

FURNITURE & CABINETMAKING



THOROUGHLY MODERN MARQUETRY

LUCY TURNER HAS CARVED A FURNITURE-SHAPED NICHE FOR HERSELF BY ADORNING PIECES WITH MARQUETRY MADE FROM FORMICA LAMINATE. SHE TELLS F&C ALL ABOUT IT

'What's not to like about Formica?' asks Lucy Turner. 'It's vibrant, it's durable, it's heat and scratch-resistant, colourfast and hygienic, and the range of colours, textures and woodgrains is vast. It truly is a beautiful product. It is made from layers of compressed paper with a thermosetting resin coating, and although the product is not recyclable itself, it is sustainable in that it lasts a lifetime. So my ethos is: buy my pieces for life, as they will stay looking fresh forever. Buy once and it will be a functional piece of art for the home. I have customers who return for more and more – they not only see them as collectors' items, but also appreciate the quality and longevity of the pieces.'

Formica was the world's first laminate brand and it celebrated its 110th anniversary in 2023. Lucy says: 'I have always been drawn to this material: the vivid colours, the retro aesthetic, the tactile feel of it. I think that's why I love greasy spoon cafés and chip shops.' She found her niche after trying her hand at everything from ceramics to lighting on the way there. 'I have always made things,' she recalls. 'From an early age you would find me making things from junk, clay and whatever I could lay my hands on – you would never find me watching TV. At school I loved Design Technology. It was my favourite subject and I was one of just three girls in the class. I've always thought that if my business fails, I would like to be a DT teacher and inspire girls – there are so many career possibilities in the creative world.'

She went on to Bath College where she took a National Diploma in Design Crafts alongside A-level Art. Next she studied 3D Design at the University of Plymouth. While there she was selected for a placement as part of Next Move, a professional development scheme funded by the Arts Council of England. That took her to Falmouth University where she worked towards a business development award for two years.

BINGO, I THOUGHT!

'The Next Move scheme was quite open-ended and enabled me to explore lots of paths,' Lucy says. 'Originally I was making ceramic products, lighting and furniture, all with a sustainable ethos. I did various shows with these products, ploughing every penny into trying to make my products sell. I had five jobs at one point. I was determined to get something to work. Then one day,

I hit on an idea. I took one of my products to a show and it sold in the first few hours. Bingo, I thought! And the rest is history – with a lot of ups and downs along the way, of course.'

The piece that sold was a sideboard Lucy had bought from a charity shop for £5 and adorned with laser-cut Formica laminate. 'I bought it because it was beautifully made and British-made, by a highly skilled craftsman, from teak, a rainforest wood – and it was stunning. For £5 I had to buy it,' she says. 'I took it home, but it didn't fit into my house, which was damp, dark and cold. It looked really sad squished in the corner. So I thought: I know, I'll cover it in Formica. But just covering it wasn't enough for me, I wanted to customise it – so I learned how to use the laser cutter and started playing around with cutting this sheet material and applying it to wood.'

The result was a 6ft-long sideboard with a cut-out, surfy-style flower – 'we were in Cornwall, after all,' Lucy explains. When she took the piece to the show it sold within hours to a customer whose home had a view over a beach in Newquay, the surfing capital of the UK. 'That was it,' Lucy says: 'I had not only hit on something that sold, it combined everything I loved in one place: recycling, Formica and high-quality craftsmanship.'

When she first started out in the venture, nearly 20 years ago, it was almost too easy to source the pieces she would upcycle. 'People were literally chopping these pieces up and burning them – it was criminal,' she says. 'My workshop at the time was floor to ceiling in rescued pieces, I was like the sideboard sanctuary of the west. The knowledge I have about mid-century furniture now is vast, I should write a book! I have such high regard for all the skilled makers who worked for the manufacturers of that era. The pieces are such high quality. I was glad I was giving them a new lease of life.'

'These days you get purists who say you are destroying perfectly good furniture by dressing it in laminate, even though a lot of the pieces are damaged anyway,' she says. 'I haven't got time to give them my whole history, but I want to say: Well, you're too late, you should've helped me all those years ago because a lot of them are now charcoal.' She adds: 'Joking aside, I'm glad these handmade British pieces are respected now. Thank goodness. You can burn chipboard crap, but not teak!'



