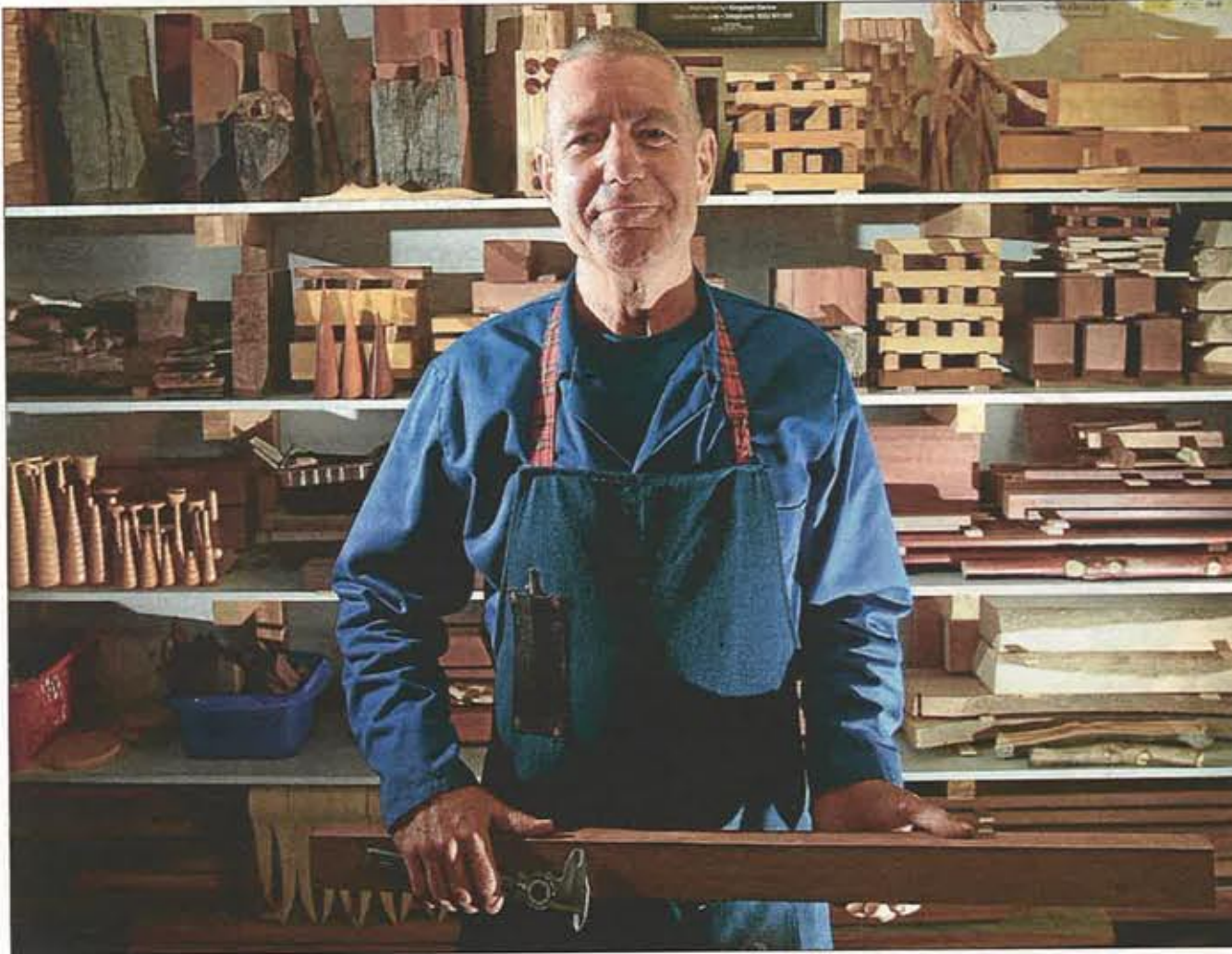


Meet Your Maker

McCance takes design to the 'Max'



Left: artist Max McCance in his workshop near Collesie in Fife. Above: One of Max's pieces. Pictures: Kris Miller.

