

Irish Examiner

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TEXTURES AND TEXTILES

We take summer home with
the latest in fabrics

KITCHEN CABINET

Lookbook for the best-loved
room in the house

DESIGNER HOMES

Glamorous and cool in Ardrack
plus Scandi flair in Douglas

Picture: Rebekah Hartnett

Furniture designers and makers, Susan Zelouf and Michael Bell of Co Laois-based Zelouf + Bell. They have been working together for 25 years.



THE great things in life happen by chance — especially for an American living in Rome and a Belfast man on a business trip. That chance meeting resulted in a furniture design and making business in Co Laois which is 25 years old this year. Michael Bell was passing a night club when he heard singing which drew him inside. There he met the chanteuse, Susan Zelouf, a native New Yorker who worked for an Italian film company — and that, as they say, was that.

The couple moved back to Belfast, and while renovating their house, Michael's love of making things truly began and Susan became what she describes as the ghost designer. This was then followed by a re-location from Belfast to develop the business.

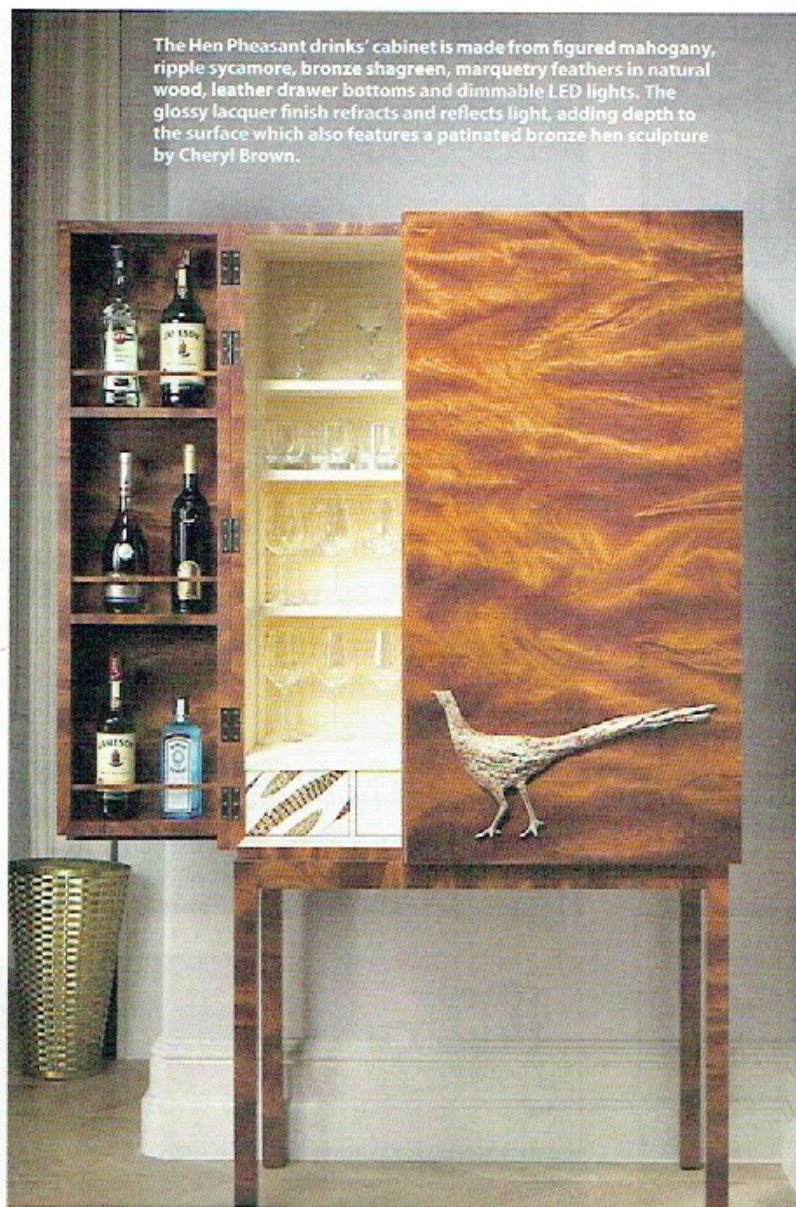
"We found that the Design and Crafts Council of Ireland was supportive," Susan explains. "So we decided to move down, and found a cottage within fifteen miles of Dublin."

Located in the grounds of Emo Court in Co Laois, it's where they still live and now have their workshops, too. Public exposure came initially when they were invited to exhibit at the Furniture Gallery on Dublin's Parliament Street.

"It was an amazing concept for art furniture," says Susan, "and gave us a start with 'Wood For The Trees', which was our first show.

Two and a half decades later, the astonishing level of imagination and skill in the pieces the studio now produces, makes it hard to believe Michael has no formal training as a furniture maker. Designs have evolved dramatically, with an emphasis on fine art decorative finishes and luxury veneers, to appeal to the collector and those who want something extraordinarily special for a house. Given it can take anything between three and four months to make a cabinet, the client gets as much involved in the commission as Michael and Susan.

But for all that, they are an artisan business operating in a costly country, and having to compete with others offering



The Hen Pheasant drinks' cabinet is made from figured mahogany, ripple sycamore, bronze shagreen, marquetry feathers in natural wood, leather drawer bottoms and dimmable LED lights. The glossy lacquer finish refracts and reflects light, adding depth to the surface which also features a patinated bronze hen sculpture by Cheryl Brown.



The Spyglass champagne cart is inspired by the Art Deco period and is made from black polished brass with blackened brass as a commission for restaurateur, Patrick Guilbaud.

The wenge wood Power Line coat stands were inspired by overhead electrical cables in California and are still in production. Coat and hat hooks are made from cash register keys (€1,975).



MADE TO MEASURE

cheap labour and overheads. It prompted them to go the other way and target the high-end buyer, to build an Irish and international client list.

It's always interesting to ask makers if they have a favourite piece — like asking a parent to choose their favourite child. They both cite the elegant Span table.

"It was inspired by a bridge over the M50 on the way to the airport," says Michael. Another is a table made with a steel beam which came out of Portlaoise Prison, and the Power Line coat stand which is still in production. Both were made at the start of the recession when Michael and Susan had a deliberate focus on making things using found

objects, in a creative nod to what were straitened times. Inspired by electric overhead wires in California, Power Line is made from wenge wood punctuated with old American cash till keys to form hooks on which to hang hats and coats.

They're in stark contrast with the sophistication of the current wave of drinks' and cocktail cabinets.

Now assisted in the workshop by three makers, Michael creates and oversees as well as designing. He quietly sketched as I spoke to them, while Susan weaved the story of their personal and professional partnership together. He admits to preferring a background role, leaving the vivacious and

engaging Susan to be the public interface for the business. He also draws by hand and has taught himself to gild while continuing to be hands-on in the workshop — even making the crates to transport furniture to exhibitions which this year includes the Architectural Design Show in New York; House at the RDS in Dublin and Decorex London. High-end prices reflect the labour-intensive nature of what they do: "It's expensive, yes," says Susan, "but there is no comparison in bespoke custom work, made one at a time from start to finish, and factory items made in volume with automated processes."

— CAROL O'CALLAGHAN