

FINANCIAL TIMES

# How to Spend it

DECEMBER 2006

SAY A SULTRY "SI SI"  
TO THE FESTIVE SEASON



If you want a very special piece of furniture, speak to the man architects and designers turn to. Helen Chislett reports. Photographs: James Winspear.

# DESIGN INTERVENTION

**T**he first indication that Alastair Graham might devote his life to furniture came when he was trying to devote it to God. At 24, he joined the Benedictine monastery at Downside Abbey in a bid to discover whether he had a true religious vocation. He was set to work making prayer stools in the monastery workshop, but began to enjoy it a bit too much: "At one point the novice master banned me from going there any more – he could obviously sense that it was starting to take my attention away from where it should be."

The former monk and I are talking in the inner sanctum of Two Brydges, a private members' club close to London's Covent Garden that is mainly frequented by media and theatrical types and is a world away from the quiet contemplation of monastic life. There is nothing obviously monk-like about Graham now, but then how would I know? I suspect a lot of monks share the same charm, self-deprecation, humour and observation that is evident in Graham's conversation. In material terms, his life now is as different as is possible to imagine. Three years ago, he married Tara Leon, an American model; their Pomeranian dog Tallulah has also joined us for lunch.

After 18 months, Graham left the monastery – "it was obedience I really struggled with" – the richer for the experience, but with no idea what to do next. Family connections led him to a brief flirtation with the City, but he would be the first to admit he made a hopeless insurance broker. "Then about four people, quite separately, asked if I'd ever thought about going into furniture. It was very strange. I had turned the odd bowl at school and made prayer stools in the monastery, but when a few people all say the same thing you start to think about it. And it felt very good."

To this day, he has no idea what prompted such unexpected advice. However, he took a leap of faith, researched where he might go to learn how to make furniture and, with savings plus support from his increasingly bemused parents, enrolled at Parnham, the school run by John





Main picture: Alastair Graham in a cabinet-making workshop. Far left: Tallulab sits on table in ebonyised sycamore with bolly marquetry designed by Alastair Graham, price on application.



Makepeace. He secured the very last place on the course, and Parnham closed the year he left. It's difficult for the words "divine" and "intervention" not to spring to mind.

After graduating, he and another Parnham student set up a workshop in the East End of London, later relocating to Sussex. From the very first, they generated quality work: "We had some fantastic craftsmen working for us and I learned more and more, but in the end the business clogged up the work. What I wanted to do was concentrate on client service and, of course, design itself."

So earlier this year, after seven years of running the workshop, Graham changed direction again. He spotted a gap in the market, one which turned out to be so wide open that he went from the equivalent of slip road to fast lane in under three months. His idea was to become a furniture consultant and designer, working primarily with architects and interior designers, although he is happy to work directly with private clients. They come to him with specifications for pieces

**Above: American black walnut table designed by Graham, price on request. Right: elliptical cabinet in Ripple English walnut with ebony.**

of furniture they need for their projects; he helps turn ideas into reality. Not only does he advise on design, timbers, finishes, construction and such like, he then approaches the right workshop for the job and oversees the work they do. If a client wants him to design the piece himself, he does. If they want to draw the design, but need him to take it from sketch to finished product, he is happy to work like that too. What he doesn't do any more is physically make the furniture.

There is a network of 15 or so workshops throughout Britain that Graham uses – some are tiny two-man outfits; some employ up to 20 people. These are the *crème de la crème* and Graham knows each one inside out: "Furniture is a very small world and everyone knows which workshops do what really well. When I was running my own workshop, I used to think, 'I wish we could

offer a high-gloss lacquer as good as that' or 'I wish we could do a curved veneer as well as them.' You always hope your client won't discover certain people because aspects of their work are so good, although of course there may be something you yourself do outstandingly well. Now I am able to dip in and take the best from everyone – not just furniture makers but silversmiths, goldsmiths, leather workers, metal workers; a whole cast of wonderful craftspeople."

Clearly, he is not the only one to think he is on to a good thing. His client list is impressive, including as it does well-established interior design names such as John Stefanidis, Bill Bennette and Terence Disdale, as well as newer design kids on the block in the shape of Finchatton and Candy & Candy. Viola Reckermann, head of design at Finchatton, is keen to sing his praises: "The quality of Graham's work is outstanding. In this industry, it is very much that you have your suppliers and you stick to them, but Graham approached us in a very professional and pleasant way and we were really impressed by what he could offer. He represents a younger generation of craftspeople, just as we represent a younger generation of designers – so it makes sense for us to grow together."

