

# Thoroughly modern marquetry

Interiors Designers are bringing new angles to an ancient craft. By *Trish Lorenz*

**M**arquetry is making a comeback. Ornae, detailed and visibly handcrafted, the art of creating designs and images by applying pieces of veneer to a solid wood surface has been around since the 16th century – and is now enjoying a revival.

In the past few years, designers have rediscovered the possibilities of the craft and British designers in particular are experimenting with new materials, aesthetics and approaches, giving the traditional approach an interesting, and at times irreverent, modern twist.

Christine Meyer Eaglestone, a UK-based artist who has been working in marquetry for more than 10 years, attributes this recent comeback in part to a renewed interest in enlivening interiors with pattern and decoration. "People are bored with minimalism and are rejecting in surface design and pattern again," she says.

Meyer Eaglestone works with wood, and with dyed and painted veneers to create strong geometric patterns on pieces such as recent cabinets and mirrors. Her work has a markedly modernist feel; she takes inspiration from "everything from cubism to Bauhaus and Frank Lloyd Wright".

Designer Gareth Neal agrees that a more decorative aesthetic is coming back into vogue. "I think, for the first time in 10 years or more, that we're open to decoration in our interiors," he says. "It's not about filling the whole room with flamboyant ideas –

but when it's done tastefully, it really is possible to fit pattern in a contemporary environment."

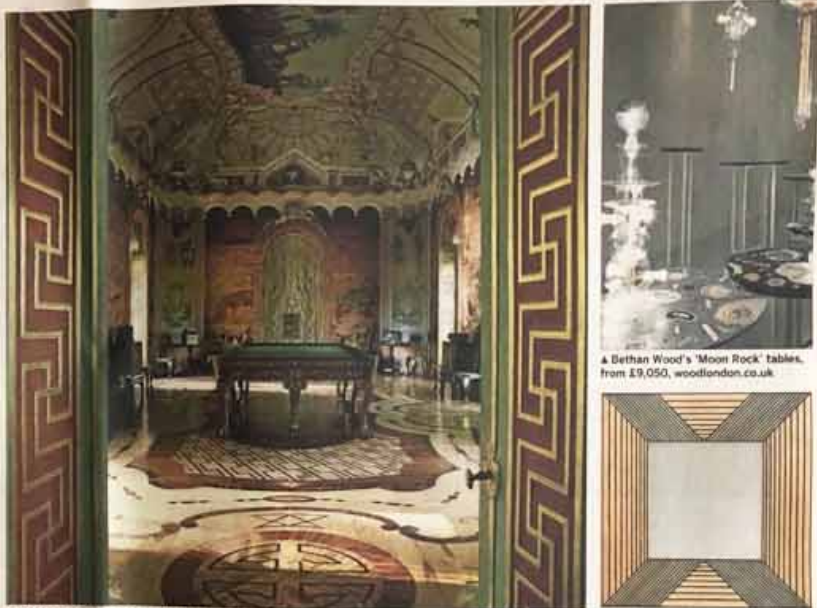
Neal's marquetry work challenges traditional approaches in his Urban Picnic range. He employs inlay lines – the veneers that are traditionally used to hide the line where two pieces of marquetry meet – to constitute the entire pattern. Neal also chose to apply his marquetry to everyday objects such as a picnic bench and table-tennis bats, rather than high-end furniture.

"I wanted to reappropriate traditional marquetry techniques," Neal says. "The idea was to use the technique for more practical pieces. I'm very happy to use marquetry for modern objects."

There's a definite move towards reviving, enhancing and personalising heritage techniques," says Blunstone. "We're seeing designers experiment with artisanal techniques and innovative materials to develop playful ideas that reference popular culture. It's the antithesis of the pared-back simplicity that's been in style for the last decade or more. Instead there's a focus on extravagant detailing and a melding of creativity, craftsmanship and technology."

Designers such as Lucy Turner and Bethan Wood are also experimenting with traditional marquetry techniques. Turner uses formulae rather than wood veneers and applies her work to everything from sideboards to kitchens. Bethan Wood, too, plays with material, using laminate veneers for her Moon Rock tables and Particle Construct range.

"I am obsessed with laminates as a material, and marquetry was a way to transform what is usually seen as a very industrial, cheap everyday surface into something more luxurious," says Wood. "Marquetry usually uses veneers of rare and expensive woods and I use rare vintage laminates from the 1950s onwards. They're no longer in production, so I see them as the rare woods of our time."



▲ A Chinese-style salon by architect Antonio Rinaldi, featuring a marquetry floor



▲ 'Phase' bureau, £8,500, by Toby Winteringham in collaboration with Patternity, tobywinteringham.co.uk

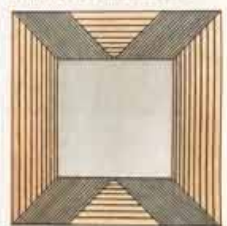
Wood's visual style – think lunar-inspired surfaces and camouflage motifs – is also strictly contemporary. "The technique has always been beautiful, but in the past the aesthetic was very traditional," Wood says. "That's changing now."

Where Wood's and Neal's work has an urban, almost edgy feel, Victoria Galan's straw marquetry takes a different approach. Galan's first collection of straw marquetry, launched during last year's London Design Festival, references the art of the Art Deco era but with a new take on colour and form. Her Pully cabinet is made of eboussé walnut with black and copper straw marquetry in a design that is almost psychedelic.

