

NO PLACE LIKE HOME

A year of confinement has prompted a spate of spending on our living spaces. Riya Patel assesses our increasing appetite for the handmade – and how it's reshaping our interiors

In the first few months of the pandemic in 2020, a new word entered our lexicon. 'Zoombarrassment' – the shame induced by a lacklustre Zoom backdrop – prompted a flurry of online spending, as we gave our home offices (or bedrooms) an urgent style upgrade. As the weeks of lockdown turned into months, and we began to live with (and maybe even love) the idea of being at home for long stretches, our upgrade ideas became more ambitious. A report by the HomeServe Foundation found UK households spent £7.5bn more on home improvements in 2020 than the previous year. So, at a time when our homes are our world, what have we chosen to surround ourselves with?

While large retailers benefited most from the online shopping spree, the craft market reaped rewards too. 'People began to rethink what "home" means to them,' says Yelena Ford, managing director of The New Craftsmen, which promotes and sells work by UK makers and experienced a 16% growth in business last year, particularly in furniture. 'They wanted to enliven their space with unique pieces with character, which craft does in spades.' A bestseller was Alfred Newall's *Bobbin* collection, a modern take on 17th-century furniture with elaborate lathe-turned legs. Gareth Neal and Kevin Gauld's *Brodgar* chair, reinterpreting the traditional woven-backed Orkney design, also sold well. When The New Craftsmen had to close its showroom in March, buyers were more than comfortable spending online. 'People bought more ambitious, distinctive pieces, investing in objects that would bring drama to the home,' says Ford.

Gallery Fumi – which specialises in interior pieces made with unusual processes or materials – used lockdown



Photos: The New Craftsmen

Left: *Brodgar* chair by Gareth Neal and Kevin Gauld, ceiling light by Annemarie O'Sullivan and ceramics by Abigail Schama. Above: Alfred Newall's *Bobbin* collection

confinement as the creative fuel for a group show this spring, titled *It's Good to Be Home*. 'We've all been through significant changes this year and we're taking many things a lot less for granted – including beautiful works of design which are here to enrich our worlds,' explain founders Sam Pratt and Valerio Capo. The show was filled with the kinds of items that clients had been seeking out during the last year: bold pieces and furniture with flexible usages. Among them was American sculptor Casey McCafferty's *Cairn Chair*, a carved wood and stone seat with a powerful rugged form that would serve as a focal point both inside or outside, and Sam Orlando Miller's *Freestanding*, a collection of interlocking fibreglass seats with surfaces painted, then scraped, to make you want to touch them. Such distinctive works have boosted their Instagram following, with more new clients reaching out to them through the platform than ever before.

While the pandemic has been a time of extreme financial uncertainty for some, others have found themselves with more disposable cash because of the travel ban and retail and restaurant closures. Any downturn from those with affected jobs has been countered by the spending of the super-rich. The Knight Frank *Wealth Report* showed furniture to be the sixth most popular passion investment in 2020 behind art, classic cars, wine, watches and jewellery. The property market also kept moving in 2020, with 21% of wealthy individuals buying a new home last year – ideal receptacles for bespoke fixtures and furnishings.

Wall hangings have also experienced a surge of interest, with Artsy seeing a 109% increase of followers in its textile art category last year. Perhaps it was due to our need for some softness in hard times or to the power of textiles to tell stories about the challenges of today. For weaver Majeda Clarke, the pandemic gave her the courage to transform the scope of her work. 'I had a spike in internet sales at the start



McCafferty: courtesy Gallery Pumi | Clarke: photo Yeshen Yenema



From left to right: waney-edge ingot table in English elm by Galvin Brothers; Casey McCafferty, *Cairn Chair*, carved wood and stone; Majeda Clarke, *Hernandez Blanket* in super geelong lambswool, from the *Explorer's Palette* series

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of lockdown,' she says. 'It was a really busy period, followed by a sudden lull.' The momentary drop in online sales – a consequence of the unpredictability of early 2020 – soon shifted, following a spate of mainstream press articles on wall hangings and commissioning textiles for interiors. Clarke turned her attention from making blankets – her 'bread and butter' – to experimenting with large artworks. 'I've noticed a shift in the market towards the bespoke and personalised,' she says. Following a commission from the UN refugee agency to make a woven artwork telling the stories of migrants' journeys to Britain, she developed an idea for a custom-made piece for families: woven panels of silk to hold trinkets and childhood tokens that have a special meaning for them. These three-dimensional 'memory weavings' feel timely, given how COVID-19 lockdowns have reasserted the value of our closest relationships.

