

Q&A

WITH WSJ.

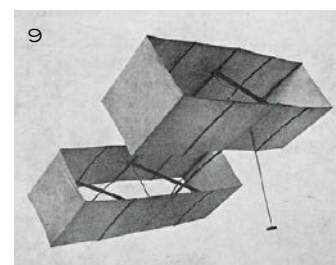
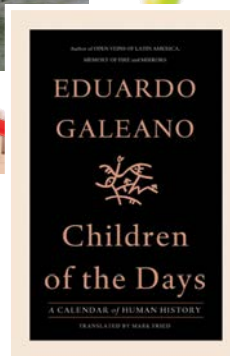
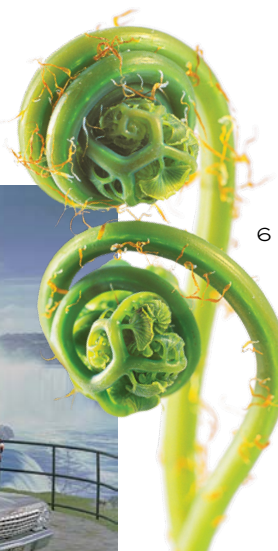
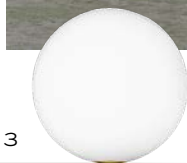
Booming interest in contemporary, handmade furniture has turned talented artisans into design stars whose work is sought after by a new generation of collectors. Here, three leading craftsmen—Christopher Kurtz, Brian Thoreen and Ian Stell—talk inspiration, music to work by and more. —Sarah Medford



CHRISTOPHER KURTZ

KINGSTON, NEW YORK

Among the creative community of New York's Hudson Valley, where he's based, Christopher Kurtz is considered something of a woodworking shaman. The 40-year-old artist and designer has crafted hundreds of pieces by hand, from Shaker-simple armchairs to a nine-legged table to basswood sculptures with limbs sanded knitting-needle thin. Kurtz spent six years assisting the artist Martin Puryear—whose practice is rooted in traditional craftsmanship—before setting up his own studio in 2008. Though his pieces are now sold through the galleries Chamber and Fair in New York City and Hedge in San Francisco, the Kansas City native is still adjusting to his success. "I once thought that to be a designer you had to have a company like Herman Miller or Vitra behind you," Kurtz says. "But after 9/11, people were longing for something authentic. Working from my barn was a way into the market." He is now developing sculptures in bronze, but wood remains his first love. "I do everything at the bench and respond to the forms as they happen," he says. >



1. What tool is key to your practice?

I am very tool dependent, so there are many that are essential. But if I had to pick one it would be a Lie-Nielsen low-angle block plane.

2. What vehicle do you rely on?

Primarily a black Chevy Silverado work truck, but for fun I drive a 1962 Chevrolet Impala sport sedan [like above], which is a classic in American design.

3. What's your most recent design discovery?

This work is well known at this point, but I'm mad for Michael Anastassiades's IC lighting for Flos. The collection is so austere and playful at the same time.

4. What are your three travel essentials?

I pride myself on traveling light. I have it pared down to two: a pocket comb and a toothbrush.

5. What book or author inspires you?

Children of the Days, by Eduardo Galeano.

6. What's your favorite cooking ingredient?

Fiddlehead ferns were just in season. I look forward to them each year.

7. What's your favorite hotel?

Nick's Cove coastal cottages on Tomales Bay, California.

8. What was the first piece you designed?

The first piece I would consider one of my designs, as distinct from my work in sculpture, is the "quarter round" chair from 2008, based on a split-leg lathe-turning technique. The leg profile drove the design of the rest of the piece, making soft radiuses on all the surfaces that contact the body while keeping a clean, flush profile on the exterior of the chair. This design also initiated my ongoing exploration of the interior surfaces, or sliced sections, of wooden forms. I continue to take commissions on these designs to this day.

9. What's an object you would like to design?

A kite. So much of my work suggests flight and aspires to lift off. I'd like to explore that quite literally. Besides, kites are so beautiful.



