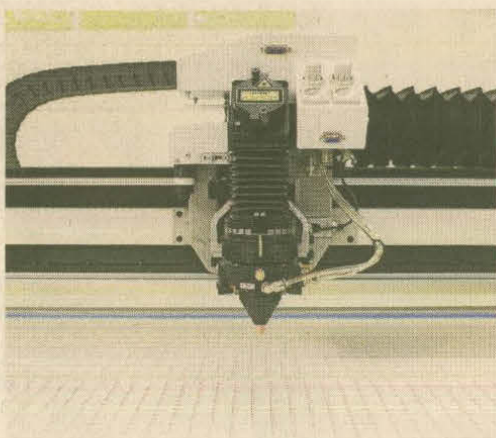


From veneer to eternity

Artisans | The ancient technique of marquetry is being brought up to date by a small company in Wales that creates work designed to stand the test of time. By *Jonathan Foyle*



Above: One of Aryma's marquetry artists at work. Below: a laser machine that cuts the wooden veneer
Gareth Phillips



Apologies if I was a little random: I had just been looking at a large - and expensive - marquetry panel that had been accidentally sanded through in one area - always a risk with our work."

Howard Sansome, the co-owner of Aryma in Llandrindod Wells, Powys, central Wales, needn't have apologised for seeming distracted on the phone - as I'd missed it and the distraction was my own. Yet his breeziness about such occupational hazards convinces me I'd not be cut out to start a marquetry business. All my instincts that this is a genteel recreation seem misplaced.

In 2005, Howard and Lisa Sansome bought a company then called Anita Marquetry. Howard had been working as a senior purchaser in the supermarkets and drinks industries. Yet beneath the career veneer he was a craftsman, who had always wanted to turn his hand to making things.

"The opportunity seemed accidental, having cropped up in casual conversation with a cabinet maker who was doing some work on my house at the time." The craftsman happened to notice some marquetry that Howard had made years earlier, when he was in his twenties.

"I've been a keen amateur woodworker for as long as I can recall, and considered taking it up formally, but my business career had taken me down a



Above: Lisa and Howard Sansome. Right: a mother of pearl design
Gareth Phillips

path that was well-rewarded enough to make it difficult to change course."

His frustration was a potential asset. The aspiration to be your own boss and turn creativity into profit is familiar to many who realise they're not really company types. Yet making such a business work is another matter entirely.

"Even as we bought it, we realised it wasn't going to survive," says Lisa. In the process of reinventing the company

while retaining its six staff, "we didn't pay ourselves for two years".

The main problem was that marquetry had a bit of a dusty image. "Historically, marquetry workers were always on the back foot," says Howard. "They were cabinet makers first and foremost, not artists in their own right. Marquetry work used design from other branches of the arts that pioneered decorative fashions."

The technique of inlay certainly has a long history, as witnessed on a wooden box from Ur in Mesopotamia lined not with veneers - by which marquetry has come to be defined - but thin ivory and colourful stones. Yet it was the tradition of inlaid stone that continued through Roman and Byzantine mosaics, into the

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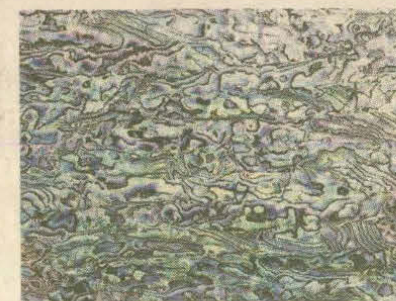
age of cathedral building and the Italian *pietra dura* technique of precisely cut, colourful stones laid into spectacular tabletops.

This domestic iteration of embellished stonework inspired the 16th-century Italian fashion for cut, coloured and shaded pieces of wood veneer. From Florence and Rome, the culture of marquetry spread across Europe: the French gave it its name from *marqueter*, meaning "to checker".

In England, inlaid chests of Henry VIII's reign (1509-47) were a warm-up to the age of walnut marquetry furniture. But the technique became associated with expensively ornamental French rococo style.