Matthew Galvin also felt the initial hit of pandemic purse-tightening at his Yorkshire-based business, Galvin Brothers, which makes handcrafted furniture. 'At first, we saw a decrease in business. People quite rightly had bigger concerns than furniture,' he says. But work gathered pace as clients came to understand the 'longer-term value of investing in better furniture and the new narratives of their homes in a post-pandemic world', as Galvin puts it. With the retail space closed, the team put energy into their online

offers and social media. It paid off – the business grew both directly and with trade clients working on interiors projects. Popular purchases included side tables and the quirky (*Perfectly*) *Imperfect Stool* with one 'wobbly' leg that showcases the art of woodturning. Bespoke commissions also increased for Galvin Brothers, with waney-edge dining tables being a particular hit. Made from giant pieces of solid wood with raw edges, deep grains and characterful knots, they emphasise the beautiful irregularity of timber.

Galvin and Clarke's observations chime with interior designer Rachel Chudley's experiences. Her clients are increasingly interested in one-off works. 'At the start of the pandemic, people were buying like crazy and they wanted a lot of beautiful, bespoke craft,' she says. For a Victorian house in north London, for example, Chudley assembled a top team of craft specialists. Sets of curtains were hand-dyed by textile artist Lucy Bathurst, while custom-made units in the kitchen by Jack Trench were paired with a polished concrete floor inlaid with a brass map showing the surroundings of the family's cabin in the Catskill Mountains. Chudley's own studio created a bean-shaped sofa for the whole family to nest in. 'A lot of our clients started getting more involved in the making process because they suddenly had more time,' she adds. 'I think people were allowing themselves creative freedom and actually getting into craft themselves.'

The craft and interior design communities are more closely linked than ever

Ford agrees that the pandemic has brought about a more engaged type of buyer. 'In future, I think we'll have a more conscious client that is going to be asking questions about provenance,' she says. 'More and more, we are having to provide interior designers with the tools to be able to impart that story to their clients.' The New Craftsmen has a dedicated trade team on hand to offer commissioning advice and creative support, and has recently launched a digital trade portal on its website, making it easier for interior design clients to browse collections geared towards larger orders, access case studies and product specification sheets, and buy items with a trade discount. 'Trade has been part of the business since it started, but it has become the growth engine,' Ford adds. 'The portal is transforming how we engage with clients, how they do their made-to-order and bespoke.' Meanwhile, London interiors mecca Design Centre, Chelsea Harbour has also responded to this increasing appetite for the handmade by launching a new fair in June, called Artefact, featuring objects from galleries that will be familiar to Collect art fair visitors, including Ruup & Form and Cavaliero Finn.

While the upswing of interest in home design has been welcome, the challenging conditions of 2021 meant that not all designers and craftspeople were able to capitalise on it. The Crafts Council's COVID-19 impact survey found that 63% of makers were affected by studio closures, material shortages and changes in personal circumstances due to the pandemic. As demand increased, many were unable to keep up. Chudley says: 'We had so many requests during lockdown, but builders and products were scarce, and we were already at capacity trying to finish things off.' This was particularly the case for handmade furniture. 'Everyone got inundated with orders but conditions were really difficult. Pandemic restrictions meant that small workshops couldn't have everyone working at the same time, so it was a real boom for the industry but a real bust at the same time.'

As restrictions lift, the craze for interior spending may taper away but certain things will remain. We are more engaged with what we want, and more confident about making big purchases. Our homes have been both a prison and a sanctuary for over a year, and the intense experience has taught us the value of a rich, interesting and increasingly personalised space for spending time together in. The craft and interior design communities are more closely linked than ever – for makers there is a real opportunity to find new styles of work and potentially counter losses from the closure of shops and galleries during the lockdowns. There is another spike of interior interest on the horizon, too. As we invite friends and family back inside our homes, there will soon be the opportunity to show them off once again.

Right: Rachel Chudley's studio designed this bespoke bean-shaped family sofa for a Victorian house in north London



Photo: Sean Myers