WORK-LIFE BALANCE

Lucy left Cornwall in 2016 because it is such an expensive place to live, and set up a home and workshop in Somerset, just a mile from where she was born. 'The house is pretty run down, but it came with the opportunity to buy 4.5 acres of old railway line, which was once used to connect up all the coal pits in the area and closed in 1936. It now has established trees and a beautiful river next to it,' she says. 'Luckily the previous owner had left lots of old sheds and stables. My husband converted the old tractor shed into a fully insulated workshop. It's nothing fancy, but it works and it enabled me to carry on working throughout having babies. I have now developed a habit of starting work at 4am due to lockdown, teachers' strikes, being self-employed, having no holiday pay and so on. It means I can head out there and do a few hours before my husband leaves for work. I wouldn't be able to do that if I had to commute.'

Lucy has been open on social media about the challenges of being a woman, a mum and running her own business. 'It is a challenge - it's difficult for everyone involved: the kids, my husband, my friends. I'm surprised I still have friends because I don't have a social life! Most makers probably don't, we don't get time. We don't get holiday pay or sick pay. Every spare minute is spinning plates. But it is a choice. I have chosen this career and I have kids, and they are my priority. You will never find me moaning about any of this, because quite frankly, it is my choice to run my own business. It wasn't my choice to be female, but it's fine. You just have to adapt to the challenges you face and get on with it.'

Lucy's advice to other mums working in the furniture world is to 'do what you can, when you can'. 'Break each project down into chunks - slow and steady wins the race,' she says. 'You may only get an hour here and there, but that focused hour is

probably the equivalent of three hours for everyone else. A good friend told me that when I was expecting my first baby. "How will I get time?" I said. She said: "You will get time, it may not be much time, but you'll be so focused in that small snippet that you'll be amazed how much you get done." She was right. I managed to continue running the business - I scaled it down, but I kept it running for seven years part-time. Now my youngest has started school and things have changed, but I did it without paying for extra childcare. I'm glad I did it that way - I was exhausted, but it was worth it.'

IT'S A MAN'S WORLD

Before she embarked on her Formica upcycling journey, Lucy trained to make furniture as part of the Next Move scheme, and her first piece was a table made using hemp matting and eco resin. She recalls: 'I had the idea of impregnating vintage fabrics into furniture, like on surfboards where they impregnate stencils into resin - I was a keen surfer at the time and worked with a local company who made surfboards.' She developed a prototype for an M-shaped table with a magazine rack in its middle section and named it Margot, because the fabric she used reminded her of something that would be worn by Margo Leadbetter, played by Penelope Keith in the TV series *The Good Life*. 'The piece was featured in the *Telegraph* and exhibited in London's Business Design Centre. It received some attention, but realistically the piece wasn't viable for production. It looked great, but at the time eco resin was still a new concept and there were issues. It was fun to work with the company and I learned a lot, including eating cold toast and marmalade dipped in your cup of tea for break time! I was the only female there: 30 men, and me.'





EXHAUSTED, BUT DETERMINED

Since those early days Lucy has become a skilled restorer and she loves bringing pieces that are 60 or 70 years old back to life. 'They need TLC,' she says. She uses a lot of software such as Adobe Illustrator and Photoshop, but also has to wield strong admin, communication and logistics skills in order to run her own business. 'You need everything, all in one,' she says.

