

## John Makepeace *Enriching the Language of Furniture*

### Supporting Information

John Makepeace was born in 1939, the youngest child of a stern father who made his living in the motor industry. Spending considerable amounts of time on his own, surrounded by countryside and pleasing architecture, John's environmental awareness developed at an early age. He was curious about how things were made and in consequence gained a reputation for taking things apart. He didn't enjoy school but his early interest in making was sparked by two things: the close proximity of a cricket bat factory and a visit to a superb, traditional furniture making workshop.

At seventeen, John visited Scandinavia where he saw the work of the great Danish designers - his first experience of contemporary design which combined a new aesthetic with technical innovation. By the time he was eighteen, John knew he wanted to make furniture.

Whilst he had been planning to go to university and then into the Church, the death of John's father allowed him to review this choice of career although, at this stage, John had no idea how he was going to achieve his ambition.

A family friend introduced John to a circle of artist-craftsmen and through this John became acquainted with the work of Sidney, Ernest and Edward Barnsley, craftsmen and makers of fine furniture and a living link to the Arts and Crafts movement. Finding a way to learn his chosen skills was not easy but John describes his youthful self as 'driven' and he finally found the apprenticeship he was looking for. Keith Cooper, a Dorset based furniture designer and maker, agreed to take him on. Here John learned practical skills but, on Keith Cooper's advice that he was unlikely to earn a living as a furniture maker, John also took a correspondence course in teacher-training. Rather surprisingly the correspondence course emphasised Design as a vital part of making. This message was driven home by John's visit to the newly established Design Centre in London<sup>1</sup>.

Two years of teaching in Birmingham (1959 – 61) provided John with his teaching qualification and some valuable experience. In his words, 'I was never a natural teacher but I gained a good understanding of how people learn.'<sup>2</sup>

John's first workshop was in Warwickshire, in a converted wagon shed on his brother's farm. From here he built up his business, outgrew his workshop and then bought a derelict property nearby which he renovated from the ground up. When he won an *Observer* kitchen design competition in the mid-sixties, his prize money of £600 allowed him to travel to Africa where the traditional dwellings, huts built 'in-the-round', had a profound effect on his design thinking. Rounded, organic forms started to appear in his work but he still hadn't found a clear sense of direction. Like all makers, the realisation that handmade pieces were unbelievably time

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<sup>1</sup> The Design Centre was opened in 1956 by the Design Council director, Sir Gordon Russell.

<sup>2</sup> Myerson, J. Makepeace: A Spirit of Adventure in Craft and Design. Conran Octopus Ltd., London 1995. p.19

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intensive, and therefore could only be very expensive, led him to the understanding that the machine aesthetics promoted by the Bauhaus<sup>3</sup> were inappropriate to individual, hand-made objects, an interesting distinction between industrial design and the work of artist craftsmen.

In 1972, the Crafts Council was established. This government-funded organisation exists to improve and promote the work of designer-craftsmen. John was invited to be a founder member by the then Minister for the Arts, Lord Eccles. John was instrumental in establishing the key objectives of the Crafts Council but his research on its behalf showed him that facilities for learning to design and make contemporary fine furniture didn't exist in a format which could provide an excellent education for committed, high-calibre students.

In 1975, John was commissioned by Liberty & Co. to make a dining room table. Liberty's was celebrating its centenary and the table was commissioned to mark the event as, in its early days, Liberty's had commissioned designer craftsmen including Charles Rennie Mackintosh. John made a three-metre diameter limed oak table with four interlocking leaves (pictured below). The table stands on a carved base and has an open centre, an area beyond reach but providing a view of the branches below. The Liberty Table is a milestone. Not only is it an extraordinary piece but it heralds the next step in John's career. The Liberty Table validated John's place as the most high profile furniture maker of the day *plus* it was too big to fit in his workshop. It was time to move and time to implement his vision of a school to train and educate fledgling furniture designers and makers.



In 1976, John bought Parnham<sup>4</sup> House in Dorset. This beautiful eighty-roomed Tudor manor house had changed hands repeatedly and had been sold 'subject to contract' on several occasions. Most recently it had served as a nursing home for 'mentally frail and elderly ladies' but the Grade 1 listed status of the house made it incompatible with modern fire regulations so the ladies were out and the house stood empty. John had enough conviction and confidence to undertake the

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<sup>3</sup> German school of Modernist design 1919 - 33

<sup>4</sup> Parnham – the literal meaning is 'valley of pear trees'.

massive restoration task. Well, who better than a craftsman with a good understanding of architecture *and* joinery to assess, determine and execute a sensitive and complicated renovation project? Part of John's vision and realisation of Parnham's restoration was to show that contemporary design and craftsmanship could sit harmoniously within a period interior. Potential clients and 18,000 visitors a year had a stunning example of a historic house showcasing twentieth-century furniture.

An ambitious schedule was set (and met) with John's workshop being moved in the summer of 1976. This meant moving 200 tons of timber, the workshop machinery, all work-in-progress *and* the staff. By the following spring Parnham House and gardens were opened to the public. By September the first cohort of students were admitted.

