



In the workshop with Yannick Chastang Real French polish



First floor studio is spotless and spacious

Derek Jones visits the workshop of the man who's been entrusted with the conservation of one of the most valuable pieces of furniture in existence

Yannick's workshop is like no other workshop I've ever seen. Once inside the security doors, at the top of a flight of stairs to his studio, there is a 5ft high image of what is reputed to be the most valuable piece of furniture in existence. The cabinet was made for King Louis XIV of France and we'd missed seeing it in the flesh by a couple of weeks. It's not easy to recover from a blow like that but Yannick's enthusiasm for his work is so infectious that, like all good storytellers, you're never more than a page or two away from the next big adventure.

The piece in question was originally

made for the palace of Versailles in 1683 and is now exhibited at Alnwick Castle, the home of its current owner The Duke of Northumberland. Every aspect of the work carried out by Yannick and his team of artisans was documented and added to a dossier recording information about the original maker, Domenico Cucci and subsequent conservators. In line with tradition Yannick was asked to add his signature to an unseen panel alongside that of the 1753 restorer Vallin. The nature of the work he does requires attention to detail in the extreme and extends to every aspect of his business.

Guardian

I was intrigued when he referred to 'being entrusted' with the conservation of pieces of furniture, for this implies an acceptance of responsibility that extends beyond the relationship with his clients to one of overall protector.

The current owners of pieces like this are more the temporary custodians, with a responsibility and duty of care to preserve these examples for future generations. The burden, however, must be short lived. Who would not fail to be moved, realising that one of the most notable people in history once stood proudly in front of it admiring its detail. Yannick himself admits to getting a kick out of knowing that in all probability The Sun King himself used the same key to open the same secret compartment to which he now has access.

There's no arguing that by today's standards the piece is of dubious taste. Inlaid with semi-precious hard stone and dripping with gold it represents the height of opulence at a time when Louis really should have been reigning it in a little. "It was extravagant, opulent and inappropriate, but it's French and that's what we do. We just happen to do it very well".

A more academic spin on this is that during the 17th-century the style for furniture and decoration was all about symbolism; the right symbolic language signified cultural awareness, great intellect and therefore social status. On close inspection the execution of the decoration and cabinetwork is relatively crude. Craftsmen were yet to be recognised for their skill as craftsmen and coveted more for their knowledge of the classics and a repertoire of the right symbolism.

Vive la France

With Yannick what you see really is what you get, and I'm in fear of failing to capture his zest without resorting to cultural stereotyping. There's nothing the French are more passionate about than being French, unless you happen to be from Paris in which case you are a Parisian and also French. A fact that is pointed out to me when I apologise for not getting to grips with some of his pronunciation and ask him to



COURTESY YANNICK CHASTANG

repeat what he's just said, "It's ok I'm from Paris so I don't have an accent." he said.

Yannick confirms what I've always suspected; the French would gladly surrender life, limb and then some to preserve their right to do what

makes them more comfortable. For this reason alone I hold him and his countrymen in the highest regard for their passion to support a cause that for all they know is spiralling out of control. A better man suited to the job he does is hard to imagine. ➤

Cabinet by Domenico Cucci, c.1683. Alnwick Castle, collection of the Duke of Northumberland

Machine 'shop

The ground floor machine 'shop is virtually dust free. Yannick and his staff are fastidious when it comes to tidying up. The backbone of the 'shop is a Martin T45 panel saw. It's well used but there's hardly a scratch on it.



An SCM FS520 planer thicknesser is stood along side the Martin with its 2.3m long tables raised for thickening



Martin T45 panel saw



The SCM T150N tilting arbour spindle moulder is also a formidable piece of kit



The replica desk is painstakingly dismantled before any further work can be started



Each piece of bronze examined closely before any cleaning can take place

Endeavour – because every home needs a seashell display stand



This 19th-century cabinet has been repaired and is awaiting collection for shipping to China

> Different world

My point of reference for considering the work that Yannick and his team carry out comes from time spent in and around the North Laine in Brighton. I now shudder to think of the damage I inflicted on 'antiques' under the guise of restorer during that time. In my defence and that of the trade, much of what we commonly accept as good practice is in reality anything but. Bad habits are just as easily passed on as good ones.

The ordered world of the conservator is miles away from that of the furniture maker but, listen and learn because what these guys are doing should strike a chord with every man jack who ever attempted to make something unique and special.

In the short time I spent with Yannick I learned that tap water should not be used as a cleaner for most precious objects. Oak should not be used for shelves in a bookcase as it's the most acidic of timbers and on contact will begin to destroy the books placed on it. A tank of boxwood chippings is the best method for drying bronze after cleaning in a solution of EDTA (short for Ethylenediaminetetraacetic acid). Boxwood is pH neutral and therefore will not tarnish the bronze. In this respect exotics have an advantage over European species of timber as they are generally lower in acid content. I'm also advised that anyone

serious about collecting furniture should install UV filtering glass in their home.

