

# beyond BELIEF

Aptly named, Meta ('beyond' in Greek) is an initiative by antiques dealers Mallett to combine traditionally specialised craftsmen and modern design. The results pushed the makers beyond their usual boundaries and exceeded the hopes of their commissioners

The inaugural collection from Meta – a new departure for the eminent antiques dealers Mallett – is a considerable, not to mention inspirational, feat. Pairing cutting-edge designers with the best craftsmen and sometimes centuries-old materials was 'an enormous challenge' according to almost everybody involved. But other comments, such as 'an amazing opportunity' and 'a gift', indicate the exceptional nature of this project. It began three years ago when Mallett's New York president, Henry Neville, and managing director of the London showroom, Giles Hutchinson Smith, decided that a foray into the modern design market should not be limited to producing pieces to fill gaps in their clients' houses, but a venture that should be taken as seriously as the selection of important, provenanced antiques that for years had graced its showroom.

Design 'fixers' Louise-Anne Comeau and Geoffrey Monge, whose recent assignments include Swarovski Crystal Palace and Thomas Heatherwick's Longchamp store, were brought in as creative directors, and it was decided that, against the backdrop of a design world focused on 'form and functionality' and 'production pieces', it was Mallett's almost unparalleled knowledge of eighteenth-century craftsmanship and materials that must be the defining factor of this new venture.

Five designers were chosen – Tord Boontje, Matali Crasset, Asymptote, Barber Osgerby and Wales & Wales – each with their own distinctive style and all well known, but not to the extent that their names would eclipse the pieces themselves. More than a year was spent finding the very best craftsman – 54 ateliers in all were selected from across the globe. Equally meticulous research went into seeking out and fine-tuning the materials; the Tula steel used in a coffee table by Asymptote, for example, was recreated from the analysis of a piece of Imperial Tula steel from 1780.

What results is a triumph of collaboration: the dialogue between cutting-edge designers and artisans skilled in obscure, historic techniques, guided carefully at every stage by Geoffrey and Louise-Anne, and driven by the unswerving passion and focus of Giles and Henry.

'As commissioning agents we worked in minute detail; it was a fascinating path to production,' acknowledges Henry. As Louise-Anne points out, 'the designers did not know the limitations of the materials, and so had no preconceived notions of what was and wasn't possible. The project has brought a new design language to the fore and created an exciting dynamism between the two worlds.'

Likewise, 'the craft ateliers had rarely worked with outside designers, or with such complex designs,' says Henry. 'Virtually all of them had the same initial reaction – one of disbelief,' comments Giles. 'Converting a design into an object requires as much thought as the designing itself. But all of them had one thing in common: whatever happened, they would make the piece, and to the quality we wanted. It was awe-inspiring.'

Here, by talking to four craftspeople and the designers they worked with, we examine the role of craftsmanship in these strikingly modern designs.



## 'CIDADE'

Designer: Barber Osgerby. Silversmith: Steven Ottewill

'As soon as I saw the drawings of this piece, it was obvious it was special,' says Steven Ottewill, one of the UK's finest silversmiths. 'From a craftsman's viewpoint it was technically challenging, and from a design perspective it was wonderful, refreshing – a new dynamic look. You could tell immediately the designer hadn't worked with silver – the manufacturing skills required would push all boundaries. It looks very different from anything a silversmith would design.' Though based on an eighteenth-century *surtout de table*, the look is intentionally industrial.

Every process, some centuries old and rare, involved in making this piece – spinning, rolling, hand-cutting, joining and hand-polishing – was complex, even risky, often involving high temperatures. 'The polisher, using a cotton wheel at 3,000 revolutions a second, put his life in his hands to reach inside the deep, armed crevices of the fins,' Steven remarks.

Jay Osgerby admits that 'limited understanding of a process can be very beneficial – it means you don't

rule things out.' More used to 'tooling moulds' for batch or multiple-production pieces, where every detail is pre-planned, Jay and Edward Barber had little experience of working with artisans. Concerned with 'choreographing the movement of candlelight across the piece', they produced over 200 prototypes in silver card.

