



Present Day Design



Kerr, Bernard Thorp, which has been screen-printing fabrics and wallpapers by hand at its factory in London for almost 40 years; Clerra Hobb, whose cushions and lampshades are silk-screen printed by hand in her studio; Cobbeys & Rose, which prints onto antique linens; and Rapaine & Wright, which produces hand-screen-printed fabrics and wallpapers in Gloucestershire.

FURNITURE MAKING

For centuries, furniture-making methods remained virtually unchanged — one man, one item of furniture, using nothing but hand tools — until the Industrial Revolution. From there, the craft moved on gradually until, by around the mid-twentieth century, most of the work was done by machine, and mass production had largely replaced artisanal handwork. Largely — but not entirely. While there are many workshops producing individual pieces or small runs of handmade furniture, even the big manufacturers retain traditional skills, according to Jessica Alexander, chair of the Manufacturing Guild Mark Committee at The Furniture Makers' Company. "In the UK, we make complex and varied furniture which gives customers individual, virtually bespoke choices, even in the mass market," she says. "This requires manufacturers to retain hand upholstery and cabinet-making skills, as such choice and individuality would not be possible with a fully automated process."

A quick overview of manufacturers large and small demonstrates the prevalence of old-fashioned furniture-making skills, from joinery through to upholstery. At Sofa Workshop, for example, one skilled person works on each sofa from start to finish, while Fleming & Howard's Heirloom collection is made entirely by hand; Parker Knoll's dedicated team of craftsmen produce their pieces in the same way as they did in 1868, and

George Smith furnishings are hand-joined and hand-stitched, using traditional methods passed down through the generations.

HAND EMBROIDERY

Decorative hand embroidery was practiced as far back as the Middle Ages, when embroiderers' guilds supplied fine vestments and hangings for the church. Equally intricate styles developed in different parts of the world, from opus Anglicanum to Moroccan blackwork and, of course, delicate Indian embroideries. In the west, nineteenth-century industrialisation put paid to such skilled and time-consuming (and therefore expensive) techniques as anything other than a hobby; even today it is impossible to produce a commercial range of hand-embroidery in the UK, according to Victoria Bate: "Even when created in India the pricing is still high, as one needs highly skilled craftsmen to carry out this type of work. Really beautiful hand work is created mainly by men, and is a skill generally passed down from father to son."

That said, beautiful hand-embroidered interior textiles are by no means impossible to find. Aside from Victoria Bate's range of decorative textiles, Beaumont & Fletcher has a range of exquisite curtain fabrics and cushions, and Chelsea Textiles produces hand-embroidered fabrics of the same quality as those of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. On a more modern note, Jan Constantine offers a bold, clean-cut and original collection, Vanderbard's textiles are subtle yet distinctive, while New York-based designer Madeline West produces contemporary reinterpretations of traditional weaving and embroidery techniques. Promotional produces luxury wallpapers that are both hand-painted and hand-embroidered. Produced in West, the centre of China's silk industry, an individual panel can take an artist up to 600 hours to stitch, using techniques that date back 1,500 years. >

IMAGE COURTESY OF THE MANUFACTURING GUILD MARK COMMITTEE