

Support our **SKILLS**

Will traditional interiors craft skills survive into the next generation?

We look at concerns over their possible loss, and some initiatives being taken to ensure their survival





From hand-stitched upholstery to hand-forged ironwork, traditional craft skills are intrinsic to the highest level of interior design.

Making things in the time-honoured, often painstaking ways in which they have been produced for centuries is, for a faithful restoration or renovation (and often for new projects, too), considered the best way to honour our heritage and create buildings and interiors that will both look beautiful and stand the test of time. "With skilled craftsmanship, what you can achieve is a room or a piece of furniture that looks good for at least 100 years," says Andrew Petherick, director of Artichoke, designer and maker of bespoke luxury kitchens and interiors.

Such craftsmanship is, however, at risk in certain areas. According to the Heritage Crafts Association (HCA) Red List 2019 of Endangered Crafts, in danger of dying out are gilding, parquetry (also known as 'stuccoing'), jappanning (a European imitation of Asian lacquerwork using shellac), chair caning and seating, passementerie and hand-block wallpaper making, to name a few. There are worries, too, amongst design professionals that other skills are becoming harder and harder to find. "Making upholstery with coil springs and hand-stitched horsehair is a rarified skill," says Christopher Howe of Howe London, who makes classic, bespoke furniture using traditional methods. "When I needed a local blacksmith to make a handrail in order to finish a project, it took me a year to find one. And to have a rush seat done we have to go to a guy who is close to retirement, and it's ▶



ABOVE The New Craftsmen gallery in London champions British craft and its makers. From left: Aimee Betts, textile and embroidery artist; Caterina Riccabona, loom weaver; Pedro da Costa Felgueiras, historic paint and lacquer expert; Otis Ingrams, leather designer; Rosalind Wyatt, textile artist and calligrapher.

BELOW Pilgrim's Chair, £2,930. Pedro da Costa Felgueiras, The New Craftsmen



Established in 1874, Watts of Westminster still uses the original handmade pearwood blocks and rollers to make wallpaper. This design is Malmesbury Stone Forest Green, made to order at £536 a roll



ABOVE This wood-paneled library was designed by Artichoke and made from European walnut by the company's craftsmen at its workshop in Somerset. The panelling was finished by hand with French polish.



against cheap, 'fast' design - much as in fashion - seems to be underway. Backing that up, the tide may be turning in favour of a renaissance of classic English style, says Wood. "One of the delightful things is that some of these traditional skills are starting to make a comeback. For instance, we've just completed a build with a lot of bullion and fringes, which was lovely."

Petherick, too, has seen a return to classicism over the last five years and is finding that clients still very much want to invest in pieces that will last. Howe is clearly in agreement, saying, "Now is a great time to consider traditional skills, because people are thinking about what materials are used and what goes into the making of something. We are only just picking up momentum." Wood points out: "People want to buy less and buy better."

On closer inspection, there are many and various positive stories. Simon Orrell, for example, has revived the skill of working with mica and selenite, though his is the only company in this country doing so, and is one of the very few still making straw marquetry. Soane Britain is proud to have rescued the only

remaining rattan-weaving workshop in the country by buying the machinery and raw materials and re-employing the exceptionally skilled craftsmen after it went into administration. With a rattan apprenticeship now established, Soane Britain hopes to have secured the future of the craft in Britain. And Artichoke is setting up an after-school training facility that will be free to children from Cheddar, where it is based, to introduce half a dozen or so young people to the use of hand tools in fine furniture making. "If we can light a spark in just one of the six, we can advise them where to go from there. And who knows, in future years we could have an apprentice," Petherick says.

Naturally, it is not just private companies who are leading the way. A range of organisations are also intimately involved, from the Crafts Council - which is currently championing bringing craft back into the classroom through its Make Your Future programme (involving 63 secondary schools across the UK) - to The Queen Elizabeth Scholarship Trust (QEST), which funds the training and education of talented and aspiring craftspeople. QEST is currently ▶

ABOVE LEFT Soane Britain owns the only rattan-weaving workshop left in the country. The Ripple Console is a cane-framed table with hand-woven rattan contours that take the form of draped linen.

ABOVE The leading edges of the curtains in this study are finished with trim handmade by Jessica Light. One of the UK's last remaining *passemerterie* weavers, Light uses techniques dating back to the fifteenth century. Interior design by K & H Design.