

Matthew Burt

idea to object





Matthew Burt : idea to object

*Simon Olding*

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CRAFTS  
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**Crafts Study Centre**

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*In all my pieces my aim is to create an object that is enduring in its design and enduring in its construction; I also set out to support the culture of makers and making*

# artist's statement

*Matthew Burt*

The magic by which an idea becomes an object has traditionally played Cinderella to the mystery of its conception. For historical, cultural and economic reasons the process of making has become hidden to the art world. The concept has become king, its manifestation a miraculous birth into the whiteness of a gallery. It has become cheaper to realise a virtual idea than manifest an object. These pressures elicit an intellectual response and a 'sloppy craft' has emerged, blinking into the light.

This exhibition is in a different space, within it and its accompanying talks I will endeavour to lift the gauze that shrouds the means by which an idea becomes an object. It will celebrate a love of a material with pieces that convey that relationship. It will celebrate the makers who have dedicated

themselves to a greater understanding of that material and its manipulation.

I remain fascinated and engaged with the diversity of thought and action needed to conceive, capture, interpret and manifest an idea into an object. The initial dive into the ocean of unthought ideas: the grappling with possibility – the ebb and flow of surprise, joy and disappointment as the idea jostles with the parameters of a design brief. This leads to a gradual tightening of free-fall thinking towards the deductive logic of making – the peppering of intuition and serendipity within the making – the occasional dip back into the pool of unthought thoughts and the plucking out of a key that unlocks a process and frees it from an entrenched procedure, allowing the maker to jump into a more liberating or efficient way of progressing the work.

As a designer-maker I am culturally committed to the magic that is making and its frequent habitat, the shed/workshop. I'm a lifelong fan of our heritage of 'people in sheds'. Such people, their ideas and the things they make, have been, and continue to be, a cultural force in our nation. Arguably their post enlightenment philosophy and curiosity kick-started the Industrial Revolution. Perhaps a blog from the suburbs will set us a path through global warming. From John Harrison and his clocks, Josiah Wedgwood with his pots to those who don their anoraks and dedicate themselves to the reinterpretation of the dovetail, I take my hat off to you.

My furniture and my workshop seek to emulate their independence of thought and action. It is fed by their collective ideas and efforts. The

cracks and crevices of our economy in which they flourish is my habitat. Their intermingling with science, engineering, mathematics, aesthetics and metaphors is vital to my continued wellbeing.

This exhibition will feature close to 23 different pieces. Most represent new designs. All have been designed by me in response to speculative design briefs that reflect my current response to the philosophical, ecological, cultural, financial and practical parameters that frame my designing. All of them seek to add something to design evolution. I aim to draw the user/viewer into the 'preciousness' of the material, the time taken to grow the material, its intrinsic strengths, quirks and beauty. I also seek to do this with environmental responsibility, often using smaller pieces of timber that are more economically and sustainably harvested,

reconfiguring them through stacking, laminating or texturing, drawing the eye and finger towards the jewel-like surface or looking straight into its time and growth end grain, asking the user/viewer to reconsider their view and experience of timber. In all my pieces my aim is to create an object that is enduring in its design and enduring in its construction. I also set out to support the culture of makers and making.

I have used thirteen different furniture makers, two engineers, one specialist glass manufacturer, one CNC (computer numerically controlled) router programmer and operator, one metalsmith, one letter carver, two administrators and one marketing person in the creation of the pieces on exhibition. Of the furniture makers, seven are from my Wiltshire workshop, four others have worked in

my workshop and have now moved on to establish their own and two have come from workshops that I respect. Each maker brings their own inimitable fingerprint to their work, teasing the object out of the idea, sometimes working alone and sometimes collectively and all the time skilfully. Most of the makers have undertaken a six year apprenticeship/training, commensurate with most of the professions; others are still on that journey.

In my workshop we'll use tools from the biblical to the digital and we'll chew it with our teeth if necessary to bring the object out of the idea. We'll wax it with words in order to reach our market and hopefully sell it so that we can continue our work.

My work is steeped in and stems from the material I'm in love with. My childhood was spent in

the shadows of towering elms and amongst the hazel coppices of the under wood, in my pocket a penknife, baler twine and imagination. From climbing amongst them to getting up to unspeakable mischief beneath them my affection for trees grew into a lifelong love affair. Trees and the gift of their material, timber which I now view as recycled sunshine and rainwater still rivets my attention. Each individual brings its surprises, fights and arguments, reconciliations and rewards. The awkward cussedness of the unforgiving, tool blunting elm; the wiry resilience of an ancient solitary grown windblown ash streaked with the colours of its age, its history etched into its growth rings and the silky caress of the sycamore with its soft charms easily won.

That I design and make pieces in wood is a privilege. That I have invested in training apprentices and

pursued Arcadian dreams of the Dance of Albion has meant a lifelong dance with debt, but I have been constantly repaid and rewarded by the emergence of consummate work, the antithesis of 'sloppy craft', manifested by fully fledged craftsmen and women, masters of their material.

The subjects of this exhibition are the results of our thoughts and labour. I am incapable of being objective in their assessment. It's over to you in the hope that you find in them their humanity and that in each of them you find the object that was worth teasing out of the idea. I am however, capable of being subjective and utterly partial when I urge you to discriminate positively in favour of people in sheds, recognise their cultural worth and actively invest in the results.



*The responsible and appropriate use of materials; sustainable and enduring design*

# dreaming of Arcadia

*Simon Olding*

In 1996, Matthew Burt gave a lecture about his work to a Hampshire Arts Conference, *The conditions for creation*. This lecture revealed him to be driven, romantic, idealistic as well as ironic. He began ‘by describing myself as an anachronism...foolish enough to attempt to make a living with my hands in an increasingly anti-manufacture culture...compounded by choosing to design, make and sell modern work to [a] retrospective public’.

