

Hugh Miller

Born c.1989. Furniture maker.

Available online at www.livesretold.co.uk



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1. Interview



The following chapter was archived in 2021, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the Wide Vicinity website at www.widevicinity.com.

Hugh, what is your most vivid childhood memory?

I remember my dad trying to take a photo of me when I was around 3. I was awkward and shy and kept looking away. I still have the photo he took.

What was the first piece of furniture you've ever made?

When I was 15, I decided I wanted to make a writing desk, so I went out to North Wales one weekend to a sawmill I'd heard about in the Mostyn Estate. I ended up buying a piece of 1 inch 'Welsh Green Oak' around 14 feet long, which the guys there cut up into 3 boards so I could get it in the back of the Fiesta. I didn't realise that 'Welsh Green Oak' isn't a species. 'Green', as you may know, means unseasoned – freshly cut down. Wet. So, once the desk was finished and placed indoors, it all buckled and shrank and warped. It was this experience that made me become obsessed with wood.

How does your background in architecture influence your approach to furniture design?

My architecture background is totally intrinsic to my work. I see furniture as small architecture, and I approach my design work using the same process I used during my architectural education – sketch, model, draw, make, amend, talk, present, redraw, remake..... I think I also compose

my designs like buildings – I tend to design ‘plans’ and ‘elevations’ in my furniture, and I end up having my work photographed in the same way.



How would you define Hugh Miller’s design language?

My design language is a splice of Japanese influences, Scandinavian timber design principles and arts and crafts detailing and articulations. I hope people would see these constituent parts in my work but, most importantly, I’d like my design language to be recognisably mine.

What are the major trends happening in the furniture design world at the moment?

There’s a lot of technology being adopted, for better and for worse, in furniture right now, but I’m not really interested in this. I’ve also seen the ‘i-podification’ of design over the last decade – everything had rounded corners and is clean lines. I find this a bit boring as well. One trend I really like is the repurposing of traditional materials and details into contemporary design. Vo Trong Nghia does this with bamboo, and Kengo Kuma is an expert in doing this with traditional Japanese timber detailing.

What does it take to become a successful furniture designer-maker?

Tenacity – sticking at it. I also think it’s important to do the ‘dirty work’ – calling, emailing and self-promoting. Success doesn’t come to you, you have to go out and get it. Talent is a prerequisite – it’s tenacity and grit that makes the difference.

You also give lectures, teach and write. What motivated you to become an educator and what do you aim to equip your students and readers with?

I didn't really set out to teach, and it's not something I'm naturally predisposed to. But my time in Japan was and is so inspiring for me, that I found I had a lot to say about it. After I wrote my book about Japanese wood craftsmanship, I started getting a lot of invitations to speak at universities and other places. Although I'm a bit of an introvert, I actually really like public speaking, so it's something I've embraced wholeheartedly. It's also given me the opportunity to go to some great places, including giving lectures in Osaka in Japan and in Venice, Italy.



Who do you admire in your industry and why?

I have three parts to my work – architecture, furniture and art – and I have people I admire for different reasons in each part. In terms of architecture, I really admire FT Architects, who are a Japanese practice, and who make beautiful timber buildings. In furniture, I love the chair designs of Hans Wegner (but who doesn't) and also a Japanese designer called Santaro, who's designed over 100 chairs. Santaro is really influential on my work. In terms of art, I love David Gates. He's inspired by industrial architecture, and his work has an extraordinary balance and hierarchy in its composition.

Is there a question that you wish people would ask you more often about your work?

I'm not sure there are questions I wish people would ask. There are definitely questions I wish I didn't have to answer so much – 'Where do you get your wood from?', 'Do you ever use recycled wood?', and 'I've seen this piece in a magazine/shop/on the TV, can you make it?' would be three that I wouldn't mind not getting asked. In case you're wondering, the answers are 'a bunch of different places', 'No', and 'No'. Haha!

What is the most important lesson life has taught you?

