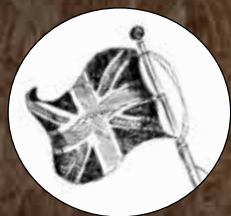


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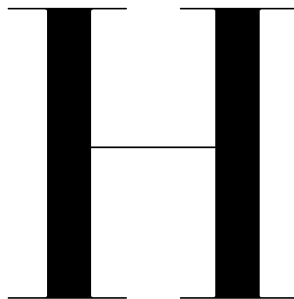


# GOING AGAINST THE GRAIN

In the heart of Liverpool's dockland,  
architect turned furniture maker  
Hugh Miller is crafting a future in  
design using a fusion of Eastern and  
Western techniques and influences

Words Hazel Dolan | Photographs Jeremy Phillips





High above a wharfside in Liverpool's Baltic Triangle, Dining Chair no. 7 is poised in mid-air. Its maker, securely strapped in with a fall arrest lanyard and harness, stands at the door of the century-old hoist bay leading from his second-floor warehouse studio, carefully guiding the ropes to lower it, while his assistant, streetside, braces its descent.

It's a traffic-stopping moment of theatre in the working life of architect-designer Hugh Miller – not uncommon and surely satisfying; the finished chair is leaving, just as its raw materials arrived, by an exterior shortcut that has long been part of this working quarter.

Aerial ballet over, it's time to take a look inside the tall, red-brick building that houses the twin practices of Hugh's furniture design studio, and his brother Howard's in architecture and landscape design. The two of them share a creative space that is part workshop, part drawing office and meeting room; a maple-floored expanse with high windows, heavy metal shutters and steel supporting columns.

In just eight years, Hugh has established himself as a maker to watch, quietly producing gallery-standard contemporary furniture, already exhibiting at The Saatchi Gallery and on tour with the British Council, and building up a network of serious and committed clients, drawn by his beautiful, thoughtful, and impeccably crafted functional and sculptural pieces.

He arrived at this heady point via a degree in architecture at Newcastle University, followed by a masters at Sheffield. Within a month of graduating, he'd set up on his own – which sounds brave, although he won't allow it. 'I'm painfully middle class,' he jokes. 'I was never going to go hungry.' He comes from a family of creatives, and his parents – his father, a town planner, and mother, a teacher turned garden designer – were encouraging. 'It seems now that it was very obvious that I would do this, but at the time that I was making those decisions it certainly didn't,' Hugh says. 'I remember making a contraption to turn off the bedroom light from being in bed when I was about four – it was all sellotape and string – so I think it's innate to make things.'

*'I always design things that are a little outside my comfort zone, and figure out how to make them later'*

By 15 he was at a woodyard buying a 'massive slab' of timber to load into his mother's Ford Fiesta. 'I bought it because it was Welsh green oak, which I thought was a species,' he says. 'It's not. It just means it's not seasoned: it's wet. So I made this piece of furniture, and of course it all moved and cracked and distorted. I think seeing that happen just made me fall in love with wood – this organic, living material – and since then I have been hooked.'

'I'm obsessed with wood. It's strong and structural, but really light; it's hard, but workable with hand tools; stable but organic and can move and distort with moisture and the seasons, and every piece is different, with unique colours and grain and working characteristics.'

He has had no formal training, so mastering techniques has come down to a determination to learn and practise, plus a perfectionist streak that rules every aspect of his work. 'I've learned from trial and error, books and YouTube videos,' he says. 'I never design based on my existing skills. I always design things that are a little outside my comfort

zone, and figure out how to make them later. It's more fun that way.'

His warehouse shelves are stacked with individually chosen lengths of beautiful, seasoned timber. 'I made a decision very early on to only work in hardwoods and solid timber, no laminates,' he points out. 'I wanted to do work without compromise, in which case I wasn't

interested in the low end of the market. I was interested in doing the best quality pieces that I could, and that meant using the best materials.'

His core values, firmly rooted in Western woodworking tradition, were already in place when two years ago he travelled to Japan on a coveted Churchill fellowship. The experience was life changing: new tools, techniques, inspiration and philosophy were all gathered, and are now at the heart of his practice.

All that he has learned is distilled in three design principles. The first, an absence of noise – stripping back extraneous details to leave only the essential intention of the idea. Second, a search for lightness, both physical and in impact on the environment. And third, the hardest to pin down, a contribution to harmony. 'It's the idea that instead of demanding attention,' he says, 'the piece should quietly await inspection. It rewards that by revealing details as you live with it.'