Here is a dilemma, making the task of the furniture designer-maker both innovative and risky. For Burt, born in, and expressly drawn to, Wiltshire, the setting up in 1978 of his first workshop was inevitably located in the county: ‘a deliberate statement of intent’. Rural Wiltshire – like the rural Hampshire of the current Barnsley workshop – offered space,

meditative room, abundant gardens and relative economic benefits (in so far as building a workshop was less complicated and expensive than doing so in, say, the trading estates of Salisbury or Warminster). Burt also sensed the heart-felt tug of home.

But wherever it was situated, the challenge remained: selling individually-designed and personally-made domestic and corporate furniture to a ‘retrospective’ public, exposed by custom to the easier choices of, say, Ercol or G Plan laid out in the safe and predictable environment of the city’s furniture showroom. Burt has never shirked this challenge. His job is not to supplant mass-produced furniture. It is to supplement it by exceptional craft, originality of design, and the quiet purr of distinction and individuality afforded by the exceptional piece in the home or boardroom.

Burt started from a pragmatic position: ‘to ponder upon everyday problems [and the] need to solve and provide for these in a practical, aesthetic, conceptual manner’. His parameters have always been clear: the ‘responsible and appropriate use of materials; sustainable and enduring design’, and the aspiration ‘to do all this beautifully’. These are the words of an artist; an artist, however, first inspired by science. Burt’s degree in Zoology at the University of Reading enriched his interests in the natural world and provided long term respect for it. It gave him a researched platform on which to settle the development of design ideas, rather than a vocabulary of images. It created a framework for his furniture practice. Burt was an environmentalist and combatant for sustainable development long before these subjects gained wider currency. Science was

to inform his work by instilling, for example, a fascination for the precision of geometry, for the daring possibilities of balance (and near off balance), and the concepts behind some natural designs. He remarked that objects in the natural world ‘are perfectly adapted to their function, [their] beauty... an incidental result of their adaptation to their environment. Evolution is a better designer than all of us and a magnificent teacher’.

The desire to manipulate material directly with his hands and tools was a stronger force and led him to embark on a two year long cabinet-making course at Rycotewood College, Thame, in Oxfordshire (where he made his first piece, a low table with the yin yan symbol incorporated across the table top in sycamore and mahogany). This was followed by an influential apprenticeship with Richard Fyson in

Kencot, Gloucestershire. These years of practical training instilled in Burt a deep respect (though not a slavish one) for Arts and Crafts furniture designs. He also settled on the predominant use of wood for his furniture, although he will incorporate points of metal such as copper or silver where the design requires such contrast or embellishment. Wood seemed to Burt to be ‘the most accessible, versatile and sensual material available to me, whose manipulation was easier and cheaper than metal’.

Burt discovered in the Cotswolds a respect for the clarity of line, the implicit restraint and the confident spoken voice of the timber that underpinned and informed the work of the Arts and Crafts makers surrounding him: the legacy of Ernest Gimson and Sidney Barnsley, for example. Here he found impeccable solutions to domestic furniture

needs: ‘sculptural boldness and constructional honesty...furniture made from solid timber [that] showed how the material is beautiful all the way through’. He appreciated the strong ‘beauty of form and function touched by deft details of humanity [achieving] more, using less’. Burt learned how to apply this instructional philosophy to his own design and technical decisions (although he has always been attracted by the notion of the manipulated surface, where an Arts and Crafts maker would leave a plain surface to allow the grain of the wood to do the work unassisted). Burt began to interpret the Arts and Crafts idiom for contemporary usage: to imagine and impart his own ‘deft details of humanity’, and to realise, finally, a design language that could move into new directions without losing sight of its hard won history and tradition.

Burt set up a studio and workshop at first in restricted circumstances in the garden of the brick Wiltshire cottage set on the outer edge of the picturesque thatched village of Sherrington and the virtually hidden hamlet of Upton Lovell. Although the workshops have extended considerably in size since these earliest days (and Matthew and his wife Celia have recently purchased the adjoining cottage in addition to their first home) the primary attraction of the location remain intact: a quiet place on the edge of a fine chalk ridge, set in the Wylye Valley: a creative retreat for the intensive purpose of design and enterprise. A place not only to dream of Arcadia, floating on a summer’s day as if in a bed of rosemary and lavender, but also a place of creative work operating in the heart of the natural environment. A place where belief and

innovation find rich resources of creativity from the surrounding woodlands and farmed fields.

Burt settled to the multiple tasks necessary to make a mark in his first work as a sole trading ‘cabinet maker and designer’. He began with an important, if prosaic task, a first paid job to design and install the stairs to a potter’s cottage in Bampton, Oxfordshire. Some clients wanted original Burt designs, but he also undertook reproduction work for those who could not yet make the leap of faith into contemporary furniture, undertaking some reproduction ‘Georgian’ or ‘Sheraton’ pieces. The heaviness of some of his early work begins to shake off, and his elegance of line and lightness of touch becomes apparent. His long approach to speculative work began with a personal project: a yew and inlaid rosewood jewellery box for Celia. Burt also

embarked on a deeply emotional journey by buying and storing elm, perhaps the most favoured of his woods, and certainly the most elegiac. He reflected on how to respond creatively to the brutal natural destruction of Dutch elm disease, and embarked, over time, on a series of individual works, the 'epitaphs to the elm'. Elm was one precious wood, and joined other (mostly) English woods in his repertoire: oak, ash, cherry, walnut, sycamore and occasionally, yew.

Gradually, Burt's designs break away from the domestic Arts and Crafts aesthetic. They lose the familiar aspect of mass-produced quality furniture, and enter a leaner and more complex phase. Here, the notion of the 'exo skeleton' comes into play. Burt means by this the essential frame of the natural organism, the structure of life, and by association,

the structure of the work of craft. The frame of any piece of Burt furniture, especially where this frame is explicitly seen (for example as a supporting structure to a cabinet or table) carries weight and metaphorical meaning, as the exo skeleton also refers to the inner life of the tree and the natural world. The outer structure has an inner meaning: strength as well as the support of life.

