

TAKE A SEAT

Furniture designer and upholsterer Hannah Stanton is on a mission to reinvent antique chairs for the modern world by exposing their inner beauty

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While I'm climbing the stairs to the home office of furniture designer and upholsterer Hannah Stanton, her cat, a Ragdoll/Burmese cross called Chino, bounds ahead of us. 'He isn't allowed in here,' Hannah laughs as she shuts Chino outside, and it soon becomes clear why. Facing the doorway is one of her most striking creations: 'Show Pony', a Victorian 'Ironback' chair, its inner frame reworked in brass and left exposed to dramatic effect. Its padded seat, covered in a beautiful horsehair fabric by John Boyd Textiles, is an inviting, cat-sized snoozing place, while rolls of fabric leaning in a corner, some of them Hannah's own design, would make perfect scratching posts on which to sharpen feline claws.

A grey sheepskin rug bought on a recent trip to Scotland is destined to find its way on to the next chair in her 'Ironback' series. 'I think it would be nice to somehow button it on to the bare frame from behind so it would be removable,' she says.

Hannah first got the idea for 'Show Pony' when she was stripping down a Victorian armchair. She thought the iron frame beneath was just too ►



FACING PAGE Chair-cum-sculpture 'Show Pony' is the first in Hannah's 'Ironback' series **THIS PAGE, FROM TOP** The craft of upholstery requires patience and dexterity; surrounded by chairs for future projects, Hannah works on the as-yet-untitled second chair in the 'Ironback' series, buttoning a removable sheepskin cushion to an exposed frame





'I don't want it to be an art piece or sculpture... I want it to be beautiful to look at but also functional'



ABOVE, FROM LEFT Hannah uses laid cord to secure springs in place; beautiful, handmade horsehair cushions add the finishing touch to her chairs

beautiful to be covered, so she made it central to her design. She first displayed it at the London furnishing and interior-design show May Design Series in 2013, where it created a bit of a stir.

A well-known interior designer approached her to buy it but Hannah decided to hang on to it for a while and use it as the prototype for a series that would explore the elaborate sculptural shapes commonly used as frames in Victorian chairs, at a time when metal was cheaper to use than wood.

FURNITURE FASCINATION

After initially studying graphic design at Central Saint Martins, Hannah worked in television and web design before her fascination with furniture got the better of her. She enrolled on a two-year upholstery course at the London-based Sir John Cass Faculty of Art, Architecture and Design, better known as The Cass.

Hannah traces her passion for furniture back to her childhood in Somerset's Blackdown Hills, where she accompanied her mother to auctions and accumulated pieces of furniture that would just sit in the garage. 'Now I'm older, I am able to fix them and do things with them. You look at furniture every day but don't think about what's under the cover. So when I started pulling things apart, I thought, "This is interesting."

Stripping back the old upholstery can reveal fascinating information about a piece's history. Depending upon the availability of materials, old chairs can be found stuffed with anything from old socks to seaweed, the latter often found in chairs made by the coast. Hannah reuses as much original material as possible. While seaweed stuffing doesn't survive well, horsehair – long the stuffing of choice in traditional upholstery – does.

The second chair in the 'Ironback' series (pictured on page 59) is smaller in scale than 'Show Pony' but shares its raw elegance. It started life as a conventional bedroom chair but is now a contemporary statement piece – although, as Hannah is keen to point out, it is still a practical item of furniture. 'I don't want it to be an art piece or sculpture... I want it to be beautiful to look at but also functional,' she says. For the seat, Hannah has once again used horsehair fabric, while the back cushion is a combination of sheep and goat skin. 'The frame reminded me of the old metal gates we had in the fields in Somerset, hence the use of sheep, goat and horse materials.'

Hannah likes to celebrate the history of each piece of furniture that she reinvents, often leaving exposed the holes left by nails hammered in over a hundred years earlier, inviting the person sitting in the chair to wonder at its story. But Hannah is not a slave to history, as she demonstrated in a ➤

CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT Castors create a striking still life in Hannah's office; one of the mood boards for her Somerset House commission; Hannah's inspiration for her next 'Ironback' chair; she loves every stage of creating her chairs





recent commission for the offices of a company based in London's Somerset House.

The commission was to create breakout spaces where employees could hold impromptu meetings or simply relax. For one space, she had an antique chaise sawn in two, so the halves could be pushed together or separated for different seating options. 'The carpenter I was working with was shocked when I asked him to saw it in half but I knew it would work,' she says. For another space, she created a twin chair, joining two antique chairs together to make a wonderfully intriguing piece.

RETHINKING UPHOLSTERY

Hannah's skill in rethinking antique furniture for contemporary use has attracted a number of other commissions, including one for a London embassy. She is also collaborating with luxury interiors company Mockbee & Co to create a range of pieces available through its shop, as well as working on a project for Mayfair's The New Craftsmen (see p12).

Between commissions, Hannah works with a fellow former-Cass student, Jude Dennis, curating upholstery exhibitions under the banner of Second Sitters. It promotes the traditional craft of upholstery while showcasing the talent of contemporary makers. Most recently, Second Sitters occupied one of four project spaces at Tent London (part of the London Design Festival).

But it is being hands-on in her workshop that makes Hannah happiest. After a morning of responding to emails and working on quotes, she walks the five minutes from her home in Hackney to the workshop she shares with five others. There, she swaps desk and computer for workbench and tools, and becomes absorbed in her craft, her thoughts occasionally drifting to Chino and wondering if he has sneaked in to her home office to take a nap on 'Show Pony'. ■ *Hannah Stanton's work costs from £2,000 for a one-off piece. 'Show Pony' is for sale at £4,500. hannahstanton.com*

FROM LEFT Hannah likes her workshop to be ordered with all her everyday tools to hand; she collaborated with fabric designer Inca Starzinsky to create a modern twist for this antique Victorian chair - the bespoke fabric presents a two-dimensional impression of the kinds of things a Victorian lady may have left on her chair

COLLECTING HANNAH STANTON

JESSICA LOZANO, CO-FOUNDER, MOCKBEE & CO



'We were delighted to come across Hannah and her work in a recent exhibition at the London Design Festival. "Show Pony", an upholstered chair that is part of her "Ironback" collection, really caught our eye. At first glance, you think it is about reworking furniture, which is enough in itself, but it is so much more. It is about crossing boundaries between art, design and craft, and rethinking furniture pieces from their original roots in order to place them in a contemporary context through a deep conceptual process. It is a project close to the values of Mockbee & Co, and we are looking forward to collaborating with Hannah during 2015.'