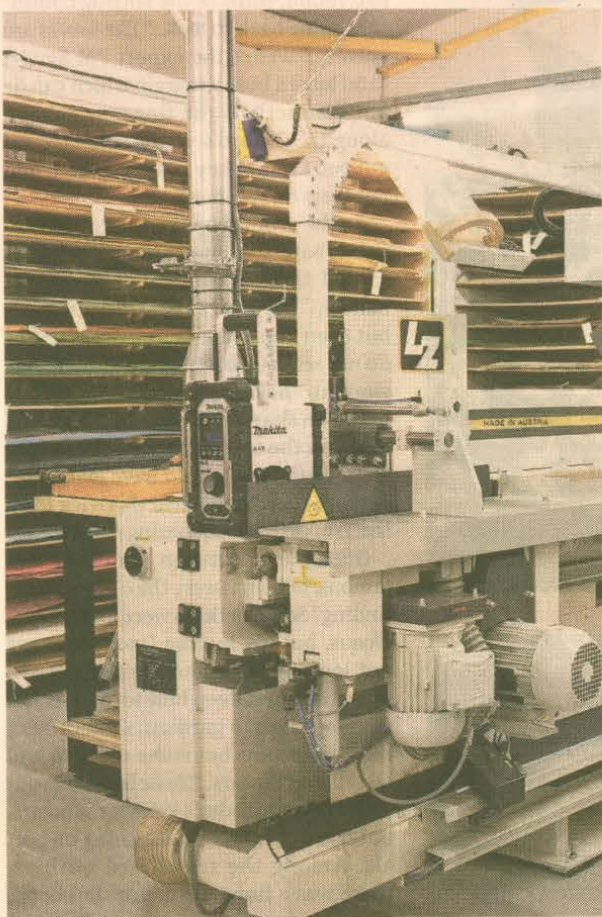
In 1964, John Betjeman articulated common British perceptions of marquetry as nostalgic, as seen on the train to Regency Brighton.

"A walk down the corridors gives a foretaste of the place. Some Pullmans decorated with inlaid mahogany and silvered fittings in a delightful Adam style recall good King Edward VII." But, he noted, "other Pullmans are veneered in cubist patterns of the 1920s".



Right: intricate work on a wooden veneer. Below: a design machine at Aryma

Gareth Phillips



Here, Betjeman merely touched on the ability of marquetry to embrace modernity. The reluctance was telling: since dressing the jazz-age lounges of country houses and ocean liners (see the Rogano in Glasgow, a restaurant dating from 1935 that emulates the panels of Cunard's Queen Mary) its potential to move with the times had regressed into postwar plain plywood.

Meanwhile, expensively crafted inlaid work usually just replicated old furniture. It was this languishing potential that attracted the Sansomes. In the 21st century, marquetry had to get modern to survive.

The company has never advertised - commissions from the high end of the market have been gained by word of mouth. And they often come from people who know what they want.

This brings highly distinctive, one-off projects with challenges. A telephone call from Arizona requested that an

'A Parakeet in a Bouquet', the Italian School, 18th century

Bridgeman



elliptical dome in a vestibule should accurately depict native southwestern flora. Where do you start with a design on curved ply sections, to be assembled with precision 5,000 miles away? (A local engineer is the answer.)

Aryma uses non-traditional plywood for a stable base, which can be moved from studio to site, but Howard prefers Hexalite aluminium substrate - costly sheets of light metal hexagonal cells that robot bees might have made.

Truly a reformer, he sticks to the principle that modern chemical bonding agents are far better than the animal glues used in the past, which can fail over time. He believes craftily hand-dyeing timber is less reliable than buying sheets in consistent modern colours that do not fade.

Both are essential in extreme jobs such as dashboards for luxury cars, where scorching sunshine stresses the wood. No car manufacturer

wants faded or split veneer. And no traditional application could deliver successful results.

Pricing is essentially based on time. The company's four "marqueteers" are fine arts graduates. Their designs bring individuality, and each step of manufacture depends on manual skill, whether using scalpels or cutting-edge lasers for cutting edges. They author a piece from start to finish where possible, and the time taken is calculated by area and complexity. That will determine if it's a solo or team job. If an intricate design feature like a butterfly takes a week to make, and your ambition is a wall of 5,000 different butterflies, it stands to reason you'll pay for 10 years of time.

Whatever size the commission, marquetry lasts a lifetime. At least, it does these days.

Jonathan Foyle is chief executive of World Monuments Fund Britain