Burt's designs now become more personalised: he discovers his touch, and he does so by following the maxim of less is more. But he also adds detail and surface complexity (the touch of the hand), and in doing so creates the distinctive look of a Burt-designed piece. Now the furniture loses weight. The underlying structural apparatus (frame or legs) combine graceful arched supports to add to the slender strength of the tapered leg. Mathematical

calculation enters the design vocabulary and symmetry as well as anti-symmetry are brought into play. The edges of the work are perfectly controlled: slight, sometimes in feel, but always strong. Burt begins to express more confidence as a designer, and his list of clients, and crucially, the clients who return for more commissioned work, steadily grows.

By the mid 1980s, Burt was ready to make a brave and far reaching decision to extend his repertoire and move beyond the commission-driven approach that (logically) informed his first business model. He invested privately-raised funds, and was awarded a key development grant from Southern Arts, the regional arts board, to create a suite of speculative furniture that more fully represented his design criteria and values. Work such as the *Rift* table in American walnut, English ash and glass was now

work from the heart. Wood was used for its intrinsic strength, colour and the glory of natural figuring. Burt used this investment to dedicate himself to creativity and risk: the heady mix that must accompany any designer-maker. He described this as a time 'emerging from a period of being lost in my shed, wilderness years'.

His response was a freedom of creativity, but it also reflected business acumen. He looked outwards for the development of his practice. He was (modestly) expansionist as well as collegiate. He employed his first apprentice, added to his stock of precious tools and equipment, and broadened his search for buyers who wanted furniture of real innovation and individuality for the complex and intertwined purposes of celebration, or the growing needs of their homes and gardens. His portfolio developed:

tables, beds, cupboards, desks, boxes, chairs and display or storage cabinets. One key piece at this time was a kissing seat shown at the exhibition *Avant Garden* at the Barbican Centre, London, curated by Lindsey Hoole, director of the Oxford Gallery in 1991. This piece pushed forward his design ideas, adding rhythm, romantic sensibility and strength to his portfolio. Around this time, too, Burt began a series of *Fantasy Pavilions* designed first for children.

The first of these, on the inspired suggestion of David Kay, Crafts Officer for Southern Arts, was a proposal for a school playground. Later variants (23 of the pavilions were eventually sold) were made of green thinnings, woven willow, Douglas fir or larch, and developed an extravagant, gothic or pagoda-like architectural language, with multiple rooms walkways and bridges interconnecting the

whole structure: strong and whimsical at the same time. One *Fantasy Pavilion* was memorably included in the exhibition *Pots to Pavilions* (a selling show of contemporary craft and sculpture) set in the gardens of Fletcher's House, Woodstock, prior to its transfer to the Barbican in 1993. These works are perhaps best seen now as a playful footnote to Burt's day to day output, though they helped to gain attention and added to his reputation for individuality and technical skill. They were exuberant structures, 'hedonistic leisure palaces where imagination runs riot and encapsulates a fantasy hideaway from the rest of the world'. The pavilions, crucially, sustained Burt's company during a recessionary period, when any creative endeavour was at risk. But he still believed that 'art will out...and I thought that irrepressibility was worth celebrating'.

His small but growing team of apprentices and senior makers supported this creative ethos with their own imaginative contributions. His team engaged, as they do today, fully in the artistic and technical problem-solving required to interpret the design in hand. Burt says that 'the extended self that is the designer-and-makers' team combines a creative mind with a commercially viable body to produce a brand that is not only greater than the sum of its parts but which also has artistic and financial integrity'.

Burt's designs now enter a long phase of settled and mature consideration, advanced technical abilities and a growing sense of bravura. Complex geometry and the precision of interlocking elements create signature, idiosyncratic structures. His clients want him to take more risks. Some pieces now appear in

his catalogue as staple designs ready for small batch production or, with subtle amendments, for use on other larger projects. Small items such as key cabinets and trays appear as relatively low cost items to attract buyers and introduce them safely into the world of acquiring the individually-commissioned piece (at the heart of his practice). These works included the *Tricorn* chair or the collector's piece such as the *Before you Go* hallway organiser. The effort to embellish surface grows in strength, but when the client demands simplicity and restraint, Burt can still answer the call, especially when extracting the maximum impact from public projects with very tight budgets. He produced, for example, a graceful, hard working set of chestnut trays for the Forest Arts Centre in Hampshire. He was asked to make work twice for the enterprising

Southern Arts Touring Exhibition Service, first an artist's deck chair (alongside celebrated artists such as Dail Behennah and Dawn Dupree) and then a walking stick in Hazel for the exhibition *Sticks* also curated by John Gillett. This feeling for occasional lightness and jollity of mood was allied to his interests in dexterity, complexity as well as the pleasure in the tactile appreciation of wood. All of these characteristics combined in the design of a signature commission that represents the extreme end of his practice and aesthetic: the *Ruminative Chair One*.

Burt was commissioned by Southern Arts to design and make a chair to be used as an annual award for a competition that encouraged the marketing of the arts throughout the region. The brief (set by Keiren Phelan, Southern Arts's Literature Officer)

was short and elliptical: 'to design and make a chair that has wit and speaks of its interest'. Burt liked the idea of wit ('so much furniture is clogged with seriousness') but the concept that required a literal, physical interpretation of marketing required imaginative thinking. Burt's response was a development – perhaps in hindsight an overcomplicated one – of the idea of the exposed external framework, the exo skeleton. The chair joined a set of pieces made by Burt for his personal epitaph to the elm tree (a bench chest, for example, in the series was made in 2003) fast disappearing from the English countryside. The *Ruminative Chair* came with twisted rope legs (hinting at the Indian Rope trick, and a visual pun on the view of marketing as a trade operating on little substance and a good deal of creative spinning), as well as

rotating 'worry globes' at the end of each arm. It was a high water mark of complexity: made of three sorts of the precious wood, wych, English and burr elm.