"I learned the classic techniques of straw marquetry in France and then started to play with colour and shapes to find my own style," says Galan. "Geometry is a natural language for me and I like to use strong, bold colour too. The challenge is not just aligning the shape and form, but also to enhance the natural iridescence of straw fibres. Every piece of straw is unique and you have to work with the fibre to get the best effect."



▲ Bethan Wood's 'Moon Rock' tables, from £9,050, woodlondon.co.uk



▲ 'X' mirror, £1,500, cme-art.co.uk

Unlike Galan's straw marquetry, which can only be hand-worked, these designers using wood and other materials can now make use of modern technology – laser-cutting, for example. "Many say such technological advances help to open up the process to a new tranche of designers and artists

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## Design Classic

### The Womb chair

Eero Saarinen's Womb chair is one of his most famous designs and was produced at the request of his boss's wife, who wanted a chair "like a basket full of pillows" – something I can curl up in."

In 1946, Finnish-born Saarinen was heading at Cranbrook Academy of Art in Michigan, US, where Charles Eames was head of the department of industrial design. The two men had become friends (Saarinen would later name his son James) and collaborated on several projects, the most famous of which was the design of a moulded plywood chair for which the pair took first prize in a competition run by the Museum of Modern Art in 1940.

It was at Cranbrook that Saarinen met and married Florence Knoll. When she joined her husband's company, she asked Saarinen to design for them.

Over the next 25 years he produced many well-known pieces, including the Tulip table and chairs, the Grasshopper chair and then the Womb at Florence Knoll's request. While it does not quite resemble a basket of pillows, it is one of Saarinen's most comfortable pieces.

Like many of his designs, it made use of new technology. In the end, he was helped by a sculptural technician in New Jersey who was experimenting with fiberglass and resin.

Florence Knoll later said: "We just begged him. I guess we were so young and so enthusiastic that he finally gave in and worked with us. We had lots of problems and failures until they finally got a chair that would work."

Saarinen began designing at the age of 12 when he won his first competition in 1922 for a story illustrated with marvellous pictures. The same week his father [Eel, an architect, took second place in a competition to design a house for The Chicago Tribune newspaper.

The following year, the family left Finland for the US, where Eel began work on a proposal for the Chicago lakefront.

Eero Saarinen continued to enter, and win, design competitions and eventually trained as an architect too. He had been taught from an early age that each object should be designed in its "next largest context" – a chair is a room, a room is a house, a house is an environment and an environment is a city plan – and he would stick to those principles throughout his life.

By Kate Watson-Smyth



▲ 'Serpentine' cabinet, from £9,900, violetgalan.co.uk



▲ 'Tulip' kidney table, £12,000, violetgalan.co.uk



▲ 'Lovebirds' kidney table, £245, lucyturner.co

▲ Table tennis bats, £120 each, garethneal.co.uk/urbanpicnic



▲ 'Vortex' table, from £1,900, violetgalan.co.uk

"Laser-cutting has been a game-changer for the industry," says Bethan Wood. "Even in Italy where the graphics and style are still very inspired by tradition, a lot of marquetry is laser-cut now. Technology is helping bridge the gap between design and craft. It's still put together by hand but we can work with patterns that have been drawn on computers. Some of the patterns I come up with could only be done using modern cutting techniques. It makes a difference to both the aesthetic and speed of production."

Gareth Neal agrees, saying that "laser-cutting really opens up the possibilities of what can be done". For more than 30 years, furniture maker Toby Winteringham has created pieces that feature hand-cut marquetry. He also recently collaborated with his daughter, Grace Winteringham, a textile designer and creative director of design firm Patternity, to create a more contemporary collection. Products such as the Shift table and Phase bureau employ both hand and laser-cutting and feature colourful, geometric motifs.

"We developed some of Grace's textile patterns into marquetry," says Winteringham. He describes laser-cut marquetry as "wonderfully accurate" – but also sounds a note of caution on the over-reliance on technology. "I do use it in my work but, although almost any image can now be reproduced in marquetry, I think the technology needs treating with sensitivity or the craft will lose its integrity," he says. "Sometimes there's more poetry in reduction. The limited palette that natural woods offer means that in marquetry you have to be creative and find interest with texture as well as with colour, and that's something that relies on the touch of the hand."

Mark Garstide and Kate Letnard are creative directors at Rockman & Rockman. The couple have created a range of tables with bold geometric patterns, working first in colourful acrylics, and then in wood veneers. Garstide and Leonard agree with Winteringham that selecting those pieces of wood that work together must be done by hand.

"What is interesting is that all the different woods, and even different trees of the same wood, have very different personalities," Garstide points out. "We cut all our veneers by hand with a surgical knife and for the acrylics we use a mix of laser and hand cuts."

But Rockman & Rockman – based in the trendy London neighbourhood of Shoreditch – also see a role for technology. The group is now releasing a range of marquetry cushions. "The pair select various pieces of wood, looking for angles, grains and colours that work together and then scan these and lay them side by side, using software to create a marquetry-style textile pattern on screen."

"It's not a repeat pattern of one piece of wood," Garstide explains. "It's a combination of pieces of wood that we've selected to work together in the same way we select our pieces for a table. We call it digital marquetry."