

# Craft works

In a world where exclusivity is everything, meet the designers and artisans collaborating to take the mass out of manufacturing

PHOTOGRAPHY: BEN STOCKLEY WRITER: HENRIETTA THOMPSON

The American sociologist Richard Sennett recently published a book called *The Craftsman*, which was positively reviewed and widely acclaimed. In it he argues that practising a craft or artisanal skill - going out each day to get better at the thing you did yesterday - is good for the soul. And, because craftspeople are happy and fulfilled, they're good for society as a whole, too. It follows, then, that the more a dedication to craft is lost, outsourced and made economically unviable, the poorer a society will be. So it might be good for all of us that traditional crafts and contemporary design are increasingly and happily cross-fertilising.

If luxury is, in part, about rarity, and rarity in design is, well, rarer than ever, the very top end of the market is left searching for new directions. What can justify a dip into the hedge fund these days? Vintage? Bespoke? Limited edition? Or any combination of the above? The 'design-art' phenomenon, as championed by everyone from Jaime Hayon to Amanda Levete for Established & Sons, has clearly tapped into some new sense of what is truly desirable, collectable and keepable: uniqueness, provenance and products with a story.

More and more contemporary designers are looking to traditional craftsmanship and collaborating with artisan workshops as a way of upping their game and answering to the demand for a product with a story. We could call it design-craft (but let's not). And from Baccarat to Royal Tichelaar, traditional manufacturers have begun to realise that their very survival lies in their ability to move with the times. By enlisting contemporary designers, companies can make what they do relevant to a new audience and attract enough new blood to keep their skills base alive. Here, we look at some of these forged new relationships at work.

## Arik Levy & Baccarat

If the Baccarat factory were a movie, it would be a musical, with 95kg men in vests doing big dance numbers, such as the smiles and synchronicity among the workforce. Near Nancy, Baccarat is a company town, tirelessly turning out hundreds of thousands of pieces of crystal day and night. A quarter of the town's residents are employed by the company, which has been shipping its handcrafted collections around the world since 1764.

It's hard to imagine that such a set-up still makes sense and it's likely it wouldn't if Baccarat hadn't enlisted the talents of contemporary designers in recent years. In 2003, struggling to keep up with trends and finding itself largely relegated to wedding-gift lists, Baccarat took action. It brought in designer Philippe Starck and so began a collaboration so successful the company has pursued a contemporary design programme ever since.

The French-Israeli designer Arik Levy is the latest to join its ranks. During the making of his collection 'Intangible', he visited the factory several times, staying for days, watching and learning the crystal-making processes, a technique that can take up to 15 years to master.

'You can't do this kind of work from a distance,' says Levy. 'When I first came, I'd sit until 4am watching the artisans. I think they enjoyed the collaboration as much as I did. I valued them and they saw that and they learned a lot more about what I do. It was rewarding all round.'

Levy found crystal-cutting machines that were so little-used Baccarat was thinking of scrapping them. He decided to prove their usefulness by employing them to make marks and cuts on crystal that hadn't been tried before. The result is over 60 pieces for Baccarat, including two pieces of jewellery.

[www.baccarat.jp](http://www.baccarat.jp) »



CRYSTAL CLEAR

Designer Arik Levy (left) spent days watching the Baccarat artisans at work during his collaboration with the company. He is pictured at the factory with Jean-Marie Sohn, an executive glassworker who manages the team that produces Baccarat's *grosses pièces*. For more photographs of the Baccarat factory, see page 194





### **Vincenzo de Cotiis & Ceccotti Collezioni A**

'We are not supported by the government like firms in France/ says Franco Ceccotti from the Ceccotti Collezioni factory outside Pisa. 'Whole industries are dying out, but we've made our specialism work for us. Many others have disappeared or outsourced everything to China.'

Ceccotti Collezioni has produced its specialism - handcrafted wooden furniture - since the 1950s. And for the last couple of years, creative director Massimo Casragna has been introducing new designs hoping to create 'antiques of tomorrow' and so ensure the company and its methods survive. 'We are the only company that brings traditional artisanal skills to contemporary styles,' he says.