Burt's work has not repeated this extravagant degree of technical virtuosity in any other commission. Here was a chair 'made because it could be made'. The individually celebrated piece, as well as the idiosyncratic commission, were joined in the 1990s by a number of significant corporate commissions. Burt indicated his new confidence (and it was a reflection on his growing stature amongst his fellow senior furniture designer-makers) by changing the company's business name to the *Splinter Group* (the title was used from 1990 to 2006). This title combined humour with an acknowledgment – readily made by Burt himself – of the key contribution of his growing team of

assistants and apprentices: the talented and even mercurial makers who joined Burt. At the heart of this team remains the shared desire to solve problems, to interpret design drawings and extol individuality within an artistic framework. This was a significant march of progress. The growth of the company and the expansion of the workshop (graced by an artistically imaginative garden, the Arcadian setting for Burt's exterior benches, tables and chairs), were important markers of change.

A full time showroom was set up in 1999 in the 18th century coaching village of Hindon, a short journey away off the main A303 trunk road from London to the West Country. The creation of the gallery was another calculated business risk. Managed by Celia Burt, the showroom added substance to the vital marketing effort. It created

a calm environment for the detailed consideration of Burt's collector's and stock pieces. It is a year-round space, giving the furniture a long term and flexible display area, as well as a focus for regular spring exhibitions featuring other craft artists such as Joanna Still (ceramics) Ruth Dressman (glass) and Robert Race (automata). The gallery gives the Burts artistic freedom, the ability to set their prices untroubled by the addition of a commission payment, as well as dedicated rooms to entertain and attract clients.

The role of the showroom has not hindered Burt in his commitment to presenting his furniture in other notable craft selling fairs such as Artisan in Scotland or Origin and its predecessor the Chelsea Crafts Fair in London. He has also very successfully shown and sold garden furniture from the Chelsea Flower

Show. Burt's gallery drives an insistent marketing and advocacy effort, now supported by a redesigned website. It is also the location that inspires confidence in the commissioning process, setting the new commission in the helpful context of pieces from the existing portfolio, and demonstrating the options available in terms of colour and texture of wood, the tactile feel of a carved surface, and the choice of sumptuous leather or suede chair seat covers. The gallery creates a wholly appropriate space for debate and dialogue around the sensitivities and hopes for the commission.

External recognition for Burt's achievements in contemporary furniture design now began to gather in force, through prestigious awards and commissions. In 2001 he won the Gold award from the Worshipful Company of Furniture Makers for

a competition design for a walnut cantilevered hallway table (a version of the piece called *Canti-ii*) with a grooved, carved top. This was an expression of Burt's interest in the tension of asymmetry and the 'risk of visual balance'. The piece contains simple elements in a project requiring understated craft excellence, as well as a perfect finish to the surface. There is a sense of gracefully resolved tension in the design added to the delicacy of the carved table surface and the lean sculptural outline of the work.

Following on from his election to the Fellowship of the Society of Designer Craftsmen in 2003, Burt was commissioned to make office and boardroom furniture for the TAG McLaren headquarters in Surrey. His lean and efficient furniture matched the poise of Norman Foster's building. Another

signature piece developed at this time, the *Compass Table*. This virtuoso table demonstrated the use of veneers to reveal 'the journey of life that a tree undergoes' and the exceptional, symmetrical poise of the tree's interior pattern is exposed, gracefully and with dignity, on the table top. Another corporate commission was undertaken for the Dartington Social Research Unit (based at Dartington Hall in Devon) and Burt designed a series of interlocking desks and cabinets as well as a director's desk.

This work matched the interest Burt had shown in a 1997 *Dartington Gnomon Cabinet*. This piece gave free rein to his interests in mathematical formulae and the laws of natural history. A copper band is fixed across the cabinet in such a way as it follows through the corners of one of the gnomonic

successions, demonstrating the incremental growth of the mollusc. The same conceptual approach was taken in a private piece (the *Gnomic Increments* cabinet) made for display in an exhibition for the Crafts Study Centre (*Transformations*) in 2005. This small work also included, trapped within interior boxes, evidence of the natural world: a mollusc and bird feathers.

The Dartington commission was followed by café furniture for the remodelled An Tuireann Arts Centre on the Isle of Skye in 1997-8, and Burt joined a group of craftspeople (including Naomi Woolf and Miriam Troth) in the design and manufacture of a creatively tense body of work (including an impressively scaled café bar and close fitting, sinuously curved tables, as well as chairs) for the Russell-Cotes Art Gallery and Museum

in Bournemouth in 2000. His work in a more modernist vein (two elm *Finback Chairs*) was also purchased for the permanent collections of the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge on the instigation of Sir Nicholas Goodison (then Chair of the Crafts Council). Burt further developed an association with the Crafts Study Centre, Farnham, building a number of ash exhibition cabinets as well as oak seating and computer desks for the galleries. He was, as a result of this project, invited to design and make furniture for the offices of the Vice-Chancellor and Deputy Vice-Chancellor of the University for the Creative Arts.

These prestigious commissions reveal Burt's skill in the narratives that precede the order, as well as the ability to meet the sometimes shifting terms of the brief with flair and accuracy. Burt works out these

shared preferences by keeping his design concept to the fore. The results can be highly original, as in the sinuous curved profile for a cabinet for sheet music or the 'reverse-obelisk' stature of a tall *Vase cabinet* balanced delicately on its narrow base. His characteristic use of small-sectioned, end-grained timber blocks to cover the sides of a cabinet or desk (or gallery seating in the case of the Crafts Study Centre) has developed into a hallmark of a Burt work of furniture.