His current work is a fusion of East and West, useful pieces in serene and deceptively simple ➤



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*Clockwise from top left:* Roped in with a fall arrest lanyard and harness, Hugh controls the operation from above; he made the metre-high cabinet to store his collection of Japanese woodworking tools and set of spade-like ryoba saws; a close up of the textured finish detail on a chair seat; Hugh in his workshop; 'Each stroke (of the chair) is hand carved,' says Hugh. 'It actually makes the chair really comfortable because you don't slide around on it. People often say they think it will be uncomfortable, but actually it has this weird hugging quality where you dip into the bucket of the seat and the stubby armrests wrap around your sides'; Hugh's studio and workshop is housed in a brick-fronted 1916 warehouse at the heart of Liverpool's wharfside Baltic Triangle; the studio walls are clad with sections of sterling board, cut into tile shapes and painted in white. The contrast border framing the space is made from greyed and weathered offcuts of traditional features like dado and picture rails, architraves and skirting boards; Hugh roughs out double tenons for the chairs' cross rails with a saw, then finishes them with chisels







Above: In the spacious workshop Hugh sands the underside of an adjustable table, which is under construction, as his assistant Jordan Reynolds gets to work on preparing the base of coffee caddy boxes

shapes. His tools are both vintage British and traditional Japanese. He will reach more readily for his Japanese saws, their fine and brittle blades designed for pulling back, rather than pushing away – ‘the same principle,’ he says, ‘just more controlled’ – yet craft an Eastern-inspired textured finish, secretly on the underside of a surface, with a classic swan-neck British gouge.

For commissions, he is keenly engaged in what is required and focussed on deadline; his own collections evolve at a more measured pace. A year might pass after noting an idea with a first rough outline. ‘Then I will come back to it and be able to work it up into a finished idea,’ he says, ‘and that will have an awful lot more richness and articulation. It will be rigorous, rather than half-baked.’

He starts by sketching and drawing, usually, architect-style, in plan section elevation, but the real exploration begins with a series of full-scale prototypes. ‘Once I have got to a stage where I think it’s a goer,’ he says, ‘I start making. I screw pieces together roughly and have them far too big, then shave them back.’

Each final piece is hand finished with Osmo oil, rubbed on and immediately buffed off. The result is tactile and striking. ‘You build it up in very thin coats and sand very lightly between each,’ he says.

‘It has taken a long time to develop the finish I want, where when you touch the timber it is very soft. It has to be perfectly prepared and then oiled and sanded between each coat. The tiny specks of sanding dust mix with the oil on each coat, filling the gaps and giving this beautiful soft sheen.’

A bigger workshop would have a spray finishing room. ‘I want to grow,’ he says, ‘so in time I would absolutely want to make my finishing more efficient, but I think there’s a value in the sort of personal connection we have with the pieces as they go through.’

His time is divided between his own collections and a growing number of collaborations with established brands. ‘Designing for industry gives me the ability to reach a wide audience and have things made that are more affordable, to be made in volume,’ he points out. ‘So hopefully that gives me the best of both worlds.’

The act of making, however, will always rule what he does. ‘By the time I have finished a piece like a chair, I will have touched every single piece of it thousands of times, so there is undoubtedly a personal connection with each one,’ he says. ‘Sometimes it’s sad to see them go.’ 📍

*For more details of Hugh’s work, or to commission a bespoke piece of furniture, call 0151 709 0970, or visit [hughmillerfurniture.co.uk](http://hughmillerfurniture.co.uk)*





*Clockwise from top left:* The mid-century Wadkin morticer dates from a golden age of British machinery production and is designed to cut square holes efficiently and accurately, speeding up the jointing process; the communal space between design studio and workshop houses a gallery of completed pieces. Hugh and his architect brother Howard designed and built the divisions within the original open-plan floorspace; the four-metre-high warehouse doors have been weathered and rusted by a century of service; Hugh shares office and studio space with his brother, Howard; Hugh's assistant Jordan Reynolds stands at street level, bracing and guiding each load as it is carefully lowered to the ground; each tenon is measured and marked out on the elm surface; the communal area doubles as display space for key pieces: the elm dining table and chair, plus the caddy, tray and scoops from the Coffee Ceremony collection; the distinctive coarse-textured underside finish is achieved by using a three-eighths British pattern marble swan-neck gouge. Hugh begins each day with a session on this process, a signature feature of the collection

