

Design

Art and industry

Work In Progress: Simon Hasan. By Janice Blackburn

It's never too late to change the direction of your career and pursue a dream, even at 30 years of age, if you have the ability and determination to succeed," says British designer Simon Hasan, who specialises in creating objects using historical, craft and experimental techniques.

Design was not a career path he ever considered while growing up. His parents divorced when he was small. His father, an aircraft engineer, and his mother, a teacher of English and Russian, had no interest in the subject. Nor was there any encouragement of arts-related subjects at his school. Holidays were spent travelling: trips to Malaysia, where his father was based, or camping across Europe with his mother, two sisters, grandmother and the family dog.

With a degree in marketing but lacking the motivation for any particular vocation, Hasan drifted into the client services department of a London advertising agency in 1996 and spent most of his 20s "devising strategies to sell sweets to children, creating," he observes, "a playground currency through advertising".

Although the work wasn't stimulating, it paid well and enabled him to shop in upmarket design stores. He regards seeing products by the Dutch co-operative Droog as a defining experience and made him realise what he really wanted to do with his life. After a short design course at London Metropolitan University (formerly the

London College of Furniture) and weekends learning to draw assisted by his girlfriend (now his wife), who was studying fashion design, he was accepted in 2005 – aged 29 and after two attempts – to study for a master's degree at London's Royal College of Art.

Working freelance for a leading advertising agency during college breaks allowed Hasan to support himself at the RCA, although he admits "it led to a slightly schizophrenic life because your brain has to somewhat rewire to deal with two very different worlds".

Influenced and inspired by design luminaries such as Michael Marriot and Jurgen Bey, he says: "I found the space to find my own voice and I learnt about the values and sensibilities that transcend design styles. I also began to really dream big dreams." Encouraged by his mentors, Hasan became intrigued by the role of craft plays in design. A book about the 15th-century technique of boiling leather to make armour and drinking vessels with wonderful names such as "blackjacks" and "bombards" led to a fascination with old and, he admits, rather odd techniques (the possibilities of using heat to harden leather, for example) and awakened a curiosity to do his own experiments. "I found it really enticing, especially as

leather is something we associate today with refined luxury, not brutal medieval processes."

Shortly after graduation he was selected for the Vauxhall Collective Award 2008/9. With part of the £20,000 in prize money he embarked on a week-long trip around the UK, exploring rural crafts made redundant by the Industrial Revolution. "It was a fantastic journey researching all sorts of rural crafts and Victorian working processes," he explains. "I decided to be disciplined and primarily focus on wood cleaving rather than a medley of



different techniques. Wood cleaving was originally used for gates, fences and hurdles and is an ancient woodland craft in which oak is split along the grain, rather than sawed, to enhance the appearance with character and strength. It also allows the shape of the legs to follow the shape of the tree. I now have a coherent collection of work which retails from about £600-£1,200 and have been successfully selling the collection to private clients. I am now in discussion with retailers."

Design Miami co-founder and direc-

tor Ambra Medda noticed his work in ID magazine and invited him to participate in Craft Punk, sponsored by the Fendi fashion empire, during the Salone Internazionale del Mobile in Milan last year. "It was an incredible and timely experience," he says. "I made amazing contacts, including [US design entrepreneur] Murray Moss and Paul Johnson of the Johnson Trading Gallery, who commissioned some pieces. I was often surrounded by television cameras, journalists and gallerists. It was a bit overwhelming but fantastic at the same time."

Exhibiting furniture and vessels in Tom Dixon's Portobello Dock space during the London Design Festival last September further enhanced

Hasan's reputation and introduced him to new clients. It also triggered questions about where his work should be seen – in galleries as edition pieces or in production for sale in shops. With one foot in the arts and the other in industry Hasan would like to find an enlightened manufacturing partner to explore a new production model, a "boutique factory system" enabling craft-inspired work in partnership with industry to be commercially viable.

"I don't want to live like an artist for the rest of my life and need to create a value beyond the next commission to create a viable career and business," he says.



Experimental Designer Simon Hasan, top; stool incorporating tweed, left; night stands in leather, right

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