Burt has progressed his company in both stature and size (in 2008 the company employs nine staff and also uses satellite workshops when required). He regards the company, even in its state of 'vulnerable, chaotic financial life' as a 'creative industry that reflects a heritage of its own small craft industries'. Deeply committed to the ideals of sharing and transferring

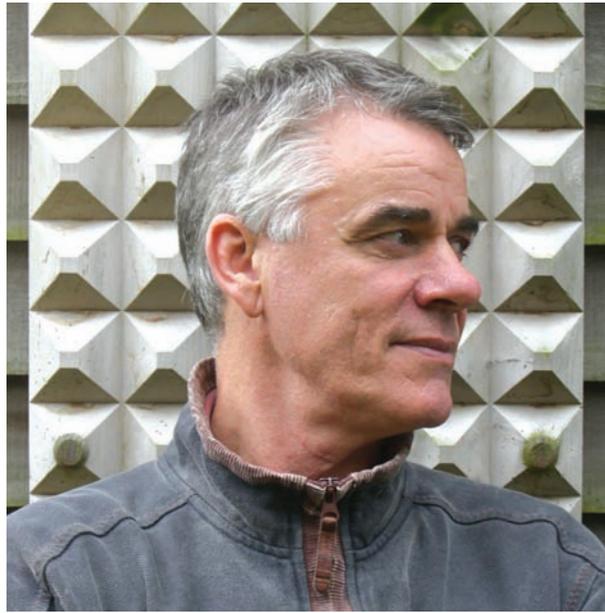
skills in order to stretch and challenge his young apprentice makers, Burt has always invested in them as a mark of hope for the future. Even in the current drastic and turbulent uncertainties of the global marketplace, Burt still sees the potential for development and even growth. He is currently exploring the possibility of relocating to a new build workshop made of cedar shingles on chalk flint footings: he is the architect of this ambitious project (basing his design on contemporary Finnish models). The scheme is at the stage of unsettled ideas, but the complex would host workshop facilities alongside an education room, a big gallery, the whole site surrounded by 2000 acres of woodland supplying the mill and workshop with sustainable timbers. It is a bold scheme, a contemporary dream of Arcadia, resonating with Burt's long-held aims and values.

His exhibition for the Crafts Study Centre, *Idea to Object* is his first one person museum show. He presents a new set of speculative pieces; the majority made for the exhibition, and in doing so celebrates 30 years of practice. As a fitting symbol of this achievement, he has designed 30 bowls in walnut and silver. The subtle curving edges of the bowl, and the effective placement of an offset silver band, marked with an original Burt hallmark, as well as the rich finish of the wood, brings together his ability to find joy in simplicity, solidity and minimalism. Here is a project that would have echoed well with David Pye, even if it is produced with computer-assisted cutting rather than the complex machinery of Pye's fluting machines. Burt has always kept a place for this kind of commemorative work, often with a strong

emotional impact, for example in the commanding and massive elm and bronze candlestick for the Church of St Peter and Paul, Heytesbury with computer-engraved lettering designed by Caroline Webb. This was an especially significant work: a double epitaph both to the elm and to Burt's parents-in law.

Burt's work is individualistic. It is perhaps influenced in the Arts & Crafts idiom through a respect for the elegant, understated modernism espoused by Alan Peters. He works with restraint as well as occasional flashes of flamboyance, at his best when he is proposing a design at risk, or a work that requires the challenge of balance and asymmetry. He is a quick and effective illustrator, using the private sketchbook to explore possible projects or resolve potential ideas. These sketchbooks express

the possible, the problematic, and the wished-for. They are used when there is a moment's lull in the workshop. They are drawings of freedom, irony and even irreverence. The outline of a commission, roughly described here, quickly transfers to the measured, exacting but still symbolic technical drawing: the raw material for scrutiny and interpretation by the team. Here, the conversation about the possible changes or improvements becomes a dialogue about the final realisation of the project. This is where the wood is cut and shaped in earnest. The technical drawing is the staging post for the hand work, the flourishes where humanity is transferred, where the quiet whisper of Barnsley or Gimson is heard, where the work gains its contemporary edge, purpose and function.



*I urge you to discriminate positively in favour of people in sheds, recognise their cultural worth and actively invest in their results*

# matthew burt

## career summary

**Matthew Burt: career summary**

**1951** Born in Wiltshire

**1973** University of Reading - Bsc Hons Zoology

**1973-74** Rycotewood College, Oxfordshire

**1974-76** Apprentice to Richard Fyson,  
Gloucestershire

**1978** Set up own workshop in Wiltshire

**Activities**

**1990-04** Furniture Adviser: Southern Arts Craft Panel

**1994-07** Primary School Governor

**1994-2000** Board Member: Southern Arts

**1998** Crafts Council Index of Selected Makers

**2002-07** Board Member: The Making Craft  
Development Agency

**2003** Member: Culture South West Craft Forum

**2006** Co-curator of *Yew Tree*: a Salisbury  
Arts Centre Project - reviewed in *Crafts*  
magazine No 204, Jan/Feb 2007

**since 2007** Trustee: The Devon Guild of Craftsmen

**Projects**

**1991** Design and make 30 desks for new  
Southern Arts offices

**1993** Design and make executive furniture for  
new MI6 offices, Vauxhall Cross, London

Design and make an office desk in  
collaboration with Hille International  
Ltd: the desk was exhibited by Hille at  
*Spectrum*, RCA, London

*Benchmarks* project at the Chiltern  
Sculpture Trail producing prototype outdoor  
seating: documented by Southern Arts

**1994** Design and make boardroom furniture for  
Matheson Investment Ltd, London

**1997** Selected as part of team of designers and  
makers for a new Craft Café at the Russell-  
Cotes Art Gallery & Museum, Bournemouth

**1998** Design and make café furniture for An  
Tuireann Arts Centre, Isle of Skye

**1999** Showroom opens in Wiltshire

**2000** Design and make library furniture for  
Stanton Guildhouse, a centre for Community  
Action Network

**2001** Design and make a 'reading companion'  
as awarded by the André Simon Memorial  
Trust to Alan Davidson, in recognition of his  
contribution to cookery writing

**2002** Design and make statement reception table  
for Wilsons, Salisbury, as part of *In Praise  
of Trees*, Salisbury Festival

