

A man with dark hair and glasses, wearing a dark suit jacket over a white shirt, is shown in profile from the chest up. He is looking out a window, with bright light coming from the right, casting a shadow of his head and shoulders onto the wall behind him. The wall has a textured, stone-like appearance. The overall mood is contemplative and professional.

FINISHING FIRST

MASTER OF LUXURIOUS CUSTOM-MADE FINISHES FOR
FURNITURE AND SURFACES, SIMON ORRELL IS LONDON'S
GO-TO CRAFTSMAN FOR YACHTS AND INTERIORS

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Simon Orrell is a specialist in luxury finishes for bespoke furniture and accessories for both home and yacht interiors

'I'M DELIGHTED WHEN CLIENTS ASK US FOR FURNITURE IN MATERIALS THAT FIVE YEARS AGO THEY WOULDN'T HAVE DREAMED OF'

There's often a moment in a person's life that is a turning point. Where your destiny is altered by a chance event. For Simon Orrell it was the seemingly insignificant action of noticing the frame on a painting. 'It wasn't just any picture frame, it was exquisite – gesso, handmade, beautiful.'

But why should he have been so arrested? At that point Simon was a young man in his 20s with a job in accountancy. The son of a consultant physician, he'd had a happy upbringing with his father, mother (a former nurse) and three siblings (to whom he is very close) in a 32-room period house in the Lancashire countryside. School was fun; he played rugby and had always done well academically.

'I came from an academic family, so it never occurred to me to take another path,' says Simon. 'I studied economics at University College London because I was good at it and the subject interested me. A career in the financial world seemed inevitable. How I became a designer is down to a single moment.'

In fact, it was Simon's UCL tutor, Negley Harte, who in a roundabout way broadened Simon's horizons. After he graduated, his teacher put him forward as a scholar at The Crabtree Foundation, an invitation-only club with 400 or so members that was perhaps the start of mixing in a more diverse, elite crowd. 'As we'd become friends, I got invited to Negley's brother's home – an artist and bon vivant who threw the most amazing parties – and it was there that I saw a painting he had done, but what really caught my eye was the quality of the frame.'

Now Simon had always collected art – even buying undiscovered

gems on eBay – and not liking the frames had started making 'very amateurish' ones for himself. He knew that the gesso frame he had seen was what he aspired to. 'I had to know more!' It turned out that the frame was the work of the top designer-picture framer, Michael Cazzani, and Simon was quick to ask his friends for an introduction. At their first meeting, Simon bombarded him with questions and the picture framer simply said, 'Why don't you take a week off work and learn with me?' Simon jumped at the chance.

'Michael had worked closely with the style arbiter Yves Saint Laurent and to meet someone who had that kind of exceptional taste was such an eye-opener,' says Simon. 'He thought I was a bit naïve, but could see I had potential. When he said, "I can offer you work for three months", I immediately handed in my notice and I ended up staying for two years.' It seems quite a leap from City suit to workshop assistant, but Simon loved using his hands. 'It wasn't an entirely new experience because as a boy I had helped my father with his hobby of restoring furniture. I still have some of the old tools from back then. It's very emotive now to hold them in my hands. Funnily enough, I was offered the chance to learn woodwork or Latin at school, but I did Latin as did most of the boys. In actual fact, I really would have enjoyed making stuff and I'm very like my father; having an intellectual interest in many things, but very practical, too.'

Not long after leaving the picture-framing workshop, Simon set up his own company and – like his mentor, Cazzani – offered high-quality frames. The difference in his fledgling business was that modernism was coming back in and Simon moved away from the techniques he'd learnt and began to specialise in less commonly seen shagreen (ray-skin) and parchment (calf-skin). 'I did a lot of research into ►





Simon Orrell at the Senate House of the University of London, where he studied for his degree. He admires the 30s architecture of the building, and many of his finishes are inspired by that period



Parchment panels by Simon Orrell Designs create a subtly textured focal point that is key to Riens Bruinsma's classic contemporary design scheme



Simon's opulent black lip shell cabinets in a London townhouse designed by Studio Indigo

Photographed by Andreas Von Einsedel Interiors

'THERE'S NO SUCH THING AS REACHING THE PINNACLE IN YOUR PROFESSION. IT'S A CONSTANT JOURNEY'

what was used in the interiors of the 1930s and 1940s and bought some parchment skin to experiment with,' he explains. 'Parchment is fabulous for frames. My cousin Jonathan Reilly, a director at Maggs Brothers, introduced me to an antiquarian bookbinder who gave me tips on handling the material. It's expensive, so you really don't want to make mistakes! After three years, I hired and trained craftsmen to help me in the workshop. We also made furniture, wall panels and accessories – anything for the home that could be made with our opulent finishes.'

Simon also set up a workshop abroad and that allowed him to expand further. He started to offer shell finishes, which were very popular because few companies could work in this exotic, lustrous material in a contemporary or Western way, but Simon knew the tastes of his upmarket clientele and could create the pieces they desired. 'In fact, we're one of the few companies that can make and deliver a bespoke piece of furniture in shell in 8-10 weeks,' he says. Today Simon offers a wide variety of shell finishes. 'At the highest end of interior design, there's a lot of interest in different shells – kabebe, black lip, mother of pearl, hammershell, tiger brown lip and cowrie to name just a few.'

Fuelled by the luxury market's need for new and original surfaces, the search for materials is never-ending. 'My wife Amy, an artist, shares many of my passions and is a great foil for some of my more crazy ideas. It's important to have someone in your life like that. She'll patiently house my experiments and is equally thrilled when these are translated into exceptional pieces of furniture.' And although Simon's original shagreen and parchment finishes are staples of his and still showing steady interest – 'we've just made

exquisite parchment panels for a Knightsbridge apartment' – and shagreen will always be loved for its unique texture, he feels there's no need to be complacent. 'There's no such thing as reaching the pinnacle in your profession; it's a constant journey. We continue to explore and teach ourselves new tricks. I'm very determined when I'm really interested in something.'

Straw marquetry – split and pressed lengths of straw – is going to be very popular and offers intricate patterns that feed into the revival of 1930s finishes. 'As a raw material it sounds humble, but with painstaking work it can be magnificently transformed. Its shimmering surface is remarkable and the pattern moves as it catches the light.' Used by the Egyptians to make mirrors, mica is another alluring material sometimes seen as a veneer – on walls, mirrors or cabinet door fronts – in ultra-expensive refurbishments. A type of mineral composed of aluminium silicate, micas are multi-layered and can be split into very thin sheets that are in tones of brown, grey, silver and gold and are prized for their metallic sheen. Selenite – slabs of crystal made from gypsum – is also proving to be very exciting for Simon and his team. 'We've just made four drum tables in selenite for a client in Riyadh that have a luxurious milky finish reminiscent of rock crystal.'

What he is really delighted by is when clients ask him for furniture in materials that five years ago they wouldn't have dreamed of. 'We've created that demand,' Simon says, 'and I've got the only creative workshop in the UK that does what we do. We're known for doing the "difficult" finishes. It feels very special.'

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