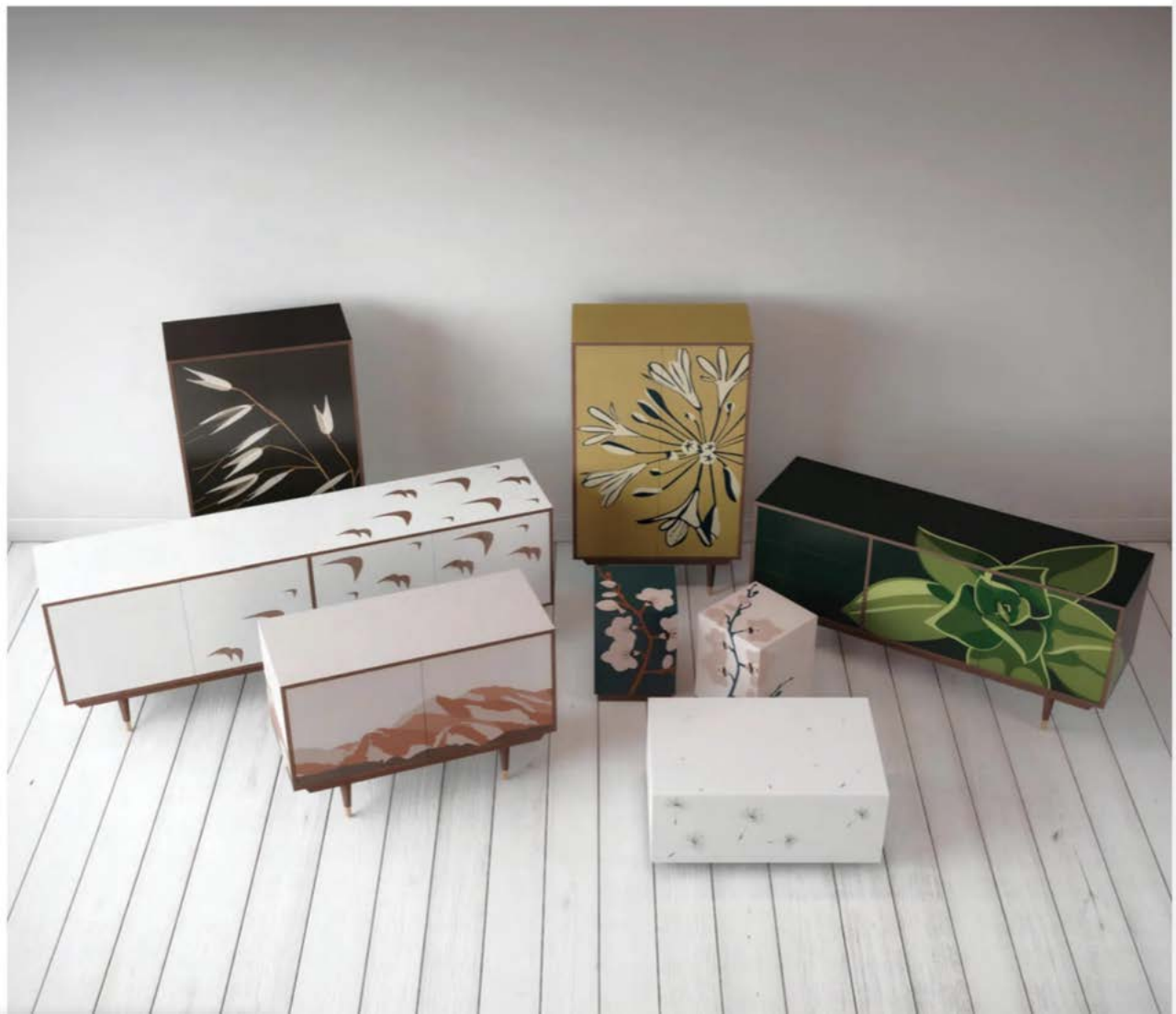
'I decided to start my business during a recession, in Cornwall, before the internet really existed. It was tough. I was juggling five jobs: cleaner, tiler – I was the only woman on a building site – chef, waitress and my own business. I was exhausted, but utterly determined. I had a vision and I needed to reach my goal.

'One day I went to my workshop, it was a huge old grain store on a farm, full of sideboards. I opened the doors, went in, sat on the floor and cried. I had been striving for four years to make it work and at that point it was make or break.' She decided that instead of giving up, she would save every penny she had and pay for a space at 100% Design London, a major trade fair for architecture, interior decoration and home furnishings. 'It cost me thousands of pounds to attend and I worked every spare hour,' Lucy says. 'You pay by the square metre at exhibitions and when you make furniture you need a lot of room: not just for exhibiting, but the making, the storage, the transformation, everything. I always say I've chosen the wrong career – jewellers don't have this problem.'