Invited to decorate a 'building block': one  
of 150 decorated by varying artists and  
renowned individuals for fund raising event  
in aid of Tommy's Charity

**2005** The making of executive furniture in Sir  
Norman Foster's building for the TAG  
McLaren Group

**2007** Design and re-fit of French Alpine chalet to  
include fitted and free-standing furniture

The making of church furniture for St  
James' Church, Weybridge; consecrated by  
the Archbishop of Canterbury

**Ecclesiastical**

**1991** St Lawrence Chapel, Warminster

**2000** The making of 25 Provincial Chairs for  
Lambeth Palace Millennium Commission,  
in conjunction with designer Alan Tilbury:  
awarded a Craft Guild Mark

**2007** St James' Church, Weybridge  
St Leonard's Church, Whitsbury

**Grants/Awards/Prizes**

**1981** Southern Arts grant for machinery

**1986** Craft Guild Mark

**1987** Southern Arts grant for design development

**1997** Craft Guild Mark awarded by the Worshipful  
Company

**1999** Southern Arts grant for speculative design  
development

**2000** Certificate of Merit from the RHS for the  
outstanding presentation at Chelsea Flower  
Show

**2001** Master's Gold Award, Worshipful Company  
of Furniture Makers

Two Craft Guild Marks

Winner for best modern furniture design  
and make piece, *Furniture & Cabinet  
Making* magazine

**2002** Craft Guild Mark awarded by the Worshipful  
Company of Furniture Makers

**2003** Shortlisted for the Arts and Crafts in  
Architecture Award, Saltire Society

**Membership**

Fellow Royal Society of Arts

Fellow Society of Designer Craftsmen

The Devon Guild of Craftsmen

**Exhibitions**

**1991** Royal Botanic Gardens, Edinburgh Festival -  
Oxford Gallery

*Avant Garden*, Barbican Centre - Oxford  
Gallery

**1993-94** *Pots to Pavilions* - Oxfordshire County  
Museum

**1994** *Deckchairs Two* - Southern Arts Touring  
Exhibition  
Brewery Arts, Cirencester

**1995** Pallant House, Chichester

**1996** *Furniture: 'four nationally acclaimed  
designers working in Wiltshire'* - Salisbury  
Museum

*New Furniture from British Studio*

*Workshops* - an Anne Prescott exhibition,  
Edinburgh Festival

*Contemporary Garden Furniture* - Brewery Arts

*Living at Belsay* - Belsay Hall,  
Northumberland

**1997** *Fires and Feasting* - Brewery Arts,  
Cirencester

*Room with a View* - Bluecoat Display  
Centre, Liverpool

*Design for Living* - Cambridge Contemporary  
Art

**1997-98** *Furniture Makers* - Cider Press, Dartington

**1997-2005** *Fresh Air* - Quenington Sculpture Trust,  
Gloucestershire (catalogue)

**1997-2007** *A Celebration of Craftsmanship* -  
Cheltenham (catalogue)

**1999** *Sticks* – Southern Arts Touring Exhibition  
*Furniture for the 21st Century* - Banqueting  
House, Whitehall (catalogue)  
Beatrice Royal Contemporary Art & Craft  
Gallery, Eastleigh

**2001** *Matthew Burt Showcase* - Beatrice Royal  
Gallery  
*Furniture Awakened* - Walford Mill,  
Wimborne

**2002** *Onetree* - touring exhibition concluding at  
Geffrye Museum, London

*Take a Seat* - Grace Barrand Design Centre

*Sofa* - Chicago with Artizana Gallery

**2002-08** *Spring into Action* – Matthew Burt  
Showroom

**2003** *Classic*, Belgium (catalogue)  
*Designer Crafts* – Society of Designer  
Craftsman, Mall Galleries, London  
(catalogue)

*Artspace* - Barn Galleries, Henley on  
Thames

**2004** *Makers under the Influence* – Walford Mill,  
Wimborne (catalogue)

**2005** *A Celebration of Excellence, The Art of  
Furniture Making*, Bonhams Auctioneers,  
London (catalogue)

**2007** *Inspired* – Grace Barrand Design Centre,  
Surrey  
*Applied Art & Architecture* - Bluecoat  
Display Centre, Liverpool

**2007-08** *Antiques for the Future* - Norman Adams,  
London (catalogue)

**2008** House of Commons exhibition: a selection  
of work from leading designer-makers  
curated to raise the profile of UK furniture  
making to Members of Parliament

*Design & Bespoke*, curated by the  
Worshipful Company of Furniture Makers,  
South Kensington, London

*Collect* – V&A, London: represented by the  
Devon Guild of Craftsmen

*Craft Focus* - Devon Guild of Craftsmen

**2008-09** *idea to object* – a solo exhibition at the  
Crafts Study Centre, Farnham, touring to the  
Bluecoat Display Centre, Liverpool in 2009

**Shows**

**1995** Chelsea Crafts Fair, London

**1995-97** *Art in Action*, Waterperry House, Oxford

**1996-98** *100% Design*, London

**1997-98** Artisan, Edinburgh

**1998** Daily Telegraph/House & Garden Fair,  
Olympia

**1998-99** Chelsea Flower Show

**2000** Daily Telegraph/House & Garden Fair,  
Olympia

*Art in Action*, Waterperry House, Oxford

**2000-01** Chelsea Flower Show

**2000-03** Chelsea Crafts Fair, London

**2002** Artisan, Edinburgh

**2006-07** *Origin* - Crafts Council, Somerset House, London

### Teaching/lectures

**1994** Invited speaker at Southern Arts AGM

Invited speaker at the *Arts in Rural Wilts* seminar

**1994-97** Visiting tutor at Parnham College, designing and assessing 1st year projects

**1997-99** Visiting tutor, The Furniture College, Letterfrack, Ireland

**1997** Invited speaker at Bournemouth & Poole College of Art & Design

**1998** Invited speaker on the arts to Hampshire County Council

**1999** Invited speaker, Parnham College

**2003** Invited speaker to The Makers Guild in Wales

### Clients include

Crafts Study Centre; University for the Creative Arts; TAG McLaren Ltd; Chez Bruce; The Body Shop; Southern Arts; Horstmann Timers Ltd; Institute of Directors;

