



Allure of *the unique*

Words: Eugene Costello

Top furniture designers are capable of producing pieces to meet almost any specification imaginable

The Bentley of furniture design, Linley has come a long way since being founded by David (Viscount) Linley in 1985. But a well-deserved reputation for classic timber craftsmanship does not preclude embracing contemporary design, explains creative director **Alex Isaac**.

'It's important to define what one means by bespoke furniture, as it is a catch-all term that can go from minor tweaks to an off-the-shelf piece with very little detailing where perhaps you might change a veneer or a detail on a leg right through to unique, one-off pieces, designed from scratch and seen right through to delivery, according to the client's precise specifications.

We distinguish between them by calling something based on an existing line with a degree of customisation 'adaptations', while we describe fully bespoke as 'unique'.

At Linley, we have a worldwide reputation for creating high-quality, well-engineered products that represent British craftsmanship at its very best. We are known for the imaginative use of wood, and a distinctive style such as great use of marquetry.

That said, we are embracing modern techniques and materials so I would argue that our ethos is one of fusing traditional cabinet-making techniques with modern designs and contemporary processes and materials.

Part of the reason we are viewed as traditional is that we work so much with timber, whereas in fact we are now embracing other materials and modern media and doing some rather off-the-wall unique pieces. But we are not doing ultra-modern industrial designs and Italianate lacquered pieces.

We welcome one-off commissions, and we were at the Milan Salone last week showing off a rather lovely bespoke box we had created for a make-up company that allowed them to



Two pieces from Linley: the Mozart desk (left) and the El Laguiton humidor (above)

•The Object



Sofa and a pair of agate tables from Mark Brazier-Jones

show their range in a fitting way, with an ultra-contemporary display box. Our market is split fairly evenly three-ways between bespoke furniture, retail furniture and accessories. For example, we are well known for our humidors, which you can buy off-the-shelf or you can have a fully bespoke one made up to your own requirements. Naturally, for bespoke alone, furniture is the biggest area simply because that is where the bespoke market is.

As a rough guide, an off-the-shelf dining table and chairs made by Linley will be in the region of £10,000-£50,000, while a fully customised unique table and chairs will almost certainly be into six figures and will vary according to complexity of design, materials, inlay and so forth.'

www.davidlinley.com

A household name in bespoke statement furniture, **Mark Brazier Jones**, 57, has been making iconic pieces since the 1980s. He works from a beautiful converted barn in Hertfordshire which clients are welcome to visit to see him in action...

'I have a collection of pieces that I have developed over the years that I will customise for clients. I came to the point where I am building designs that I liked and felt passionate about and luckily my clients shared my enthusiasm and bought them. Around a quarter of my work is bespoke and I will design something specific for customers, either that is right for the space or for their tastes.

I work primarily with what I call the 'noble' materials – bronze, aluminium, steel, stone and glass. As well as having some intrinsic

value, these materials don't decay so that should still look half-decent in, say, 1,000 years' time.

Recently, I've started to play around with semi-precious stones such as agate and amethyst, and I have been incorporating these into pieces.

My philosophy is that I want to create beautiful pieces of lasting value that will not end up in a skip but that will be fought over as treasured heirlooms. I am in the business of making fantasies practical.

www.brazier-jones.com

*Representative of the new wave of industrial designers with strong influences in continental Europe and Scandinavia, **Tord Boontje**, 45, occupies the space where design art, form and function meet.*

'I work across many disciplines within industrial design, from mass-produced pieces to very high-end, one-off pieces. It is the latter where I can be most experimental and indulge my fantasies and which later I may be able to adapt for wider production.

Sometimes, I will bear the cost of creating these pieces as I want to create a dream I have had, but of course if they sell, then that is good.

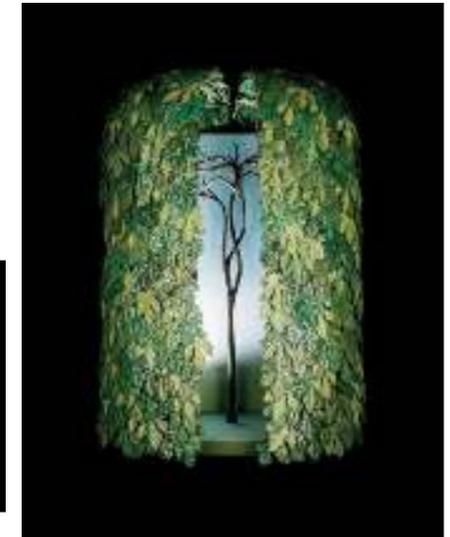
For example, if you look at the wardrobes section of my website, there's the Figleaf. This was a commission by Meta, on behalf of Mallett. Meta is the contemporary arm of Mallett, which is known for its 18th-century craftsmanship, and has exhibited in the V&A and so forth. Meta brings a 21st-century aesthetic to that legacy, and that is where I have been able to work with them.

The Object•

'Clients who had 18th-century furniture wished to add to their collection but with a contemporary twist, so we created a fusion of new and old.'



Garland lamp and Figleaf wardrobe from Tord Boontje



This came about because Mallett's clients who had existing 18th-century furniture wished to add to their collection but with a contemporary twist, so we found a way to create that fusion of new and old that worked really well. A lot of contemporary furniture does not reach the standard of the 18th century, which was the Renaissance, really, of furniture-making, the Golden Age.

And if you look at Armoire, this is made of cocobolo wood, a mahogany-like rich, dark brown wood with an irregular grain from South Africa. So these are pieces done for individuals through Meta.

With Armoire, there are numerous secret compartments, and each one has a unique way of opening – only the client will know where and how to open these compartments.

Figleaf is enamel-painted by exceptionally creative enamellers, and it is bronze, cast by Atelier de Forge in France. They work for Le Palais de Versailles. These people represent the most highly skilled craftspeople in Europe; it is very exciting for all of these people to be involved in new projects as opposed to restoration.

I also work with traditional craftspeople in Guatemala, Senegal, ceramics from Colombia and so on. I am determined to work with specialist craftspeople from around the world and this is part of my philosophy.

In the case of Armoire and Figleaf, I have done a version of Armoire for around £150,000. As yet, Figleaf remains unique, but should someone want a similar piece, due to the high level of craftsmanship, it would cost, I would think, £250,000.

That said, no one should think designer furniture or accessories

are out of their reach. You don't have to be a hedge fund manager or the MD of a multinational to invest in design. Bespoke is not the only option – if you look on our website, under 'Lighting' you will see one of our most successful items, a piece of wrought-metal called 'Garland' that we did for a height street store.

www.tordboontje.com

*Known for her independence and expertise in design, writer and design consultant **Helen Kirwan-Taylor** advises clients before they set out on the road to commissioning bespoke pieces...*

'In my own personal history, when I have bought a bespoke item, I've got it wrong every time. Unless you are a designer with knowledge of the engineering process, you can never be sure what you are getting.

And that is why it is best to go to a design company rather than an individual designer who creates these beautiful templates for a one-off piece without having the faintest notion of whether it can actually be built. The real heroes of bespoke furniture are the engineers, not the designers. I have seen for myself what the designers hand over and it is a sketch on a napkin done in a bar.

For what it's worth, my tip is if you want something unique, comb the auction houses for mid-century pieces. They are classic designs, impeccably manufactured and there are simply not that many of them around, such as Eames chairs, when the tooling process is still crucial and valued at least as highly as quirky design.

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