Inspired by nature, made by the hand of man — or at least one man, furniture maker Max McCance, who told **Helen Brown** about his own unique take on design . . .

SOMETIMES, AN object will stop you in your tracks and make you think: "I wish I could do that" or "I want one!" Max McCance's amazing work in wood is just such a thing. It shouts quality, imagination, skill and dedication whether it's a small, finely-detailed wooden box or a smoothly-moving rocking stool; a wall cabinet whose interior is as carefully finished as the front or a decorative and practical chopping board.

He makes one-offs and he makes them to last from a workshop in the Fife countryside where he has now also built an on-site gallery, created to showcase his pieces which are the perfect combination of artistic vision and top-class technical ability. As you might expect from a meticulous perfectionist — his workspace is tidier than many people's homes! — he did all the work himself, including a bespoke lighting gantry and presentation plinths designed to the last detail.

Aptly, this year's Fife Open Studios weekend was his most successful yet with around 300 people heading out to the gallery to admire some beautifully-made artefacts and antiques of the future. The

McCance "spiky" or multi-layered tables have become a trademark but Max has also branched out into making affordable pieces including box shelves, and mirrors and candleholders made from copper and brass fittings.

"Getting old ones apart is a bit difficult so I start with new ones then acid-age and buff them to get the look I want," he explains. Each is made with the same loving attention to detail as the largest project, aiming for an edgy beauty.

Max, a Glaswegian who now lives at Kinloch near Collesie with his American wife Ellen, explains: "I love to talk about wood and speak to people about what I do. Every time I start something, I wonder: 'What would happen if I did this or that?' It's about new ideas; I don't want to repeat the past. I wake up every day so grateful to be able to make things with my hands."

Having completed his early apprenticeship in Scotland, he worked in London and Edinburgh before moving to Italy at the start of the 1980s to study sculpture and design, eventually setting up his own furniture studio in Tuscany. A stint in the USA was followed by a return to Scotland and the building of a reputation

as both a craftsman and an artist, a creator of pieces that enhance lives.

Max works mainly in prime, kiln-dried American or European oak although he has a treasure trove of small amounts of unusual woods from around the world — many no longer available — to experiment with colour, texture and grain. Black bean from Australia, a rare gift from an old cabinetmaker, bog oak thousands of years old, lignum vitae, wenge which is a form of African rosewood, and beautiful fumed oak make a real visual impression either as the main body of a piece or as finely crafted detailing. Oil finishes, sometimes as many as four coats, bring out the grain and the life of the wood.

With many of his ideas emanating from nature, he feels a particular affinity with the work of D'Arcy Thompson, the pioneering biologist and mathematician at Dundee and St Andrews universities who brought together the worlds of art and science in a seminal book, *On Growth and Form* which has influenced many artists over the last 100 years. This fed directly into his own thinking and came to a head with the creation of what Max dubbed his DNA table, with wood honed to resemble

conjoined strands of the stuff of life. It's now housed in the new Discovery Centre at the University of Dundee. Max describes it as a piece of "functional sculpture", an elegant shape with movement built in to the design, on which he worked with Professor Michael Ferguson, Regius Professor of Life Sciences.

Another highly original project, domestic this time, led to the creation of a wooden staircase following the vista of the Sidlaw Hills which could be seen from the house.

"The battle is to try to come up with something original. I was commissioned to make wooden mallets by a silversmith but people liked them and I ended up making more. I had to work on the weight by using brass inserts. They can be displayed but they're also tough enough to use! People don't often consider commissions but generally they're not any more expensive than buying what's already been created and they can be made very personal to fit exactly the space you want them to fill.

"As I keep telling my students, you must love doing something like this — don't do it otherwise!"

www.maxmccance.com

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