Matheson Investment Ltd; Warren House Group; Bernard Quaritch Ltd; Balliol College, Oxford; An Tuirrean Arts Centre; Russell-Cotes Art Gallery & Museum; Architectural Plants; Community Action Network; Stanton GuildHouse; André Simon Memorial Trust; Wilsons Solicitors

### Permanent collections

Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge

### Media coverage

*Robb Report; Sunday Times Magazine; Vogue; House & Garden; Home & Gardens; London Evening Standard; You; Crafts; FX; Sunday Express; Daily Telegraph; Metropolitan Homes; Woodworker; International Herald Tribune; The Times; Woman & Home; Marketing Week; The Kitchen Magazine; International Woodworking; Gardens Illustrated; Today; Kitchens, Bedrooms & Bathrooms; The Sun; Perspectives on Architecture; Cabinet Maker; Furniture and Cabinet Making; Artist's Newsletter; Experimenta, Spain; Wessex Life; Wiltshire Times; Monocle; Salisbury and Warminster Journals*

### Publications

**1995** *Complete Woodworker's Companion* (Roger Holmes: pub Conran Octopus)

**1996** *Family Gardens* (Bunny Guinness: pub David & Charles)

**1998** *A Celebration of Excellence* (the Worshipful Company of Furniture Makers)

**1999** *Furniture for the 21st Century* (Betty Norbury: pub Stobart Davies)

**2002** *Onetree* (Garry Olson & Peter Toaig: pub Merrell)

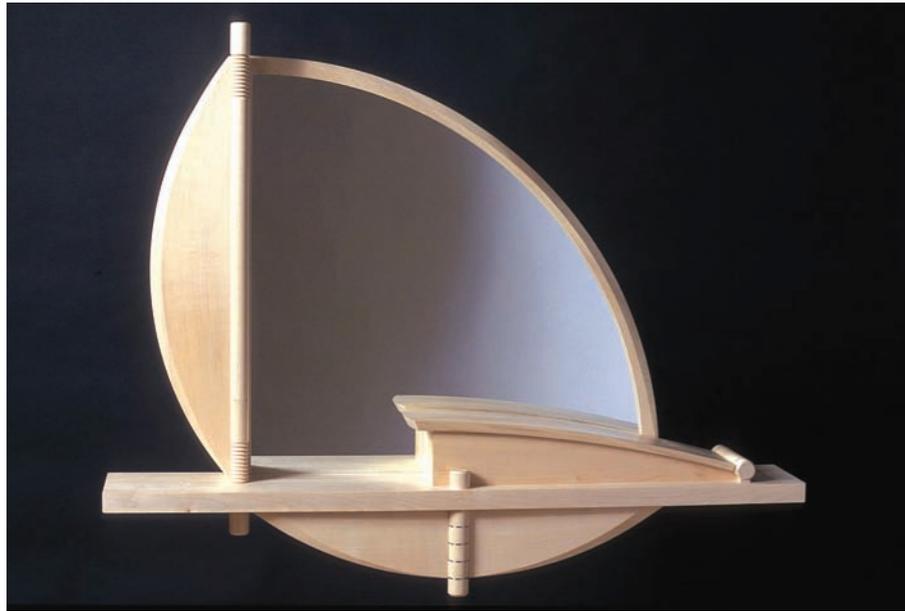
*Buyers Guide to Contemporary Wood* (Crafts Council)