In John's words 'the idea was that education and training would go on adjacent to my own studio, but separate.' As John had found early in his own career, and reinforced by the number of design graduates seeking to work for him, there was a frustrated need for an integrated and practical programme in design, making and management. This is what Parnham was offering. The course fees at the time were more than Eton, but immediately there were twenty applicants for ten places'.<sup>5</sup>

Parnham House was one of those rare educational wonders where a superb vocational education was on offer - advanced skills taught by master craftsmen in a fine environment. Today's battery students could only dream of such a creative, intensive, materials-based, specialised education. The Parnham College prospectus contained both a warning and a promise. *'While you are at Parnham you will be required to work hard. The minimum amount of time you can anticipate being in the workshop is from 8am until 5.30pm. The day is extended until 9pm three evenings per week with the addition of a forum on Monday, drawing class on Tuesday and computer class on Wednesday. Friday afternoons are spent in the classroom alternating between the Wood Science and Design Culture sessions. One full day each month concentrates on business analysis and understanding what is involved in running a successful business of your own.'*

Of her experience as a Parnham student from 1996, Sarah Kay, now running an award-winning design partnership with another Parnham graduate, Andrea Stemmer says, 'A high percentage of my year were in our late 20s/early 30s and had left different careers behind. We were really driven and there for the education Parnham was reputed to offer. In terms of my being a woman, it made no difference whatsoever, we were all treated the same and just got on with it. Parnham was extraordinary – the house and gardens were fabulous, the walk across the fields to the pub, bluebells etc. etc, it was magical and all conspired to make it a very intense experience.'

Robert Ingham, resident tutor at the start, explains the policy for bringing in visiting lecturers. 'Exposing students to a wide variety of talent, skills, attitudes and

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<sup>5</sup> Helen Johnson. *John Makepeace*. Craft & Design Magazine, Issue 2008, Nov/Dec. P. 8

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experience has always been important. To have only John and me teaching would have been very limiting stylistically.<sup>6</sup>

Over the centuries, Parnham's original acreage had been sold off. The house now had 14 acres of grounds – a sizeable garden but not big enough for John's next idea. Despite running his own workshop, running the college, managing the ongoing restoration of the house and fundraising, John wanted to integrate the growing of wood with its sustainable use. Four miles from Parnham, John was able to buy Hooke Park for the Trust, a 350 acre forest. 'In a managed forest, 90% of the trees are removed as thinnings. Conventionally, these go for pulp or firewood. If we can use them for building components, then we can make forestry sustainable.'<sup>7</sup>

Hooke was also a venture into architecture, a constant interest of John's. The buildings which were to become the campus were the result of collaborative research involving four European universities in the development of new ways to use woodland thinning as a material for building construction. It was during the work on Hooke that John was awarded the OBE. He received it for services to design. 'It was quite novel for a furniture maker to get an OBE. I was thrilled – it was a reflection of Parnham and the team there.'

After 25 years of working tirelessly for Parnham and Hooke, John decided to hand the reins to the Trustees. This decision is described in the exhibition catalogue as 'regaining independence', the moment when John was free to return to his first love, designing and making furniture. Parnham House was sold and the school, already relocated to Hooke Park, amalgamated with the Architectural Association. It is impossible to put John Makepeace in a nutshell. He simply doesn't fit. His career as a designer, a maker, an educator, a businessman and an innovator encompasses success and influence but, as is inevitable with achievement and a high profile, some controversy. Despite John's illustrious career, this is his first solo touring show. The Devon Guild of Craftsmen is delighted to be the organiser and first venue for this. For us, first and foremost, John is a designer craftsman. He is also a man who has thoughtfully informed the path of craft and design education, using his knowledge and influence to raise the bar for all makers. He could not be further from the stereotype of a poorly paid craftsman toiling in a cold shed. John's belief in the value of his work and skills has always been firm. A maker cannot work in isolation believing that the work they make is validation enough for their effort. We all have to sell ourselves and John has always taught this. As he says, 'I don't accept the conventions because they have often been based on the wrong assumptions.'<sup>8</sup>

It would be misleading to say John, now 70, is enjoying a quiet life in the country. His practice is as busy as ever and his aim is clear. 'As a designer and a maker, I am constantly searching for more eloquent concepts for furniture. My objective is to

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<sup>6</sup> Myerson, J. *Makepeace*: p.77

<sup>7</sup> Helen Johnson. *John Makepeace*. Craft & Design Magazine, Issue 2008, Nov/Dec. P. 9

<sup>8</sup> Myerson, J. *Makepeace*: p. 9

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achieve freer, lighter, stronger and more sculptural forms better suited to their function and more expressive of what is unique about each commission.'



John also continues his campaign to raise the quality of design and professional practice, by sponsoring the 2009 'Furniture Futures' conference at the V&A. This event was the culmination of two years of planning between John and the museum. The speakers included such luminaries as the American artist-furniture maker, John Cedarquist, material scientist Chris Lefteri, architects and sculptors Thomas Heatherwick and Amanda Leveté, business consultant Chris Croft, design critic Caroline Roux, London Design Festival director Ben Evans and Gareth Williams who created the extraordinary V&A exhibition, *Telling Tales – Fantasy and Fear in Furniture*.

John's work has been acquired for numerous private and public collections including the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, the Art Institute, Chicago and the Royal Museum of Scotland.

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