



RECLAIMING HISTORY

with TIMOTHY OULTON

THE FORMER BRITISH RUGBY PLAYER TELLS US
HOW HE BREATHES NEW LIFE INTO OLD WOOD.

THE
REPRODUCTIONIST

STORY BY LAURA CAVALUZZO / PORTRAIT BY MARC HOM



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It’s after 11 pm in China, and Tim Oulton isn’t ready to sleep. On the contrary, he’s just getting fired up. “No one’s interested,” he says of the antique business. “It’s not relevant. Now, antiques *reinvented*, that’s what people are interested in.”

As a designer, Oulton is the master of reinvention. He can look at a single broken down steamer trunk and envision an entire line of furniture. And it’s that talent – along with boundless energy and a deep understanding of the family antique business – that’s fueled his success.

Growing up in Manchester, England, where he spent school holidays working in his father’s shop, the last thing Oulton wanted was to be an antiques dealer. “I left school at 18 and didn’t know what to do,” he says. “I thought, ‘I’ll do this for a year or so, and then I’ll become a banker or something serious.’ And then, suddenly, I got the bug.”

What hooked him was not the beauty or rarity, or even the provenance, of the pieces he sold, but the quality of the craftsmanship. It was a revelation that furniture of such astounding quality could be made with the simplest of tools more than a century ago.

But still, a life peddling Chippendale highboys and Windsor settees was no life for him.

So, when Oulton eventually did take the reins at his father’s antique business, he moved the company in a radical new direction: creating reproductions, crafted with the same meticulous care as the original antiques, but reconceived. Though based on historical forms and built with traditional techniques, his furniture is

authentically original, one of a kind, and – in Oulton’s parlance – relevant.

This is due, in large part, to Oulton’s penchant for going to extremes that few other designers would. “If something takes 12 days to make, I’m drawn to it, because I know other people won’t want to do it,” Oulton laughs. “But that’s what we’re good at, and that’s what we want to do. The more intricate it is, the more I’m drawn to it.”

The Salvaged Wood Collection is a perfect example. Beyond their strong, classic lines and hand-carved details, the pieces derive immense character from the 100-year-old pine Oulton uses to build them. But, like all true character, it’s not something that comes easily.

Reclaimed from distilleries, factories and other buildings across Great Britain, these timbers arrive at Oulton’s workshop in the oddest of odd lots – a jumble of different lengths, widths and finishes, weathered and worn and filled with rusty nails. “To be honest,” says Oulton, “when you see the timber arrive from the UK, the fact that we ever make a table out of it is a miracle!”

Oulton’s artisans go to work, removing the nails, sorting the planks and setting aside the pieces with the most character to use for tabletops and cabinet doors. Once sorted, the timbers are cut, shaped and joined using carpentry methods that would have been familiar to English furniture crafters of the 19th century. However, where furnishings of that era would traditionally be stained and lacquered, buffed and polished, Oulton’s pieces are left raw and unfinished, proudly displaying the patina that could only come from decades of weather and use.



Opposite page: Tim Oulton and a container filled with planks of 100-year-old salvaged pine timbers from Great Britain; Clockwise, left to right: An old distillery in Great Britain, its wood being reclaimed for later use; the Gun Barrel Salvaged Wood Dining Table; tools of the carver’s trade. Select photos courtesy of Tim Oulton.

In pursuit of character, there’s no cutting corners. Says Oulton, “The Palladian three-door bookcase spends 60-odd days in the carpentry shop – six people, 10 days – and we’re just talking about assembly. Before that, the wood has to be selected. Then cut. Then dried. Then, after the carpentry shop, it has to be dried again, assembled again, all the glass fitted – individual panes of glass, cut by hand – then cleaned again, then assembled again, then packaged. It takes three days just to pack!”

Certainly furniture this labor-intensive is more costly to make, but Oulton believes the expense and effort are well worth it. “We have a point of view. There is a character, a soul to what we do. There

is authenticity in the product because of the materials we use, the design we have, the link to heritage and antiques. It is completely unique. Is it cheap? No. It’s not cheap. It’s actually bloody expensive! But the goal was never financial, the goal was to make the best product on the planet,” he says. “Whatever we do, it has to be BOP – best on planet.”

Oulton’s dedication to fine craftsmanship is legendary, as is his loyalty to a team of highly trained craftsmen. When he set up his workshop in China, he brought in furniture builders to train local artisans in traditional English joinery – including a craftsman who reproduced antiques for his father. “He’s 35 years with the

company,” Oulton says. “If you want to make a table from old wood, I guarantee there is no one in the world who knows more about making a table from old wood than him.”

Oulton’s wide-ranging imagination draws inspiration from history, fashion, industrial design, art and music – creating collisions of traditional and modern that defy classification as period pieces. “All periods influence your aesthetic... you can’t help it,” he says. “A motorbike jacket influences your aesthetic. A pop song can influence your aesthetic. What I’m drawn to are things that have longevity. If you talk about music, I like the Rolling Stones, because despite whatever people thought about Mick Jagger at the time – that he was a revolutionary, that he was going to ruin the world – the Rolling Stones are still relevant today. Mick is still the coolest guy on the planet. Rihanna is hot today, but in 40 years’ time, will our kids be turning on Rihanna? I don’t think so. So you can try to emulate a piece of furniture that’s 200 years old, but you have to make it relevant. Because if you’re not relevant, you’re out.”

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