

# Woodwork in a Social Age

Scrolling the Net, *Hattie Speed* finds the Austrian chairmaker Vinko Nino Jaeger



skillfully tactile, fully functional wooden kitchenware, with each item made from reclaimed timber. Grain & Knot's Instagram (@grainandknot) is well worth a follow, between the tasteful and elegant images of Sophie's creations, we are treated to personal snippets of her trips into the woods and the launches of her pop-up shops.

Then there are those who work on a larger scale, like Benoît Averly, engineering amazingly elaborate sculptures (benoitaverly.com). Based in Burgundy, France, Benoît creates textural pieces in wood that explore light and lines. Having discovered woodworking during his childhood, his most coveted pieces are prized by interior designers, architects and collectors worldwide in numerous luxury interiors. I would recommend following Benoît Averly's Instagram (@benoitaverly\_sulptor), if you are seeking an eclectic arrangement of inspirational images, as well as occasional action shots of Benoît manipulating material.

However, during one of my many weekly purges of Instagram, I came across the work of Vinko Nino Jaeger (@vnjaeger\_chairs). At first glance: an Austrian-American chairmaker with a passion for hand-tools, and whose profile I found interesting enough. Nevertheless, following further research via his website portfolio, and eventually a 60-minute Zoom call, I was more inspired than ever by this maker's work. Finding connections with other people, especially craftspeople, really excites me, and this seemingly random event of contacting someone via the internet proved to resonate so meaningfully with me.

Initially it was Nino's creative interpretation of the traditional chair form that attracted me. Some designs have four legs, others have three; some are for sitting front ways, others you sit on backwards. And amazingly, all of his creations involve no (or very, very minimal) use of machines. As Nino describes it: "Working by hand is a creative process, I let it happen. It's interesting to work with hand-tools because you have a more

Scrolling through Instagram, woodworkers are spoiled for choice at the vast amount of content available. Social media has broken down barriers, allowing hobbyists and professionals to showcase their work alongside one other; providing an accessible platform for the community to directly communicate.

From this diverse network, there are makers of beautiful handcrafted objects, Sophie Sellu, deserving a notable mention for her contemporary woodwork brand Grain & Knot (grainandknot.com). Sophie graduated from Manchester School of Art in 2009, and now lives in London, and works from her home studio. After completing the Prince's Trust Enterprise Scheme, Sophie was able to pursue her craft full-time, offering



Nino's adze is a one-hand hollow swage from Dictum. "It is well made and less expensive than others."

PHOTOS: PATRICK BAUER



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direct relationship between the body and the thing you're making. It's like sculptural handwriting, and makes objects more alive. I see my pieces more like artworks, I don't want to compete with industry. It's important to me to design my chair sculptures only in my head. I don't do design drawings. This approach significantly influences the result."

I explained to Nino that in the second year of my degree in furniture-making, I designed a playful stool called 'Hinny'. I remember the sceptical looks of my course mates, probably thinking, "how is that a chair?" So it was really refreshing to find someone else whose work explores the performative aspects of making furniture. "Chairs are interesting to me," Nino replied, "because somehow they are connected to the human figure, with the legs and arms... a metaphor. I see chairs as a sculpture with a function; only complete when a person uses it. I mostly do artworks that people are engaged with in some way, and this is the case with chairs. You have to use it, do something with it. It has this performative character. I sometimes use chairs as props in my own performance art."

"This is probably part of my history as a trans man; I'm interested in this non-visible part of the body. If you didn't know me, you'd think I'm just a normal guy, so I have to do this like 'outing', but it doesn't matter who you are, you always have this invisible side of your body. We all have that, and it's similar with chairs. I like it when nobody is sitting there, the chair is asking about this 'invisible body', which is only in your imagination. This plays a big role in my passion for chairs."

Vinko Nino Jaeger grew up in south Austria in Carinthia. Raised in the countryside, where he could play in the woods and

his family's big garden, he has engaged with woodwork since his early childhood. "I was always building treehouses, dens and toys out of wood. I had a lot of support from my father. He was a self-taught artist and supported me in my creative energy, so I could basically do what I wanted. I decided to study fine art at the Academy of Fine Art in Vienna. First I started painting, but very soon it became clear that I wanted to do sculpture and three-dimensional things, as I was always building and constructing things out of wood. I changed to Object Sculpture, where I tried stonework, however it was always clear that woodwork was the thing I liked."