**2004** *Crafts Study Centre – Essays for the Opening* (pub Canterton Books: ISBN 0-9541627-4-9)

**2007** *Bespoke* (Betty Norbury: pub Stobart Davies: ISBN 978-0-85442-185-5)

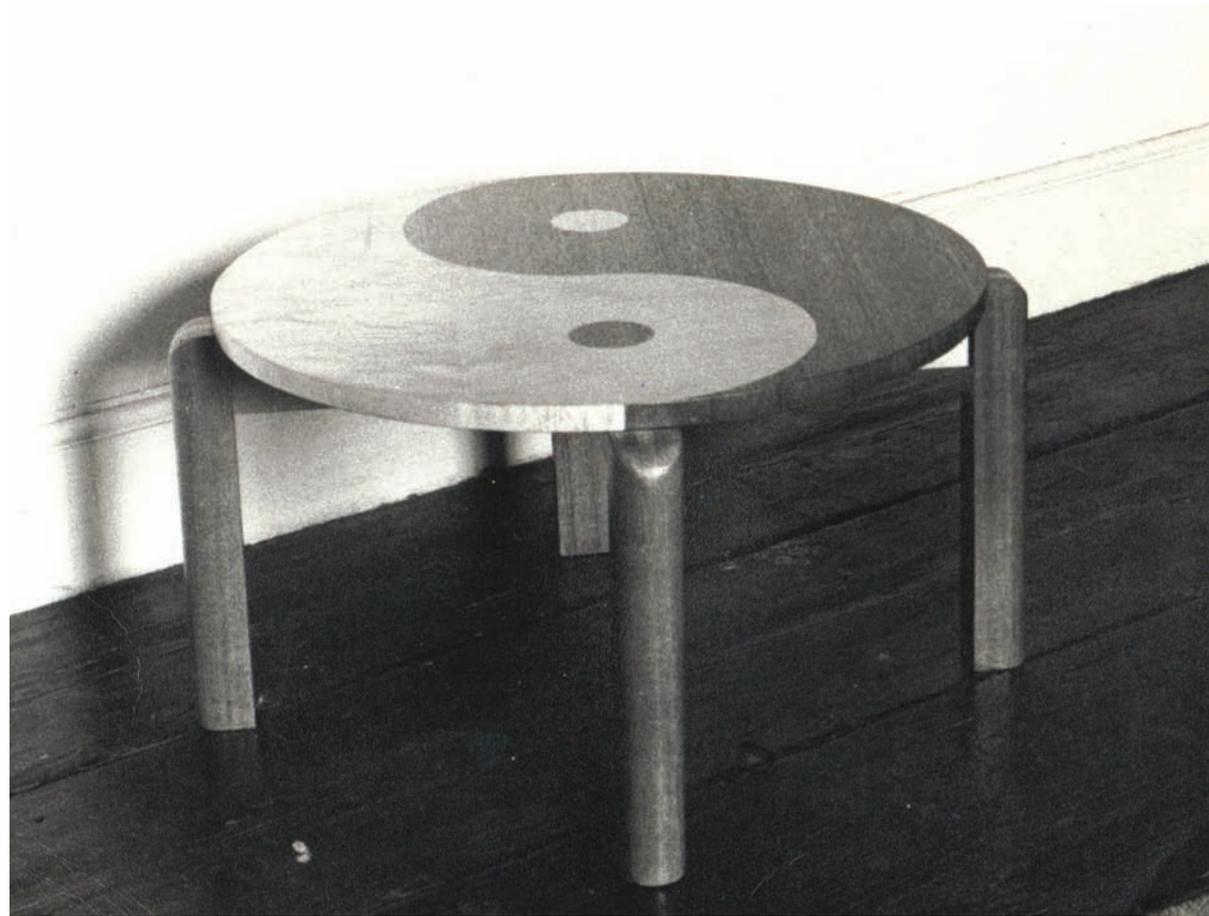
### TV and radio

BBC TV - Southern Eye; BBC Radio Scotland; BBC Wiltshire Sound



*In my workshop we'll use tools from the biblical to the digital and we'll chew it with our teeth if necessary to bring the object out of the idea*

colour plates



Yin-Yan low table, 1975; mahogany and sycamore; 520cm x 350cm



Top: Brickworked dining table and chairs, 1984; cherry, mahogany and leather; table 1530cm x 1002cm x 740cm



Below: Writing desk, 1985; walnut and sycamore; 1500cm x 900cm x 760cm



Occasional table II 'Homage to Sheraton', 1995; cherry and brass; 810cm x 320cm x 600cm



Bishop's chair, 1991; burr oak, windblown in 1928, with English oak felled by the hurricane of 1987; 1200cm x 650cm x 760cm



Above: Ruminative chair, 1989; wych elm, English elm, burr elm and sycamore; 860cm x 600cm x 680cm

Right: Wedding cabinet, 1982; English yew and burr elm; 1200cm x 600cm x 900cm





Hille desk, 1993; powder-coated steel, polished aluminium and sycamore; 1550cm x 740cm x 820cm



Above: Packington table to seat 14, 1989; English oaks and burr elm with boxwood banding; 2200cm x 740cm

Left: Wave cabinet, 1998; rippled sycamore, wych elm and silver; 520cm x 520cm x 1778cm



Kissing seat, 1990; English oak, yew and brass; 1700cm x 600cm x 920cm



Dartington partners' desks, 1998; beech; 1500cm x 1000cm x 740cm



Top: Seven-roomed fantasy pavilion, 1991; larch, cedar, Douglas fir and larch plywood; 3660cm x 3660cm x 3660cm

Below: Cupola fantasy pavilion, 1990; larch, cedar and Douglas fir; 3040cm x 3040cm x 3040cm



Fan table for Balliol College, Oxford, 1997; English walnut and bronze; 1580cm x 1300cm x 430cm



Leaf table, 2007; rippled olive ash; 1330cm x 700cm x 460cm



Russell-Cotes Art Gallery and Museum café, 2000; ash



Rift table (detail), 2000; walnut, rippled sycamore, glass and sea urchins; 1500cm x 400cm x 820cm



Vase cabinet, 2008; brown, brindle and tiger oak with rippled ash interiors; 360cm x 450cm x 1320cm



Memorial paschal candlestick, 2008; elm and bronze; 500cm x 1830cm



Music manuscript cabinet (detail), 2003; European cherry and ash; 530cm x 450cm x 1557cm



'Goggle head' pedestal chest of drawers, 2007; customer's own cherry felled by the hurricane of 1987; 420cm x 420cm x 1280cm



Tricorn chair, 2007; ash and leather; 500cm x 430cm x 850cm



Coopered carver, 2008; rippled oak; 590cm x 450cm x 840cm



Chelsea bench, 1998; elm and stainless steel; 1600cm x 450cm x 860cm



Pyramalised dresser I, 2007; brown and tiger oak with ash and oak interiors; 1320cm x 360cm x 900cm



Celebration bowl (detail), 2008; walnut and silver; 370cm x 370cm x 74cm

### The Makers

Nineteen makers have worked with Matthew Burt since he set up his Wiltshire workshop and studio in Sherrington in 1978. Those makers who have made work for the exhibition *Matthew Burt: idea to object* are shown with an asterisk beside their name.

Ian Boon*	Ben Brown*
Daniel Church*	John Cullen
Mike Feeney*	Phillip Gullam
Peter Hall*	Alasdair Healy*
Ian Hewett*	Derek Kenyon
Vincent Large*	Kim Lucas
Ian Marmont*	Marcus Mindelsohn
Berwyn Phillips*	Malcolm Scott
Justin Smith*	Loïc le Trividic*
Marc Williamson*	

Other artists have also collaborated with Matthew Burt on specialist elements required by his furniture.

#### Letter designer

Caroline Webb\*

#### Metal engineer

David Garrod\*

#### Administrators

Celia Burt

#### Metal work

John Barker\*

#### CNC engineer

Mark Phillips\* at Dcode

Rebecca Walker





**Matthew Burt : idea to object**

*Simon Olding*

The first monograph on the acclaimed designer-maker Matthew Burt is published to coincide with a major Crafts Study Centre touring exhibition.

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CRAFTS  
STUDY  
CENTRE