

# 21st century classics

Eleanor Flegg looks at key pieces by Zelouf+Bell that advance contemporary design while referencing past masters, prior to their exhibition at the Centre Culturel Irlandais, Paris

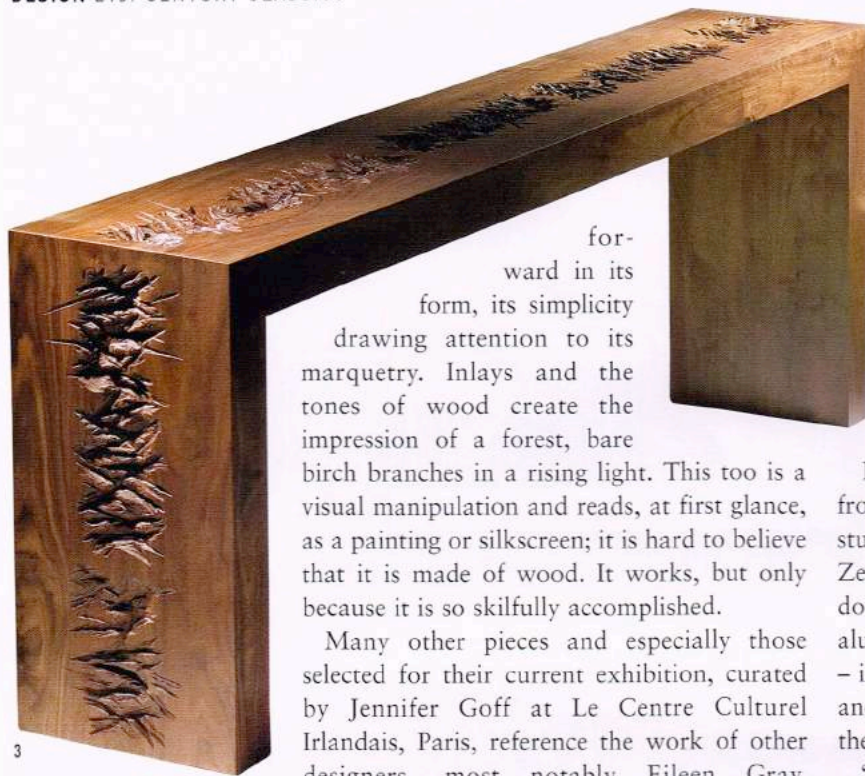


If craft can be described as skilled making, and art as the expression of the human spirit, both qualities can reside in the same object without conflict. There are few stronger examples of this in early 21st-century Ireland than the elegant furniture of Zelouf+Bell, which has much to say for itself (and not all of it entirely proper).

Zelouf+Bell have been making furniture for more than twenty years now, a creative partnership of the Belfast-born Michael Bell, who, he claims, abandoned a promising career in the tobacco industry to make one-off pieces of furniture, and the energetic Susan Zelouf, whose background is in music and that wide sweep of creative endeavour more typical of her native New York than of Ireland. Zelouf+Bell are deeply committed to their process. They have refused to

divide their practice between 'art pieces' made by themselves and a production line made more affordable by elements of factory production or foreign manufacture. Their furniture is handmade in Ireland by Bell, with a team of craftspeople. This places them firmly in the high-craft price bracket dedicated, as the National Museum's Jennifer Goff describes, to 'the haute couture of Irish furniture design,





forward in its form, its simplicity drawing attention to its marquetry. Inlays and the tones of wood create the impression of a forest, bare birch branches in a rising light. This too is a visual manipulation and reads, at first glance, as a painting or silkscreen; it is hard to believe that it is made of wood. It works, but only because it is so skilfully accomplished.

Many other pieces and especially those selected for their current exhibition, curated by Jennifer Goff at Le Centre Culturel Irlandais, Paris, reference the work of other designers, most notably Eileen Gray.

Zelouf+Bell's *Koi Noir Table*, an early rendition of which was purchased by the National Museum, owes its finish to twenty coats of lacquer, painstakingly applied by hand and is a homage to Gray both in methodology and form (Fig 6). In 1917 *Vogue* showed an illustration of a lacquer koi table with an attendant rug, both by Gray, although neither of these pieces have been traced. The contemporary

ripple tanganika, finished in a high-gloss lacquer, and pinned with polished aluminium rods. But, where the moveable element of Gray's screen is straightforward, the sideboard is not as transparent in its movements. The doors open by touch – there are no handles – but touch one door and one beside it opens! This devious bit of trickery employs a 'low-tech gizmo we call an

Esherick mechanism, a boomerang-shaped rocker made from wood, inspired by something similar we'd seen in the studio of the Pennsylvanian architect Wharton Esherick,' Zelouf explains. Similarly the *Glimmer Console*, a three-door cabinet in bog oak, with horizontal inserts of polished aluminium at the front, takes an idea generated by a screen – in this case Eileen Gray's screen of 1926, inlaid with gold and silver leaf – but made into a cabinet and translated into the materials of the twenty-first century.

