



The furniture maker

Designer-maker Olly van der Breggen, who creates luxury bespoke furniture, talks about his passion for the craft.

BY CATHERINE KIELTHY

He may only be 30, but Olly van der Breggen has been passionate about making items for 25 years. Indeed, it seems designing and making furniture is in his DNA as he can barely remember a time when he wasn't being creative. 'From the age of four, I have had a passion for and a devotion to working with wood. I remember asking my father, as a child, to help me make wooden swords, shields and toy trains. Before the age of five my parents had bought me a child's toolbox.' Similar to a professional box, it traditionally folds out, but is filled with child size tools. It's possible his father, an antiques dealer and restorer, piqued his interest. 'Yes, I guess, him being in that field influenced me.'

Design and craftsmanship

Van der Breggen has carved out a successful career as a designer-maker from his workshop in Radlett, Hertfordshire. En-route he studied woodwork and resistant materials to A-level and then graduated with a BA (Hons) in Furniture Design from Rycotewood in 2007. 'I think by the time I had left school I knew I wanted to further my career in something practical and creative. I went to Rycotewood because it was a



craft-led course,' he explains. 'It was very much focused on the whole process of designing and making furniture from start to finish.'

As well as the practical aspects of furniture making and traditional craftsmanship, the course helped van der Breggen, whose 'obsession' with detail, is evident in all his pieces, be they fitted or freestanding items, to develop innovative design processes and concepts. The results are stunning and reflect his desire to 'combine functionality, form, attention to detail and visual differences.' This can clearly be seen in his walnut writing desk with its European cherry dovetailed drawers and his 'ribcage' coffee table. Ostensibly created to store magazines in the centre, it also has a glass edge for drinks, but it stands as a beautiful sculptural piece.

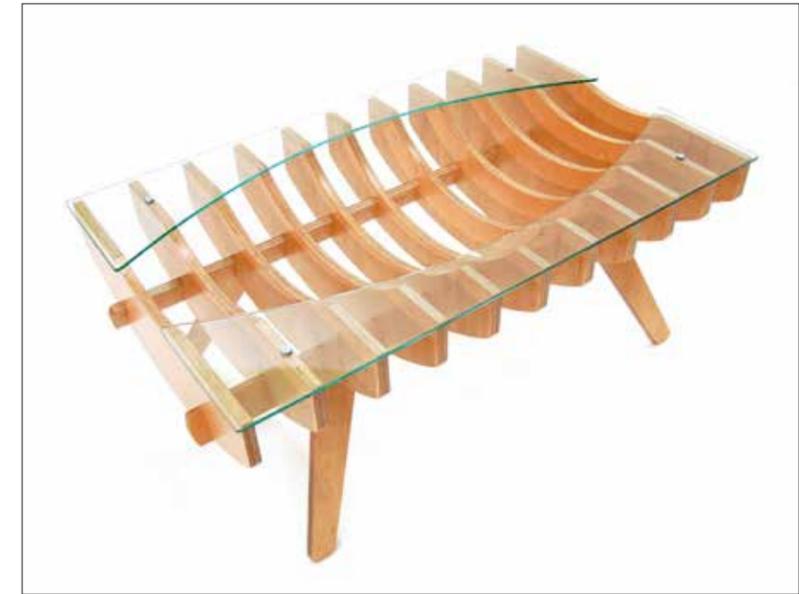
It is his walnut writing desk, however, that he regards as his most challenging commission to date. 'I never really thought about it at the time but when I reflect, I think about the fact that I was so young when I made it. For me, it was a real achievement of which I am proud.' Another commission that he has completed is a pair of walnut and maple bedside cabinets for a client in Devon. 'The drawer fronts of these particular cabinets are faceted in different directions and display elements of movement and repetition. I aim to create pieces of furniture that are the highest quality of craftsmanship and finish, which will last many years and will ultimately, not only impress, but surpass the client's requirements.'

This meticulous approach doesn't come as a surprise, given that he proudly admits to being 'very particular', 'a perfectionist' and 'obsessing over the smallest details.' It is perhaps these qualities that caught the eye of headhunters at the New Designers Show where van der Breggen was exhibiting his walnut writing desk and maple chair. They recruited the London-born designer maker to Silver Lining, a company that creates pieces for private airlines and superyachts.

He has also worked on high-profile projects and installations for British manufacturer Modus. Among them is the luxurious Martinhal Resort in Sagres, Portugal; student accommodation at Roedean Girls' School in Brighton, East Sussex; and the famous Roundhouse concert venue in Camden, north London. Such projects would seem to bring added pressure, but van der Breggen isn't fazed. As he says: 'I'll always strive for the same end result, whether I'm making my own furniture or focusing on freelance projects. The only difference being, that within a group the pressure is shared; it's a team effort.'

The future

Looking to the future, however, van der Breggen, who cites his influences as John Makepeace, Senior & Carmichael and fellow Rycotewood alumni Wales & Wales, is keen to develop more bespoke pieces and feels being a member of The Guild is valuable in that respect, 'because it's important to be part of something prestigious. I feel honoured to belong to The Guild.' He adds that The Guild's policy of canvassing regular feedback from its members' clients ensures that



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standards are kept high. 'It will be of benefit to me in the long run and shows the quality of your work.'

That future work might include a drinks cabinet and a high-end jewellery chest, but they are in the early stages of development. Whether or not they comprise his favourite American black walnut, European cherry and birch ply remains to be seen. What is clear, however, is they will be made of the highest-quality materials complemented by the finest hardware and they'll likely undergo various stages of development. 'It's important to have that design development,' he says, 'you start with your initial thought, followed by a concept and then begin to draw and associate elements towards the piece of furniture. This is then progressed and scaled models are made, to get an idea of the finished look. The design can then be tweaked before full-sized prototypes are produced. The concept for my coffee table, for example, was very square to begin with and ended up becoming organic. It's pleasing to step back and observe how products evolve.'

What's obvious is that Olly van der Breggen won't stop until he's achieved perfection, but he doesn't see that as a hardship. 'Working for yourself is rewarding and you can take all the credit,' he says. 'Making furniture is my passion and what I live for.'

Olly van der Breggen
www.ollyvanderbreggen.com