She went with her heart when choosing the pieces she would take to London, and picked ones inlaid with pineapples, palm

leaves and flamingos. 'Now you see that stuff everywhere, but at the time you didn't. I just knew I had one last chance, so if I didn't love it, why would anyone else?' In the end she was delighted with the stand – and so were buyers from John Lewis, Marks & Spencer and Lane Crawford. 'My gamble paid off,' she says.

Her latest venture is with Shamsian, a family-run furniture manufacturer based in Oman which specialises in marquetry for high-end clients including royalty. Shamsian had already produced a very successful collection with UK designer Bethan Gray using wooden marquetry, Lucy says. 'Shamsian spotted that I was using the same process of marquetry, but with a modern material, and asked if I would like to collaborate. I went to Oman to see the factory, which was out of this world in terms of what it can produce. They can accommodate every process from water-jet-cutting to bronze casting. It was immense. We have been working together for 17 months to create our collection: each piece will be designed by me and handmade to order by the team at Shamsian.' The collection launched at Clerkenwell Design Week in London in May and at High Point Market in North Carolina, USA, in October. Lucy says: 'This this is just the beginning with Shamsian. The capability of what they can produce combined with my design aspiration is really exciting. It is a very special family-run business and a pleasure to work with. I feel like I am at the same point again as when I put every penny into launching at 100% Design. This is the next big step. Fingers crossed it works.'





Has she ever faced any challenges as a woman working in what remains a very male-dominated world? 'Furniture is male-dominated, but the creative sector isn't at all,' Lucy says. 'I noticed this when I was at university: the females generally would shy away from the workshops. I think it's a confidence thing - big, scary tools. It should start at school level: get girls using the machines, show them that it's like riding a bike or driving a car - you just have to do it, and it takes practice.' Does she have any tips for young women wanting to make a name for themselves in the world of furniture? 'This is not only a tip for women, this is a tip for everyone,' she says: 'Work hard and believe in yourself. Anything is possible, but you have to keep going. You will experience a lot of ups and downs, but essentially, if you follow your passion, you will succeed. Eventually. Maybe.'

SUSTAINABLE FUTURE

'My ethos always was about recycling and reusing, but it's now geared towards sustainability: buy once, buy for life,' says Lucy. 'It's our job as designers to create pieces that have longevity and not to add to this throwaway society we live in. Prevention is far better than cure.' She works with fairly basic tools - 'even my laser cutter is basic,' she says. 'Don't be scared of technology - they are designed to be user-friendly. If I can use, maintain and fix a laser cutter, anyone can.' Inspiration comes from all over the place, but she doesn't try to force it. 'I never go on inspiration trips or retreats. I find it can hit me in a flash, sometimes in the night, other times I can just see something and it sets me off,' she explains. Her latest design features scallops inspired by a pattern she spotted in a 1930s teacup and saucer in Denmark. 'My designs

are usually inspired by nature, but that's because I'm usually surrounded by nature and we can all connect to it,' she says.

Looking forward, she would like to take her work beyond furniture. 'The scope with Formica marquetry is immense,' she says. 'It can be transferred across the interior design spectrum. I had done a few kitchens, splashbacks, fitted furniture and other interior applications, but it can be used in so many different arenas. The hospitality sector is where I see it heading.'

So what is the most challenging project she has worked on? 'Sometimes it's not so much the making that's challenging,' Lucy says. 'As all makers know, we are not robots and we do make mistakes. Generally the mistakes you make on a piece can be rectified, even if it's at a financial loss and you have to start again. The most challenging projects are when you get an awkward client who you feel doesn't respect you - that can hit you really hard. When you're a maker, it's your life and your passion, and when you're hit with contempt it can really knock you back. I won't go into details - we have all been there.'

And does this busy woman find time to do anything on top of making, running her business and taking care of her family? 'We have a little smallholding with a few sheep and chickens, and we grow our own veg - well, I do. That keeps me busy,' she says. 'I love cooking, running and music. I miss going to gigs. The kids are almost old enough to come with me now. Live music makes me so happy: with a beer in one hand, something nice to eat in the other and my family, I'm in heaven.'

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