The Academy had different workshops for every discipline, and Nino recounted how the woodshop proved too machine-focused: "I'm not interested in this side of the industry. I don't want to create forms that can be reproduced hundreds of times." Nino transferred to the Wood Restoration course, where students were expected, due to the nature of restoring antique furniture, to do everything by hand. This provided a great opportunity to familiarise himself further with hand-tools.

Prior to studying at the Academy of Fine Art in Vienna, Nino completed studies in Psychology and Philosophy, but decided it was not a pathway he would continue. "I think I just wanted to understand myself more. I was interested in participating with other people. However I found Art was the right place for me, because I knew I didn't want to be a cabinetmaker and only use big machines. I wanted a more holistic approach, to work with my hands and my mind. I say I'm an artist, because it offers a combination of philosophy and practice."

In spite of this, Nino has since found a match between his

former studies and his craft, by teaching in the Art Therapy Department at the Sigmund Freud University in Vienna. I too have pursued a career within Craft Therapy; working as an Occupational Therapy Technical Instructor with neuro-rehab patients at Oxford's Centre for Enablement. I can relate to the two disciplines co-existing for his students, in a medium he has fostered called 'performative sculpture'. Nino described how the main challenge arises from having to teach the Art Therapist trainees with as little material as possible. Since much of their practice will be carried out in hospitals or homes for the elderly. "I try to teach them to think about how they can use the body in art therapy, as a tool to learn about oneself."

Nino promotes similar teachings in greenwood spoon carving courses he also runs. By using just an axe and knife, participants are encouraged to find their own wood, and let their imagination talk freely with the material, to make something from it. During these courses, people learn the most important hand-tools for specific tasks, and find shapes that harmonize with their body, rather than trying to implement a rigid form.

When he isn't teaching (a quarter of his time), Nino can be found in his studio in the heart of Vienna. A 20m<sup>2</sup> workspace for sculpting his chairs is fronted by a gallery-shop called STÖL. This allows him to sell his work directly to clients, as well as providing space to showcase other artists during exhibitions. His toolkit is comprised of many hand-tools I'm sure most keen woodworkers would recognise. However I admit there were several I had no prior knowledge of, particularly: Adzes, Travishers and the various types of woodworking knives. Despite completing a furniture-making degree, where most of the first year focused

on hand-tools, I feel surprisingly ignorant of the manual options available; the adze, the travisher and various types of knife.

For many beginners and young makers, the luxury of a workshop is most desirable, but access is often prevented by cost, space or even confidence. "You need a little space," comments Nino. "Only a few tools, and you don't need a lot of energy. I don't need big machines that make noise and produce dust. It's really ecological." As my tutor, Joe Bray, wrote in QMO2, if craft education's primary focus is employability within industry, then the use of hand-tools and what might be seen as 'slower ways of working' are at risk of erasure. Nino and I can count ourselves lucky that within our Art and Craft Therapy roles, an understanding of hand-tools will only ever be an advantage.

Since my Zoom call with Nino, I have recognised untapped potential within my own making practice. Hearing about his use of hand-tools to carve, sculpt and make things means attempting projects from home seem far more achievable than I'd first considered. So I take comfort at the thought of Vinko Nino Jaeger sculpting chairs in his studio at his period house in the beautiful Austrian countryside.

*Hattie Speed is an artist-maker, who specialises in woodcraft therapy within her role as OT Technical Instructor at Oxford Centre for Enablement. Hattie is founder of This Girl Makes, an on and offline community of designers and makers, as well as facilitator of Rycotewood Furniture College's National Saturday Club. To see more of Nino Vinko Jaeger's work visit [vnjaeger.com](http://vnjaeger.com).*



Nino Jaeger outside STÖL, where he has a studio, and using a Stanley spokeshave he bought used. "It is a good quality spokeshave," he says, "for not a lot of money, though I would love to try a Lie-Nielsen or Veritas."