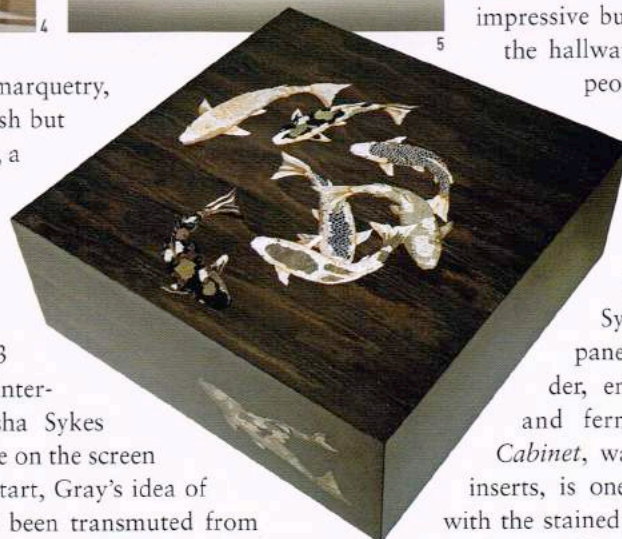
'One of the things I have always liked about their work is that no particular collection defines them,' says Goff. 'Sometimes I look at a new piece and I find myself wondering – is that by the same designer? Their styles continuously evolve because they are constantly questioning, challenging their work, and drawing inspiration from different sources. Their work never falls into cliché and their thought process is an endless interrogation of the social, political and the natural world.'

Irishness emerges in unexpected aspects of their work. In *Monolith* the fine lines of the walnut are ploughed into texture by the chainsaw blade of the Danish sculptor Jorn Ronnau (Fig 3). The piece was not intended to have political meaning but the Northern-Irish undertones are unmistakable. It is, they described, as though the piece were trying to heal itself. Collaboration is also an ongoing theme. The Zelouf+Bell *Ladder-back Chair*, was made for a client who wanted a visually impressive but uncomfortable chair to sit in the hallway beside the telephone so that people would not stay too long on the phone. With a respectful nod to that great designer of uncomfortable chairs, Charles Rennie Mackintosh, it was designed in collaboration with Sasha Sykes, who has created acrylic panels between the rungs of the ladder, embedded with organic matter and ferns. Similarly the *Pin-striped Cabinet*, wall-mounted with stained glass inserts, is one in a series of collaborations with the stained glass artist, Peadar Lamb, and created especially for the Paris exhibition. Goff sees their work as 'organic, modern retro and urban',



ersion shows more virtuosity in marquetry, this time expressed in swimming fish but also, because it is made in bog-oak, a rootedness in the Irish landscape. Almost, although this is surmise, a questioning of the distance that Gray placed between her work and her native country.

Gray's *Brick Screen*, of the 1923 Monte Carlo room, has been interpreted by various designers, Sasha Sykes among them, but Zelouf+Bell's take on the screen is original in several ways. For a start, Gray's idea of moveable geometric elements has been transmuted from screen to cupboard, interpreted as the *Briques Sideboard*, a low curved cabinet composed of rectangular sections of grey





not only 'questioning Eileen Gray, and where she fits in the canon of design', but making work that both references and distorts the legacy of Art Deco. There is much of Émile-Jacques Ruhlmann in their work, both in elements of design and in their commitment to luxury. The *Art Deco Console*, for example, is a contemporary take on the form that Ruhlmann explored in his writing desk of 1925, while the Zelouf+Bell *Fan Desk* in macassar ebony, bleached birdseye maple and figured sycamore, recalls the tapering legs of Art Deco, but is also inspired by the shape of the Victorian ladies' fan (Fig 1). Ruhlmann's exoticism is also evident in the *Gazelle Table*, sleek and stylized in quartered wenge and ebonized walnut, with legs modelled on the twisted horns of gazelles, even if the hematite drawer pulls are also inspired by nipple piercing, a surfacing of their work's ongoing sexual undercurrent (Figs 4&7). A tall cabinet, the *Pentower*, a collaboration with the California-based artist Roger Marvin and a visual essay on the subject of sensuality, eroticism, and pornography, was once turned away from an Irish exhibition on the basis of its adult content.