It may sound a bit trite, but I think I've come to learn that what you project out into the world is what you get back in return. I've had times when I've felt quite negative about work or personal things, and it's felt like the world's against me.

Similarly, I've had times when I've been really 'up for it', like when I was in Japan doing my research, when opportunities and wonderful friends and amazing experiences just seemed to fall into my lap. I've come to realise that it's not the external world that's creating these different experiences, it's the mindset that take into them.

What do you do or where do you go to unwind and get inspired?

I go climbing. I absolutely love it, and I've realised that it's because it's an activity that is entirely in the moment. It's the essence of 'mindfulness', because you simply can't think of anything else when you're climbing. I've also started to really enjoy the heights. I used to be scared of heights, but now I like to look around when I'm high up on a cliff, and wonder what business I have being up there.

What are three questions you don't have an answer for?

I'm really interested in Moral and Political philosophy, so my unanswerable questions are from there. I think the first ones that would come to mind would be...

What's the right thing to do in the case of 'The Trolley Problem'?

Whether free will exists, or if the universe is deterministic, or if it's a universe of chaos

I can't think of a third one right now...

What are you working on at the moment?

My most exciting project at the moment is a piece for the National Trust to be added to the collection at Red House, William Morris's iconic residence in Bexleyheath, London. It's a contemporary response to the cast iron range that once sat in the kitchen at Red House and, as the piece will sit in a fireplace, part of the making process is that it's set on fire and partially burned. The 'Burn Ceremony' will take place in the garden at Red House on the 29th September at 6pm. It's a free public event, and everyone is welcome.



Red House is a National Trust Arts and Crafts building located in Bexleyheath. Co-designed in 1859 by the architect Philip Webb and the designer William Morris, it was created to serve as a family home for Morris. Construction was completed in 1860.

When you think about the future of Hugh Miller Furniture, what are you most excited about and why?

My goal for HMF is to buy a plot of land and build my own studio and home. This is something I've wanted to do ever since I can remember, and I can't wait to do it. I'd love to do more design work for established brands, as I've done with Benchmark and Savoie Beds. It's really interesting to design for manufacture, and create pieces that have a life of their own outside of my studio.

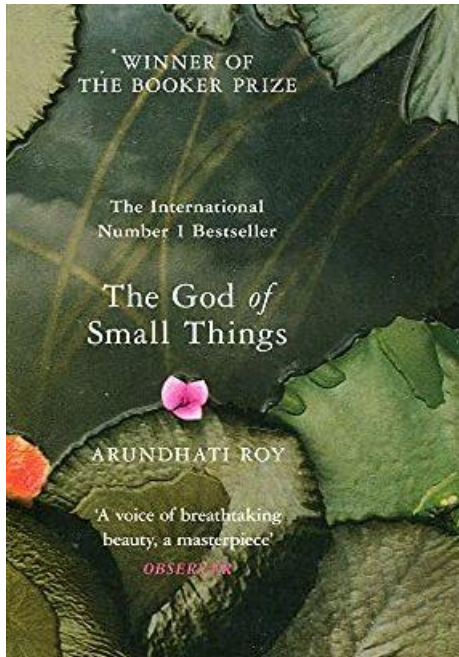


Can you recommend us:

A book: *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy

A song: *Life's A Bell* by Langhorne Slim

A film: *The Graduate*



2. Furniture

The following chapter was archived in 2021, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the Hugh Miller Furniture website at www.hughmillerfurniture.co.uk.

At Hugh Miller Furniture, we combine the hand of the craftsman with the eye of the architect. Specialising in gallery-standard contemporary furniture in wood, we design and construct pieces of exceptional quality for clients throughout the UK, and around the world.

Hugh trained as an architect, and sees his furniture as small pieces of architecture, where the concept is embedded in the intricacy of the detail. Our studio has developed a unique and recognisable design language, heavily influenced by our founder's time studying in Japan as a Churchill Research Fellow.