BRIAN THOREEN

LOS ANGELES

While still in high school, Brian Thoreen, 37, became fascinated by art and artists, and after graduation, he worked as a studio assistant in his hometown of Los Angeles. He eventually tried his hand at environmental design and fashion, going to school for both, and got a job in the fabrication shop of architects Marmol Radziner. It was only a few years ago that he took up furniture making, but this nonlinear path has clearly benefited his work. “My philosophy comes out of all those people and experiences—so does a system of trial and error,” says the designer. At New York’s Collective Design fair in 2015, Thoreen debuted a marble and brass coffee table that appears both airy and immovable. Its success has spawned private commissions as well as larger-scale interior and installation work. This past spring, the designer outfitted the new Manhattan location of fashion boutique Resurrection Vintage with sculptural brass shelving and desks of sensual black rubber. For Thoreen, the high point of the project was collaborating with Mark Haddawy, Resurrection’s multitalented co-founder, who also restores important midcentury homes. “I’ve always thrived on working with creative people,” he says. >



1. What was the first piece you designed?

I would say that everything I designed and built from an early age was just learning and experimenting and that the Mixed Marble Coffee Table [2015] was my first mature design—the first piece that I felt was whole.

2. What’s a material you’re excited about right now?

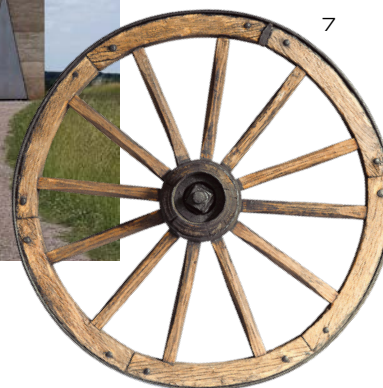
Probably rubber, which I used in the pieces I made for Mark Haddawy and the new Resurrection Vintage store in New York.

3. What’s your favorite dish to cook?

Carne asada.

4. What are your three travel essentials?

Handcuffs, passport, security blanket.



5. What project would you characterize as your breakout moment?

I sang an incredible rendition of “Body Talk” by Imagination last Thursday. I can really feel the stars aligning after that performance! Also, showing my work [including the Torpedo Chandelier, left] in NYC in 2015.

6. What’s your most recent design discovery?

This year I went to visit Le Corbusier’s Notre Dame du Haut [in Ronchamp, France] and was really taken aback. We have all seen it in images for years and studied it, but to see it in person and experience its intuitive nature and honest textures is quite special.

7. What’s an object you wish you had designed?

The wheel.

8. Who is your design icon?

Architect Peter Zumthor [who designed Germany’s Bruder Klaus Field Chapel, left], for his clarity of vision.

CHRIS SHINTANI, SHINTANI PHOTOGRAPHY (PORTRAIT); CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: LATHAM & HOLMES/ALAMY (STOCK PHOTO); ALEXANDER THOMPSON; COURTESY OF BRIAN THOREEN; BILDARCHIV MONHEIM GMBH/ALAMY (STOCK PHOTO); MIRO NOVAK/ALAMY (STOCK PHOTO); LOTHAR M. PETER/ULLSTEIN BILD/GETTY IMAGES; DON MILLER; BRENT HOFACKER/ALAMY (STOCK PHOTO); MICHAEL BURELL/ALAMY (STOCK PHOTO)



IAN STELL

NEW YORK CITY

It's easy to start puzzling over the inventions of Ian Stell, 49, and end up mesmerized. The designer is a combination Rube Goldberg and Jony Ive, building beautiful, wildly complex tables and chairs that call into question even the basic definitions of such furniture. For instance, his Femten seat (U.S. Patent Number 8,197,008), made of plywood and 3-D-printed plastic, can be flipped inside out; his steel and aluminum Diagint staircase, now on view at Spree Studios in Berlin, provides four-way circulation in an elegant X-shape form. The Manhattan-born, Brooklyn-based Stell studied painting and engineering alongside furniture design, and had childhood training in classical choral music. "Designing is very much like composing," he says. "I know the process of building something up from constituent parts." He gestates ideas, often for years, before refining them manually and digitally. "My works can have up to 1,000 pieces," he explains. "I may shape them with drawing, but CAD allows me to move through and around them. I'm not a purist at all." He's putting together work for a show next year at New York's Patrick Parrish gallery, including a piece that takes Mart Stam's 1926 cantilever seating as a point of departure. "It's the quintessential 20th-century chair design," says Stell. "But this will be a new direction." ●