Quality is also the word that Martin Kemp, senior interior designer at Candy & Candy, emphasises: "Our clients

expect perfection, so we have to offer that level of quality. Graham has an incredible knowledge of materials, construction techniques and of how to adjust a specification so that it meets the budget – he also has a very endearing personality, so it all adds up to a good package for us." His colleague, Ilinka Lukic, who is creative director of Candy & Candy and is currently working with Graham on 1 Hyde Park, thinks it all comes down to trust: "His taste and knowledge can be relied upon fully. English furniture has a great tradition, and Graham takes the principles of arts



and crafts and then turns them around to fit the more contemporary lifestyle we are living now."

One of the more sobering aspects of these conversations is the realisation that it is largely thanks to the international clientele of firms such as Finchatton and Candy & Candy – the Americans, Japanese, Russians, Arabs and so forth – that workshops in places such as Whitby and Wales can continue to thrive. In terms of price, it can cost more than high-end furniture manufactured in Italy or Spain, but there is a real sense among designers that British craftsmanship is once more something to celebrate. Theo Theodorou, design director of Rolf Sachs, says that working with Graham fits perfectly with their own zeitgeist: "We are very much reacting against the anonymity of mass-consumer design. We have gone back to craftsmen who have traditional values and techniques because that complements what we do. I think it is great



**"I think it is great that Graham is blowing the trumpet for all the little craftspeople who don't have the time to do their own marketing."**

that Graham is blowing the trumpet for all the little craftspeople who don't have the time to do their own marketing, plus providing the legwork for designers who are inherently lazy animals. He has found a good niche."

It is a niche that Graham would love to broaden by re-educating the English about their forgotten furniture heritage: "Sometimes it seems as though people stopped buying furniture after Queen Victoria died. The fact is that commissioning your own furniture is the most fabulous thing you can do – it is special and it is smart and it will knock your socks off because the spectacularly skilled individual who makes it has spent years learning his or her craft and does it not for money, but for love. Nobody ever went into furniture to make money."

However, Graham is quick to distance himself from those who claim to be making

"the antiques of tomorrow", which is a meaningless phrase, in his opinion: "It makes me cringe because it is bulls\*\*t. I don't know anyone who buys clothes as an investment, or carpets or fabrics or wallpaper, so why furniture? I am very uncomfortable with the idea of anyone commissioning something as an investment. You can't make for the future, you make for the present. And you have to be true to the present and make for now. Buy



**Above: Alastair Graham and Tallulah. Right: starburst veneered-top table in Ripple English walnut with white gold.**

something because you love it, not because you think it may be worth something in 30 years' time."

He is all too aware that commissioning furniture is too expensive an activity ever to be democratic, but he is evangelical about the need to encourage those who can afford it to do so. Few of the projects he works on come in under £3,000 – typically a bedside table or coffee table – but £50,000 upwards will buy you something "serious", perhaps a cabinet of exotic timbers inlaid with shagreen or beaten gold. He is happy to work in both traditional and contemporary styles, but his natural bent is towards the latter. What gets him really excited are curves – apparently they add a real "phwoar" quality to furniture. "Straight lines can look super, but you can do them by machine so what you often end up with is a machine-inspired aesthetic because they are more affordable. Curves, however, are difficult and you can't do them by machine. The minute you start to get into curves, you see the prices start to rise, because price is dictated by the sheer quality and quantity of hand-work."

It might have taken him a while, but Graham has clearly found his true vocation. He has become the meeting point for some of the best design and the most skilled craftsmanship in the country, and the combination looks set to be magic. No wonder he is so enthusiastic: "The biggest kick is delivering the finished piece – it gets me every time. Some of these craftsmen are just so jaw-droppingly good that even though I know exactly what has gone into something and every detail of its construction, I am still amazed to see it in all its perfectly executed beauty." \* Alastair Graham, The Kennels, Church Farm, South Harting, Petersfield, Hampshire GU31 4QG (01730-826 636; www.alastairgraham.com).