

A REPURPOSED DRIVEN LIFE

Craftsmanship, a love of antiques and a deep affection for his country's past are the driving forces behind furniture designer Timothy Oulton's business.

STORY APPLE MANDY PORTRAITS TERRY WONG

Manchester born and bred, Timothy Oulton is a jet-setting furniture designer and businessman. He travels frequently to source materials, meet suppliers, develop new businesses and visit his 37 retail galleries located worldwide. Pinning him down for a one-on-one interview is a little tricky; he generally stays only a day or two in Hong Kong at a time, splitting his time between meetings and his four-storey showroom and factory in Gaoming, southern China.

Despite his hectic schedule, the 49-year-old's vibrant energy is almost tangible. He stays upbeat, positive and excited even when describing the difficulties his business faces. "I think we have a bright future," says Oulton. "The world market is not easy but I am not worried. We'll stick to what we do well."

What he does well is manufacturing and designing bespoke furniture from reclaimed materials. His British vintage-inspired designs have garnered him a worldwide reputation for their timeless aesthetics and time-honoured craftsmanship. Whether its handcrafted furniture or lighting for the bedroom, each piece tells a story. "We do a good job of taking a not easy project and standardising it," says Oulton. "It's not mass production."

Oulton's approach to craftsmanship is the driving force behind his business; his furniture is made in very small batches. Oulton, sitting in his retail gallery on Gough Street, pointed at the Museum Dining

Table as a perfect example of craftsmanship. When he first saw the English oak parquet flooring

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— Timothy Oulton

reclaimed from a disused building in the UK, he was mesmerised. He and his craftsmen preserved each block and turned them into a rustic table.

"The trick is finding the flooring and then relaying it down. The woods come in a variety of colours and combining them to re-create an antique feel is bloody difficult. It's incredibly labour-intensive. Teaching people how to make it look random without being random is a skill and that's what we are good at," says Oulton. "They [craftsmen] lay the pieces of parquet, [which are] slightly irregular, and that's intentional. The amount of irregularity is one of the things we deliberate for hours and that sets us apart. We try not to say 'that's okay' because



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01 Saddle Chair

02 Aviator Tomcat

when is okay ever okay?"

Materials play an important part in Oulton's designs; often, the material is what drives the design. Many of his creations feature reclaimed materials, including wood taken from roof beams and floorings of old buildings in the UK. The wood is shipped to Gaoming, where it gets graded and sorted before being repurposed into new pieces of furniture.

Leather is a key element in Oulton's classic designs, including the Westminster Feather sofa, Saddle Chair and the award-winning Aviator Tomcat chair. The Timothy Oulton brand carries over 30 leathers in a range of colours, finishes and textures. The hide comes from Oulton's own tanneries in Brazil and China, each with the capacity to process 1,000 hides a day.

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He describes the four-month leather manufacturing process as "horrendous". Leather is tanned, treated and delivered from the tannery in Brazil to Oulton's factory in China, where finishes are then applied by hand.

Take the Chesterfield-inspired Westminster Feather sofa; polishing the vagabond leather alone takes 14 hours. This is followed by craftsmen nailing each of the 1,600 studs in by hand. The entire process of building the leather seat takes about five days. "We call that the ecstasy of pain. We kind of like that because other people don't want to do it," says Oulton.

Today, Oulton is still closely involved in the furniture design process. "Inspiration comes from everywhere. We obviously look at antiques, then why wouldn't you look into the past and decide how you want the past to look in the future? Copying an antique is easy but I don't want to do that."

THE BUSINESS SIDE OF THINGS

Oulton never intended to be a furniture designer. When he was a child, his ambition ran as far as becoming a playboy, but his dad, Major Philip Oulton, was singularly unimpressed. Oulton thought he would end up working as a banker after leaving Ampleforth College at 18, but instead he found himself drawn to his father's antiques business, Halo Antiques, which opened in 1976 in the village of Hale, near Manchester. Oulton was fascinated by antiques and he took over the business in 1990.

Oulton soon realised he couldn't build a scalable business out of antiques so he focused on reinventing them for the wholesale market, selling items to pubs and restaurants in the UK. But business was still limiting. With a desire to expand in Asia, Oulton exhibited at the Canton Fair in 2004.

The following year, Oulton entered the Hong Kong market. He opened his first office in an apartment on Conduit Road and a year later opened a small office on Hollywood Road to run a wholesale business. He had no intention of building a brand because he wanted to improve his competencies first. He sold a few leather bags to pay the rent and, as his customer base grew, he moved his offices to Gough Street. There, he converted his office into a small shop selling his own bag collection. He then made a transition to retail, opening his first retail gallery on Gough Street in 2012 and then on St Francis Street in 2013.

Since then, Oulton's Hong Kong retail business has grown, but has been recently met with a slowdown. "There's definitely less traffic today. I don't think it





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[the situation] will change in the near future, but there's nothing we can do about that. All we can do is to make the shop look great. It's a buoyant market, but it's also quite a fickle market."

Oulton didn't want to concentrate entirely on selling furniture in Hong Kong, so he opened a boutique called Rare by Oulton in Gough Street. The idea is to showcase unique and rare pieces that have inspired his furniture designs. Items found at the shop range from a pair of 1890s barber's chair and a 1940s double life-size training model of a Browning M1919 A4.30 calibre machine gun, to a selection of antique customised Louis Vuitton trunks.

04 The Rare by Oulton antiques boutique on Gough Street

05 World War II Japanese military surveillance binoculars



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06 A 1940s double life-size training model of a Browning M1919 A4.30 calibre machine gun

07 A barber's chair from the 1890s



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Outside of Hong Kong, the retail furniture business has expanded into numerous major cities, including Dubai and Mexico City. When he moves into a new city, he either finds a business partner or he gets approached. Service is important for Oulton and he requires his partners to comply with certain guidelines, like greeting customers and offering them a glass of champagne upon arrival. Oulton also requires staff to do an intensive five-day training course in Gaoming to get them fully familiarised with what the brand is all about. He even makes them hammer studs into sofas and de-nail timber. "Manufacturing is easy to teach, but craftsmanship and authenticity is a hard one to teach," says Oulton.

Now busy dedicating his time to three new ventures, Oulton is designing spaces for individuals and hospitality clients, including a 20,000-square-foot members-only club in Singapore, as well as planning for a new hospitality venue set to launch this year in Hong Kong.

Despite his company's expansion into different brands and businesses, Oulton remains grounded. "We are a \$200 million company but we don't behave any differently than we did before. The big decisions are not made any differently," says Oulton. "We still treat people well and it's high in my agenda. Suppliers, customers and employees - I see them all the same. If you come to our circle, we have to treat you with respect. It's important to keep that. It's not easy when you get bigger and I think it's one thing we've done well." ☺