We have an expanding collection of exquisitely made pieces of timeless furniture and, being handmade and finished, these can be customised to meet the most specific of client requirements. We are also pleased to accept bespoke commissions, creating unique pieces of heirloom quality cabinetry.

Our materials palette spans the familiar to the unusual. We use British timbers, selected by hand, and combine them with materials such as Japanese bamboo, marine-grade brass, and full-grain leather. These materials illuminate the duality of cultural influences that underpin our studio.

In addition to creating our studio collection and bespoke pieces, we also design for established luxury brands. Recent collaborations include a coffee table and side table for Benchmark Furniture, an ArtSuite bedroom for the IceHotel in Sweden, and a limited edition gift box for Savoir Beds.

Coffe Cart No.1

Coffee Cart no.1 (2016) is the signature piece from 'The Coffee Ceremony' collection. The piece, made in solid British elm, takes inspiration from Japanese design principles, as well as Western cabinetry techniques. A set of innovative constructional and design techniques were employed in the creation of the piece.

The wheels are formed from constructional veneer, and axled on bespoke brackets made in solid brass. The curves of the top and front leg are created through splitting and steam-bending the timber, allowing it to dry against a former. The hand-cut joints are wedged in Japanese smoked bamboo, and the rear legs are connected to the table top with a sliding dovetail tenon



Coffee Cart No.1

Ceremony Bench No.1



Ceremony Bench no.1 (2016) is part of 'The Coffee Ceremony' collection. The piece, made in solid British elm, with details in brass and Japanese

bamboo, takes inspiration from Japanese design principles, as well as Western cabinetry techniques. The hand-cut joints are wedged in Japanese smoked bamboo, and the front legs are connected to the seat with a sliding dovetail tenon. Brass bars are used to increase the strength of the backrest, and the textured seats are carved by hand.

Coffee Table No.2



Coffee Table no.2 (2016) is part of ‘The Coffee Ceremony’ collection. The piece, made in solid British elm, with details in brass and Japanese bamboo, takes inspiration from Japanese design principles, as well as Western cabinetry techniques. The hand-cut joints are wedged in Japanese smoked bamboo, and the legs are connected to the table top with a sliding dovetail tenon. Brass rods protrude from the table surface to provide a place for a hot kettle. Carved trays hand below the surface of the table to allow the apparatus of the coffee ceremony to be stored.

Studio

The Hugh Miller Furniture studio, where all of our pieces are designed and made, is in the Baltic Triangle area of Liverpool. Located on the 2nd floor of a Victoria warehouse, the studio is a tall, columned space with memories of it’s maritime past, and is the perfect setting for our craft workshop of today. All materials are hoisted up the outside of the building, as they were 100 years ago, and finished pieces are taken out the same way.

3. Curriculum Vitae



Qualifications

2007-2009 University of Sheffield. Masters in Architecture

2003-2006: University of Newcastle. B.A. (Hons) Architecture, First Class

Background



From my studio in Liverpool, I design and make contemporary studio furniture in wood, Japanese bamboo, and brass. I create collections for exhibition, and bespoke commissions for private clients in the UK and abroad. I trained as an architect and see my furniture as small pieces of architecture, where the concept is embedded within the intricacy of the detail.

In 2015, I was awarded a Winston Churchill Memorial Fellowship, in order to travel to Japan to research the unique woodworking arts culture there. This transformative experience led me to develop a set of design principles, inspired by Japanese applied arts philosophy, that now underpin my work.

I have explored these principles in a new collection of work titled 'The Coffee Ceremony', which uses the everyday ceremonies of life in Japan as the inspiration for developing one of my own, based on a ritualistic attitude to coffee. The collection was selected for the Craft Council's flagship showcase, Collect Open, at the Saatchi Gallery in Feb 2017.