Material world

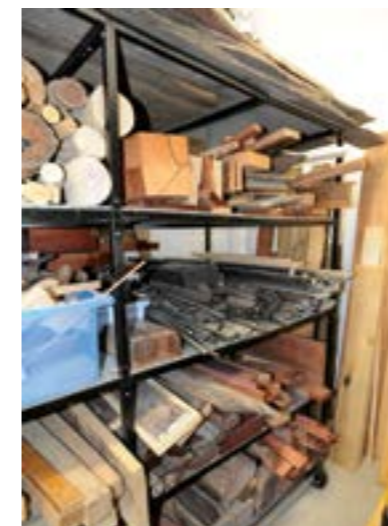
I was not at all surprised to learn that Yannick is a collector of materials. A truly creative person must, by definition be enthused by the material to which he plies his trade. If a collection of material is indicative of one's passion then a recent acquisition of two tons of pink ivory wood suggests a severe but nonetheless healthy obsession with the medium.

Further examination of his

timber rack reveals a hunk of snake wood, airlifted from Guyana by his godfather while on military service, and segments of berberis from the local skip. This happens to be the most vibrant natural yellow timber you can imagine. Much of his stock is crucial to the work of conservation and, like the pieces that require his attention, simply can't be replaced. On this subject Yannick is resolute in his belief that any finite resource should be managed responsibly. This is fairly obvious of course but he's pragmatic in his approach. Yannick infers that this is not being managed in the best interests of all interested

parties. Many of the accepted notions of using exotic materials are born out of a failure to reconcile the worlds of art and conservation.

In contrast there's no shortage of red tape however and in Yannick's words much of it is, "bureaucracy for the sake of it." A typical ivory restorer in France needs about 2kg of ivory a year. To give you an idea of volume, a typical tusk could weigh something in the region of 20kg. With a stock pile worldwide of hundreds of tonnes releasing such a small amount for this purpose in recognition of the need to conserve items of artistic significance hardly seems an excess. >



Practically every piece of timber in the rack has a story to tell



A record is kept of the location of every pin and screw used to attach the gilded motifs

DESIGN & INSPIRATION

In the workshop with Yannick Chastang



The pink ivory dressing table with shagreen and gold pigment resin work top

➤ The CITES Convention requires that any ivory imported to the USA must have documentary evidence of its existence for more than 100 years, and in the UK before 1947. With the new 'worked item regulation' the work of art cannot be restored and will be refused entry in the USA or the UK regardless of the age of the material used, even if old ivory harvested from an object older than 100 years has been used for the repair.

The subject is both emotive and divisive and the ramifications have impact beyond the care and protection of artefacts held in reverence by a minority of the world's population and therein lies the problem. The only sound argument I can offer is that once these artefacts have gone, they're gone forever but the means by which they could have been preserved will no doubt still be stacked up in warehouses around the world. There are countless past atrocities, in ancient and modern civilisation, that by today's standards we wish had never happened, so let's not let that be the case when future generations look back at what we did to preserve this particular aspect of our cultural make-up. It's my understanding, so please correct me if I'm wrong, but the bulk of this unscrupulous trade is largely connected with practices linked to alternative medicine.

Furniture classics

At the moment conservation work accounts for most of Yannick's output but it's only half the story.



A modern classic if ever there was one

With the same meticulous approach he produces some exquisite contemporary work as well as replicas with breathtaking levels of precision. In a separate part of the upper studio work is being carried out to complete a replica of a desk originally made for King Louis XV. The project was started prior to the outbreak of the Second World War by a firm of cabinetmakers in Paris, before being moved to Switzerland. Remarkably the original carcass was preserved and five years ago, the project was started again. There are no records that show precisely how the original internal mechanism worked as this was removed after repeatedly failing.

A specialist in marquetry, Yannick's work is exciting and dynamic. He explains that there are around 120 different colours of wood and that using anything other than the real

thing makes little sense. Furthermore he only uses saw-cut veneers in his contemporary work preferring, in most cases, to cut his own.

In a corner of the ground floor machine 'shop' were a pair of matching dressing tables; one finished with ebony and the other with pink ivory. The tops were undergoing an experimental process where shagreen had been coated with a resin mixed with gold pigment and ground smooth to create a shimmering textured effect. Luxurious and daring, the pair sit perfectly well alongside the period pieces stored in the vault.

Yannick was generous with this knowledge, but time was against us. In a future issue I've asked him to explain why he adds Belgian beer to his animal glue, and what it is about a sturgeon's swim bladder that makes it the strongest glue known to man. *F&C*