1. What was the first piece you designed?

It was a drafting table that hung from underneath the loft bed my dad built for me. The pitch was adjustable by means of an array of pulleys and rope. I was 9.

2. What's your signature project to date?

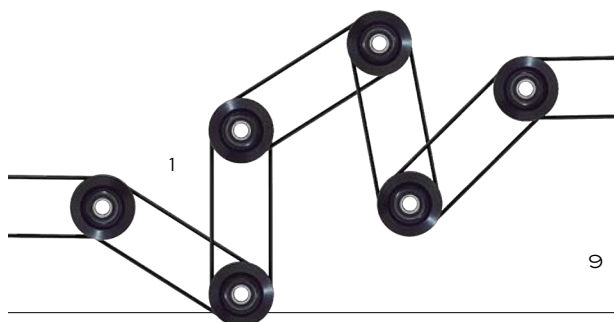
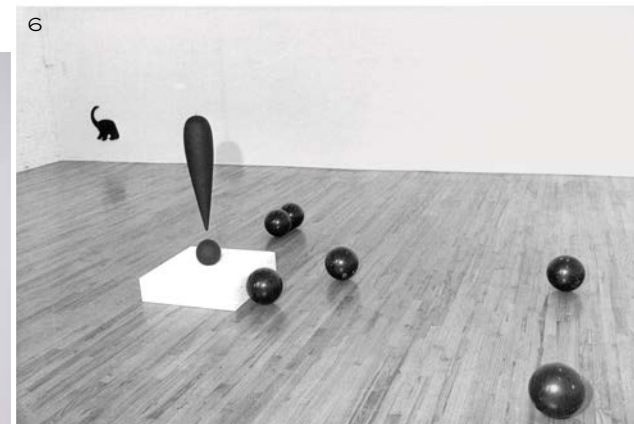
In the U.S. I'm probably best known for the Pantograph series [right], and in Europe the intersecting staircase called Diagint.

3. What's your favorite design store?

Limited Stock in Zurich: a charming curation on a charming street.

4. What item do you find expensive but worth it?

I have a pathological weakness for Common Projects Achilles sneakers.



5. What's something you keep in your studio for inspiration?

A little book called *A Dictionary of Color Combinations*, by Sanzo Wada.

6. Who is your design icon?

Artist Richard Artschwager [who created *Yes/No Ball* (1974) and *Exclamation Point* (1980), below]. The same seemingly mundane cast of characters populated his work for his entire career, yet he managed to get them to speak with such eloquence and precision.

7. What are your favorite cooking ingredients?

Thyme, white raisins, almonds.

8. What project would you characterize as your breakout moment?

A lot of my ideas have been germinating for quite some time—sort of like slow-growing fruitwood. The breakout moment was when I was finally able to fabricate and realize some of these things. I think that the building of the reversible chair, Femten, was the point when I felt up to the task.

9. What bands are you listening to these days?

Roomful of Teeth and Tune-Yards.

ROB HOWARD (PORTRAIT); CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: CLEMENS KOIS; LIMITED STOCK ZURICH; ARTY POMERANTZ/NEW YORK POST ARCHIVES/NYP HOLDINGS INC./GETTY IMAGES; ANTON STARKOV/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO; DM SMITH; ZOONAR GMBH/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO; HERA FOOD/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO; COURTESY OF IAN STELL; COURTESY OF COMMON PROJECTS; COURTESY OF SEIGENSHA ART PUBLISHING