The 'Skyline' shelving unit by Vincenzo de Cotiis is one such design. In contrast to Ceccotti Collezioni's usual flowing, organic pieces, 'Skyline' is all angles and boxes, but its new aesthetic hasn't meant any concessions in its production. 'We say each piece is probably

touched by 8,000 hands during its making,' says Ceccotti. 'You can feel this in the finished piece, it's so smooth.'

It takes around two days just to polish 'Skyline' by hand. 'Another manufacturer might go back to de Cotiis and demand he alter the dimensions of the compartments so that polishing can be done faster,' says Ceccotti. 'But we pride ourselves on the fact that we can respect the original design and we don't have to make compromises to industrial production. The result is an item that has real feeling.'

[www.ceccotticollezioni.it](http://www.ceccotticollezioni.it)

### **Andrée Putman & Poltrona Frau ▶**

'Segreto' (Secret) is a domestic desk for the discerning. In hand-stitched, baby-soft white leather, with secret concertina compartments and a concealed drawer in one of the legs, It isn't a desk for working at, it's a desk for stroking. With very clean hands. Designed for Poltrona Frau by the grand dame of design Andree Putman, the made-to-order desk, along with Putman's matching 'Oceano' trunk,

evokes the spirit of a 1930s transatlantic cruise. And, in the long-standing tradition of Poltrona Frau, it's remarkable for its attention to detail.

The design process of one 'Segreto' takes around a year from sketch to single finished prototype and the care with which it's made is such that each desk has a dedicated 'modelista' assigned to look after it from start to finish.

'Segreto uses leather-working methods so precise and detailed, they are usually reserved for the making of handbags,' says Putman, now in her eighties, but busier than ever. 'The simplicity of the form disguises a lot of secrets.' The modelista assigned to 'Segreto', Anna Maria Ilari, says the concertina folds of the desk's secret file require the same specialist skills she once used to produce luxury leather luggage. And more precision, because of the complex mechanics involved. 'Thanks to my previous work, I have the experience to make Andree Putman's design a reality,' she explains. 'Here, the detail remains the same, only the dimensions of the product have changed.'

[www.poltronafrau.it](http://www.poltronafrau.it)

**HARD CRAFT**

This page, Andrée Putman (right) has worked closely with Poltrona Frau 'modelista' Anna Maria Ilari (left) to create her 'Segreto' desk

Opposite, designer Vincenzo de Cotiis (left) with Massimo Ferretti, head of varnishing and finishing at Ceccotti Collezioni. De Cotiis was brought in by the furniture makers to create 'antiques of tomorrow'





### Jurgens Bey & Tichelaar

Royal Tichelaar Makkum manufactures intricately hand-painted earthenware and innovative ceramics for the building industry. Based a few miles north of Amsterdam, and dating back to 1572, it is easily the oldest specialist ceramics producer of the Netherlands. In the mid-1990s, Jan Tichelaar, the 13th Tichelaar to take the helm, decided the family company needed some serious re-tooling.

At the time, both the company's customer base and its skilled workforce were slowly diminishing, while its stockpile of unsold traditional ceramic pieces was growing every day. Tichelaar held an enormous sale of all its items in storage and, using the money that was raised and the space that was opened up, bought new equipment and introduced a radical programme of contemporary design. 'We wanted to give the painters something else to do. We brought in contemporary design to keep them challenged, while they also still work on the more traditional pieces,' he says.

Dutch designers who have collaborated with Tichelaar since embarking on this

new creative strategy include Hella Jongerius, Studio Job, Marcel Wanders and Jurgens Bey, all of whom are required to embrace the company's traditional methods, its knowledge of ceramics and acknowledge its history in their designs.

