





coleman's mustard

'My Influences? I'm going to sound like Pseuds' Corner, but the most significant for me are the Cistercian monasteries in the south of France. Places like Le Thoronet and Silvacane – if you haven't seen them, make sure you do. Big spaces supposedly undecorated but actually very sophisticated. The sharp blue light casting wonderful shadows and the buff coloured stone help contribute to the feeling of relaxed emotion. I'm not religious, but the effort and conviction oozes out of everything. You have to respect the energy of the people who created those spaces.'

We're talking with John Coleman, a furniture designer with the clarity of thought and sheer ability to have achieved significant success in the domestic, hospitality and office markets. Not many of his breed can claim such crossover success – and as John admits, it hasn't always been easy.

'What I'm good at are simple, straightforward answers. I don't like frills, and I only like decoration if it expresses the structure. I think I'm also pretty good at listening to the client. In terms of my designs for residential and contract clients, I think that for a long time I fell down a hole in the middle – domestic clients do tend to think my work looks too commercial because of my use of angles, straight sides and flat surfaces. I'm sure that if I'd been more of a whittler, with curves and hewn edges, I would have been more successful! On>>>>



»»» the other hand, commercial customers saw the complexity of my work, decided it was bound to be expensive and I got pigeonholed. I didn't mean it that way, it just happened.'

We're chatting with John just a few weeks before Design Prima, an exhibition that is significant in John's career in many ways. John Coleman is perhaps the perfect example of the design excellence that Prima tries to showcase. A designer with a keen understanding of the nuances of the commercial market is arguably what Prima, and its predecessor Spectrum, wants to present. This year John's first task chair for Nomique – Wo – is being launched at the Old Billingsgate show, thereby continuing a link with David Field that goes back to the late '70s.

'I left the RCA in 1979 and like most students had no work – until David offered me a job prototyping and developing furniture in his workshop, helping to make one-off pieces, domestic cabinets and some commercial work,' John recalls. 'After nine months I got a job with Bob Heritage at Minty Furniture, working with Archie Shine. The idea was to create a higher specification design division, targeting outlets like Heals. I joined that division as it's first employee – in about 10,000 sq ft of space! It was a bit daunting, as I had to rationalise my ex-professor's drawings for production and produce prototypes. He trusted me, and I knew far less than the skilled men I worked with. Meanwhile David let me use his workshop in the evenings and weekends, which resulted in my exhibition of occasional tables at Ann Hartree's Prescott Gallery in Banbury. I sold several the first day and things got a bit out of hand! So on the strength of that I left Minty's and set up on my own.'

'It went well – I was doing limited editions, one-offs and repeats with variations. The workshop continued to grow, while I started teaching design part time at Rycotewood College, then at Brighton. Teaching is great, unless you get a dozy bunch of students – I'm not a good enough teacher to inspire people who don't want to learn. While teaching I was living over my workshop in a mews in Notting Hill, for a while doing it on the hoof until I got a Crafts Council grant for some basics like a band saw – it's still working today!

‘Working on purely domestic pieces throughout the ’80s and early ’90s, it wasn’t until the first 100% Design in 1996 that, thanks to Tim Lishman and Janet and Vasco Vaggetti, I saw my first commercial collaboration. Allermuir were emerging from metal bashing and wanted some timber framed furniture. They marketed the Zupo well; and sales are still ticking over – what’s more the chair is about to be relaunched with some companion tables and a barstool. That ‘bolted’ back detail was the first of its type in 1996 – it has since been imitated a lot.

'I continued making bespoke pieces and repeats – but I was getting a little bored of that kind of work. That first 100% Design had also marked the start of a collaboration with Chris Bodker, of Moving Image restaurants, and my biggest single job as a designer maker was for his prestigious Avenue restaurant, which raised my profile as a contract designer. I produced a timber stacking chair (which Robin Day liked); and designed the Magnus tables for Gordon Russell and the Quorum chair for Senator. And of course the Mollie chair for Allermuir, which has, been very, very successful!

'I bumped into David Grimshaw (who I knew through Allermuir) at the last Spectrum in 2004. He showed me his work for Nomique and introduced me to the company's John Ravenhall and Robbie MacKinnon. A couple of months later Robbie came to ask me to work with them on a new task chair. The fact that I'd never done one before was significant because Nomique specifically wanted to work with someone without any pre-conceptions. It was brave and it also showed what an outward thinking company they▶▶▶▶



are. More evidence of this came when we invited a group of ergonomics students from London Metropolitan University to work with us on the project – they gave the chair a thorough health check and suggested some helpful modifications. I think it was a very rewarding experience for all of us, and I was particularly gratified that my design proved to be ergonomically correct.

‘I used my old craft skills for prototype making – you can’t use a computer for everything. It’s a high spec chair with cast aluminium arms, and though it’s a good quality chair aimed at the Clerkenwell market, it’s also got pricing and feature options which will allow it to be considered for a wide range of environments, from the City to call centres. It’s being launched at Prima – ready to take orders!’

The Nomique chair is not the only significant project John Coleman’s been working on. A major renovation of a 300-year-old farmhouse in Cumbria’s Eden Valley is clearly a labour of love for John and his wife. ‘It was pretty much of a wreck – so we’re effectively building a new house within the old. The position is fantastic, our nearest neighbours are two miles away – curlews, owls and rabbits are a lot closer. But of course there’s a lot of weather!’

Drawing to a close we chatted about school. ‘I was good at art and useless at everything else. I think I had visions of myself in a shack painting naked ladies while drinking beer. My father taught art as well so I suppose there was never any question about what I was going to do. I was good at art; it’s what I did. I love all the visual arts, particularly film – though I’m not a film buff. *Bladerunner* is a desert island film for me, *Diva*, *Bullitt*, *Seven Samurai*, boys’ films. I’m not really into music – but listen to jazz and have Oscar Peterson’s *Night Train* on in the car at the moment.’

We started this piece talking about likes and influences, so it seems appropriate to finish on the same theme. Just before our meeting John had dropped in on the Vitra showroom, so obviously... ‘I have to

mention Charles and Ray Eames – truly renaissance people. Others? Well, Thonet’s classic bentwood chairs, Vico Magistretti has always been a strong influence (perhaps even more so today) and although I’ve never been to Japan, I love looking at pictures of Japanese houses – all lines and grids. I can’t stand baroque – perhaps I’m too much of a Northern European!’ ●

