



varnishing act

Ali McCluskey meets a furniture restorer with a colourful past, and an eye on the future

Furniture restoration is the new rock'n'roll. Or at least it is for Andrew Matthews. This is a man who, in a former existence, used to be a lighting technician out on the road with major touring artists, but now has a quieter existence as a restorer and conservator of furniture operating from a workshop down the end of a gravel track in Barton, surrounded by farm buildings and old machinery.

As he clears a space amongst the chairs and dressers that he is currently working on, I asked him how the transformation came about, from rock music to furniture. 'I originally got into it in the late 1970s,' explains Andrew. 'I was working as a freelance lighting technician, going out on the road for perhaps three months at a time, working with people like Marvin Gaye, Elton John, the Human League and Culture Club. The work was enjoyable,

but led to a rather insular existence, where he would wake up in somewhere like Prague, and instead of wanting to see anything of the city, just concern himself with that night's show. After giving up 'the rock 'n' roll thing' Andrew worked for a spell with the Royal Shakespeare Company. Throughout these years he dabbled in woodwork, making three-dimensional wooden sculptures of jazz instruments ('because I was too lazy to play or write music.') Then came another career change which led eventually to the career he now enjoys.

Andrew takes up the story. 'At the end of the 80s I was living in London at a very loose end, and I came across a load of old, good quality, pine floorboards. I made them into spice racks and things like that - I combined driftwood with the floorboards to make racks and cupboards and used to try and sell them

at Camden Market. I got feedback from people, and they said they liked them, but the construction should be better ...' At this stage, Andrew was completely self-taught, so he embarked upon a three year period of study, first with a cabinet making course at the London College of Furniture, followed by a two year HND course in furniture restoration and conservation. So what was the appeal of these studies that encouraged him to devote his life to furniture restoration? 'It combined all the things I liked. There's an awful lot of social history tied up with furniture - like why chairs are made like they are, or the evolution of different tables. And I enjoyed the challenge, I suppose - putting something right, and putting it right so that nobody notices.'

Somewhat surprisingly, there are various different schools of thought in the world of furniture restoration and

conservation, with regards to the whole philosophy of the profession, which Andrew even refers to as a 'schism'. It governs a professional's whole approach to a piece of furniture - do they simply stabilise a piece of furniture, but leave it essentially as it was found, complete with defects and blemishes; or do they restore and repair, blending the new bits into the old? 'I call what I do restoration and conservation, so that I'm conserving what I can of the original, and restoring what I can't. Some conservators would say that all repairs should be entirely visible and obvious, so that there is no pretence that no work at all has been done on an item. Andrew's approach differs slightly: 'If I'm putting in a new piece of timber, essentially I want them not to notice it's there. It's an honest repair, it's not faking - faking would be if I tried to pass it off as a 200 year old vintage chair.'



He illustrates his personal philosophy with another example: 'If you've got a chair that was made in 1770, and perhaps in 1780 something broke, and they got the local blacksmith to make a little handmade bracket, and that's been left in. What do you do? It's become part of the piece. In the past what I've done is remade the joint, re-glued it, and then I've put the bracket back in - so that it's visual, but it's not structurally important.' So defects become part of the piece, part of its history, and thus part of our country's social history. A conservator would probably leave the defects, while a restorer may be more interested in making the piece of furniture practical and useable. Andrew's approach lies somewhere in the middle ground.

As if to illustrate this, Andrew brings out a large wooden box that he has recently finished working on. He opens it up to reveal a mahogany 'writing slope' - like a miniature office in a box, complete with ink wells, hidden

compartments, small drawers, and a sloping leather surface to write on. When it was brought to him it was in 'a parlous state'. Bits of the wood were replaced, a new lock and key mechanism were fitted, and new red leather complete with gilded design was added. But the completed work looks authentically old and 'distressed' thanks to Andrew's hours of painstaking work, stippling the leather with artist's colours, and blending the various wood finishes together. The final effect is seamless, but how does he know when he has finished a job? 'I'm my most critical judge. It's a question of being satisfied with it. At the end of the day it's my reputation.'

As much as being concerned with the past, when working on a piece Andrew has to consider furniture restorers who may come back to it in years to come. This becomes evident when he brings across an encrusted, pungent-smelling pot of runny glue. This is traditional Scotch glue, actually made from horses

hooves and other various bits and pieces. Unlike modern synthetic glues, this allows future restorers to reverse the adhesion process using hot water, steam or methylated spirits.

As Andrew prepares to get back to work on some fellows' armchairs from King's College - the Cambridge colleges, along with private customers and Kettle's Yard house provide a significant part of his work - he neatly sums up his working ethos. 'Whatever we do,' says

Andrew, 'we're trying to think about the future.' With one eye on the past, and another on the future, it's been a long and curious trip for Andrew Matthews.

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