Zelouf+Bell are nothing if not eclectic in their inspirations. A purple *Cocktail Cabinet*, Ruhlmann's influence discernable in its form, also evolved from an Art Deco cocktail shaker owned by the client that commissioned the piece. The colours are not typical, its highly-coloured veneer in 1980s purple is

### RUHLMANN'S EXOTICISM IS EVIDENT IN THE GAZELLE TABLE, SLEEK AND STYLIZED IN QUARTERED WENGE AND EBONIZED WALNUT, WITH LEGS MODELLED ON THE TWISTED HORNS OF GAZELLES

reminiscent of the Memphis Group; the interior is a pale seashell pink (Fig 2). In order to capture and describe their thought process, Goff has included a number of drawings and mood boards, she calls them 'smorgasbords' in the exhibition, intended to show 'not just the craftsmanship but how artistic they are. They take a simple idea and develop it into a final piece of furniture, but it's not just a piece of furniture – there is a context to it.' The mood boards give a notion of how disparate ideas may have come together to produce a final piece. The Bond Collection mood board, for example, showing samples of old men's slippers and studded shoes, Chanel quilting, studded leather, marcasite, Stephen Webster's fierce aluminium studded jewellery, vintage microphones and the pyramids of Egypt. And where will they go from here? Where will they be in twenty years time? Zelouf is currently fascinated by squids, although whether this will be translated into the magic of furniture still remains to be seen. ■

Zelouf+Bell '21st Century Classics', the Centre Culturel Irlandais, Paris, 22 March - 26 April 2013.  
Eileen Gray Retrospective', Pompidou Centre until 20 May 2013.  
Photography Roland Paschhoff

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3 MONOLITH TABLE  
solid walnut, with chainsawn texture by Danish sculptor Jorn Ronnau

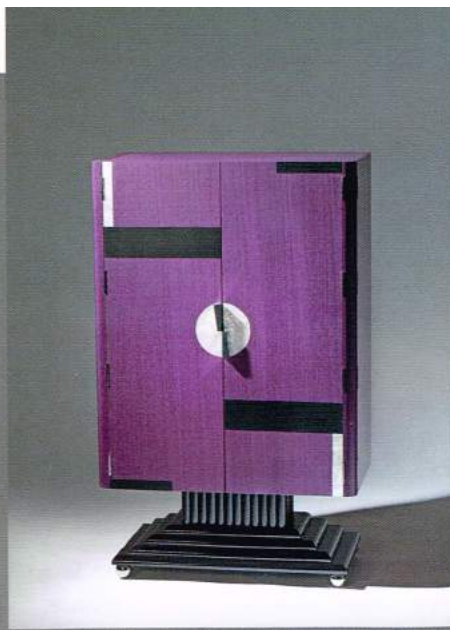
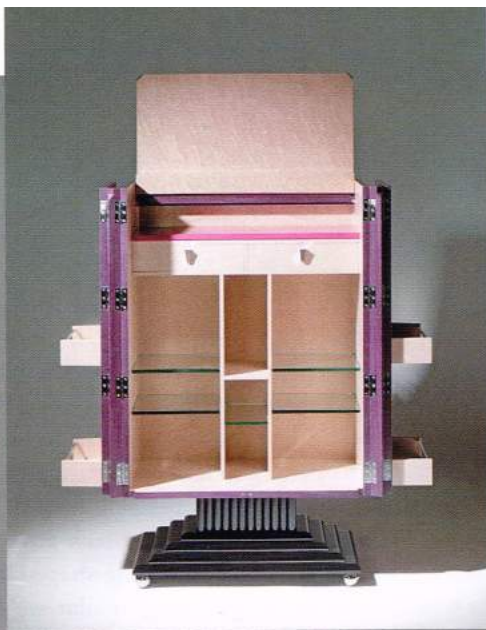
4 GAZELLE DESK  
in solid quartered wenge with hand-carved ebonized walnut, hematite drawer pulls Hand-rubbed oil finish

5 DOLMEN TABLE  
in macassar ebony with bleached birdseye maple tabletop

6 KOI NOIR TABLE  
slip-matched, rift-cut bog oak, with hand-cut marquetry

7 GAZELLE  
[detail]





2



1 ZELOUF + BELL  
FAN DESK in  
macassar ebony  
and silver koto

2 COCKTAIL  
CABINET in purple  
koto, pink birdseye  
maple, ebony,  
mother-of-pearl,  
polished aluminium

created for a discerning clientele.' It is a stance that recalls an era where there was no shame in connoisseurship and the love of fine things was proud to speak its name.

Zelouf+Bell have a broad vocabulary, a wide stylistic range, and their pieces tend to be complex, rooted in the here-and-now but frequently referencing several historic traditions at once. Their *Dolmen Table*, however, is one of the

simpler designs to unravel since it does not recall the work of any particular designer but shows an adaptation of the prehistoric dolmen form; the rough hewn slabs under a sloping apron of stone, translated into a graceful and functional table (Fig 5). Like a dolmen it is three-legged, a twist running through the wood mimicking the grain of rock, accentuated by macassar ebony's pronounced grain, while the bleached birdseye maple table-top gives the impression of slant by a feat of *trompe-l'oeil*. 'The curved apron,' Zelouf describes, 'is on a bias, wider at one side than the other, creating the illusion that the *Dolmen's* top is slanted.'

Clever illusion, especially in reference to the natural world, runs through their work. *The Branch Screen*, for example, a tall tripartite hinged screen of wood, is straight-