Exhibitions (selected):

2017: 'Coffee Ceremony' collection selected by British Council for the British Pavilion at Cheongju Biennale, South Korea

2017: Selected for COLLECT Open, at the Saatchi Gallery, London, organised by the Crafts Council

2017: Selected for Design Nation 'Marks and Tools' Showcase at the Oxo Tower Gallery, as part of London Craft Week

2017: Selected for 'Dish of the Day' group exhibition of table wear and furniture, at Bluecoat Display Centre, Liverpool

2016: Joint exhibition of my furniture with textile weaver Rita Parniczky at Bluecoat Display Centre, Liverpool

2016: Exhibited at Made:London, Marylebone

2016: Exhibited at Designer Crafts on the Mall, as a member of the Society of Designer Craftsmen

2015: Exhibited at Celebration of Craftsmanship and Design, Cheltenham. (Also exhibited in 2016)

Awards:

2017: (Current) Selected for Walpole 'Crafted' business mentorship programme, for emerging high-end craft studios

2017: Selected as 1 of 15 international artists to design an ArtSuite bedroom at IceHotel, Jukkasjärvi, Sweden. (Also in 2016)

2016: Winner of the Craft&Design Magazine Award at Made:London 2016

2016: 'High Commendation' by Worshipful Company of Furniture Makers, for design of 'An Absence of Noise' collection.

2015: Awarded Winston Churchill Memorial Fellowship, to research woodworking and design philosophies in Japan.

2015: Winner, Wood Awards, for the design and construction of Constellations Bar, Liverpool.

2015: AJ Small Projects Awards, shortlisted for Constellations Bar

2015: RIBA Awards, nominated for Constellations Bar

2010: Awarded Silver Medal at RHS Tatton Show for design of 'Handbag of Harmonies' Garden.

2009: Awarded North East Timber Trade Association Prize for best use of timber in a Masters Architecture thesis.

2006: Awarded William Bell Memorial Scholarship by University of Newcastle.

2005: Awarded Napper Memorial Fund Prize by the School of Architecture at the University of Newcastle.

Collaborations:

2017: Designing two pieces for Benchmark Furniture, as part of their new collection, to be unveiled at Decorex 2017.

2016: Ceramics and bamboo for 'Coffee Cart' made in collaboration with Japanese artists Saiko Fukuoka and Take Sagawa.

2014: 'Folded Stool' collaboration with RCA graduate Kate Rieppel, shown at Royal College of Art Summer Show, London

Teaching, Lecturing, Writing:

2017: (current) visiting lecturer at Osaka Institute of Technology, School of Architecture, Japan (started 2016)

2017: (current) timber design tutor at Newcastle University School of Architecture (started 2016)

2017: Lectures and panel discussions on practice and process for a number of institutions, including Creative Lancashire,

Crafts Council, Leeds Beckett University Product Design School, and Athenaeum Liverpool

2017: Feature article in Craft&Design Magazine, spring 2017

2016: Visiting design tutor at Liverpool University School of Architecture

2016: 'Japanese Wood Craftsmanship' - book written to document my research in Japan

2016: 'The Use of Water as a Tool in Japanese Woodworking' - article for Carpenters Company Magazine

2016: Lectured on Japanese Wood Craftsmanship and its influence on my work at Manchester University School of Architecture,

Glyndwr University, the Heritage Crafts Association annual conference,
and Benchmark Furniture,

Galleries:

CAA; Bluecoat Display Centre; Bils & Rye; Artisan Alchemy; National
Centre for Craft & Design

Collections:

Work held in private collections in London, Cheshire and the Lake District.

4. Book: Japanese Wood Craftsmanship



Hugh Miller is heavily influenced by his time researching in Japan as a Winston Churchill Memorial Fellow. This transformative experience led him to develop a set of design principles, inspired by Japanese applied arts philosophy, that now underpin his studio.

Hugh's research in Japan resulted in a book titled Japanese Wood Craftsmanship. There is a link from Hugh Miller's index page on the Lives Retold website to a digital version of the book.