The latest initiative - to be launched at Milan's Salone del Mobile - is the Pyramids of Makkum project, for which Jongerius, Bey, Studio Job and Alexander van Slobbe have all been commissioned to design modern interpretations of the traditional Dutch flower pyramids of the 17th and 18th centuries. Complementing a restoration project Tichelaar is doing with the Amsterdam Rijksmuseum, the pyramids will all be made using the faience (tin glaze) technique.

Bey is one of Tichelaar's favourite designers to work with, despite being, by far, the least commercial. 'But,' insists Tichelaar, 'it doesn't matter so much if we don't sell a huge amount, as we truly love working with him. He really understands the company. He knows we would rather produce something with real meaning - almost closer to art - than a bestseller. We're on the same wavelength.'

Bey's pyramid design for the company is complex and conceptually daring,

#### TICHELAAR FANCY

Jurgens Bey (left) talks with Fokke Hamstra of ceramics company Royal Tichelaar Makkum, for whom he has designed a flower pyramid that requires hours of painstaking hand-painting

resembling a series of buckets and vases stacked haphazardly. Ceramic flower pyramids became popular in the Netherlands at a time when flowers were expensive and the nobility would prove their wealth and decadence by organising extravagant displays of exotic blooms. Bey's design, correspondingly, was inspired by the Wunderkammer, or Cabinet of Curiosities, in which explorers and adventurers would show off their collections of exotica.

Each individual vase (or indeed ceramic cleaning bucket) in his design is decorated with highly evolved motifs and patterns in multiple languages - from Braille to binary code to more abstract messages involving pigs - all painstakingly painted by hand by the Tichelaar team of artisans.

Justifying the complexity of his designs (which will undoubtedly take many people many days to produce), Bey is blunt: 'People often think that to make progress it is necessary to increase efficiency all the time. But, actually, that is not true; often it is the unnecessary and the stupid things in life that turn out to be the most gorgeous.'

[www.roydichelaar.com](http://www.roydichelaar.com) »

**FOUNDRY FATHERS**

Ingrid Donat (right) works with up to 14 skilled craftsmen, such as Nicolas Gay (left) at the Blanchet-Landowski foundry to produce just one piece of furniture.



### **Ingrid Donat & Blanchet-Landowski Foundry**

The sculptural furniture of Ingrid Donat, 51, provides a refreshing counterpoint to sleek, mass-produced design. Mainly in bronze, her pieces are handmade in the Blanchet-Landowski Foundry on the outskirts of Paris near where she lives.

Born into a family of artists, she studied sculpture at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in the capital and fell in with Sylva Bernt, sculptor and companion of Andre Arbus, and the Giacomrti brothers, Diego and Alberto, a quartet who fused architecture, fine art and furniture design during the 1940s. It was Diego who pushed Donat towards designing furniture and Alberto who introduced

her to the Blanchet-Landowski Foundry, which cast his iconic figurines.

At the foundry, the prototype is the most important stage of development and Donat believes in being there as often as possible to shape her designs as they're built. 'I need to have a close relationship with the maker. It's not like design, when you can hand over a drawing and that's it. I never know how it's going to look at the beginning.'

From the artist's wax maquette through to casting, sandblasting, welding and patina work, it takes some 12 to 14 craftspeople to make each piece, five of whom work on the project exclusively. Each design is limited to editions of eight, plus four artist's proofs. 'It's exciting to work with such skilled craftspeople,' says Donat. 'They always say yes and try

everything.' The first prototype in bronze is critical in making sure everything fits perfectly and the mechanisms work in the best way. 'Nicolas, who's in charge of this, is very clever,' says Donat. 'It's no mean feat when a single drawer can weigh up to 50kg.'

Donat and her family (her son, Julien Lombraill, is her manager as well as a partner in the Carpenters Workshop Gallery in London) do everything they can to support the foundry. And they feel a duty to encourage artisans to pass on their skills to 3. new generation. 'We're currently employing the last few,' says Donat. 'It's our responsibility to make sure this industry and its skills continue into the future. Their skills are the reason behind the quality of these pieces.' ❖  
[www.landowski-fondeur.com](http://www.landowski-fondeur.com)