Steven congratulates Meta on the 'openness' of the project: 'they were very accurate with what they wanted, which is why it turned out so well. I was just able to add the technical sides to ensure the piece really worked.' He advised on the finish and thicknesses of the material – Britannia silver, the purest form it is possible to work with – 'to ensure every edge was as bright as possible'. He was also able to aid the designers' understanding of silver, by making them aware, for example, 'that it is not just about the objects themselves but how they reflect each other and their environment – the tray, for instance, reflects the pieces so that they look twice as high.'

## 'GLISSADE' DESK

Designer: Wales & Wales

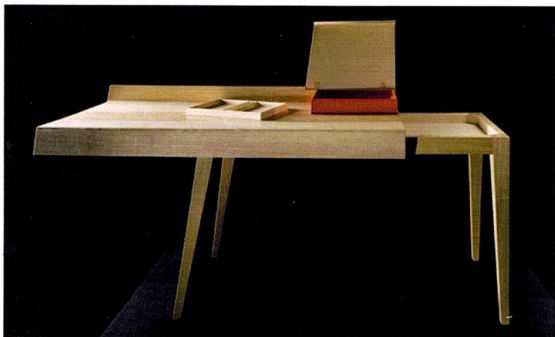
Maker: James Ryan, The Edward Barnsley Workshop

The relationship between the designers and makers of this desk is slightly different from the others in the collection. While Wales & Wales 'emerged from a making background' and still maintain a workshop 'to be in touch with materials', The Edward Barnsley Workshop – which has a tradition stretching back to the height of the Arts and Crafts Movement – had never worked with an outside designer. 'I'd always felt that, if people are paying for it, it should look like a Barnsley piece of furniture,' says James Ryan, who was initially reluctant to take on this project. 'Normally my designs are quite fluid; I work things out as I go along. I was wary because, as this was not my design, I wouldn't know the feeling or spirit in which it was designed and it could make problem-solving more difficult.'

James was won over by the 'whole mission' of the Meta project: 'It is brave and something that should be supported.' The perfectionism demanded was in line with the Barnsley ethic – 'in a single box of hinges we reject over half, and those we do select we

repolish.' Furthermore, he had huge respect for Wales & Wales, as they did for Barnsley: 'They take making to an almost spiritual plane,' acknowledges Rod Wales.

'This desk is a good example of a team coming together; it adds a poetry to the object, a frisson – I think you call it the Liza Minnelli effect,' Rod laughs. He is referring particularly to the secret button that allows the entire desk surface to slide sideways silently on leather-covered boxwood wheels to reveal a butter-leather-lined hiding place. Wales & Wales had been asked by Meta to add a compartment for a laptop, which they felt compromised their design – the sliding mechanism was James's brilliant suggestion. 'I'm not a mechanic in the furniture sense,' explains Rod. 'I'm not interested in the technical details, it is absolutely outside my competence.' Barnsley, on the other hand, prides itself on the subtleties – the tiny catch is made of 3,000-year-old bog oak, venerated with sycamore, hand-carved with the letter 'M' to reveal the oak below. 'It goes over most people's heads, but for us it is vital,' says James.



LEE MANTONLEY

## 'DIAMONDS ARE A GIRL'S BEST FRIEND'

Designer: Matali Crasset

Craftsperson: Matt White, Heritage Metalworks, US

When Matali presented her lantern design, which was intended to 'push the traditional form as far as I could in a modern language', she proposed using a rare metal. Meta suggested something she had never considered: paktong, an alloy with a subtle, silvery-gold finish, so rare that it no longer existed. A sixteenth-century Chinese candlestick had to be sent to Oxford University for scientific analysis and Meta scoured the world to find a foundry that could recreate this complex 'recipe'. 'It was very luxurious,' says Matali, 'to be able to work in this way, have time to research, meet people, discuss quality. I never normally have the opportunity to go this far; it was fascinating.' The huge glass panes were mouth-blown in Germany.

'The creation of the lantern itself involved what Matali describes as 'a ping-pong' of daily e-mails, as she and Heritage Metalworks – whose clients include the likes of the Smithsonian Institute – worked out how to bring her complex design, involving 102 different angles, to fruition. Heritage used 'Rapid Prototyping', a computer program, to sculpt the

lantern in three dimensions. 'It was very interesting to find a craftsman who was willing to work with a computer,' comments Matali. For Heritage, it was an essential means of achieving the precision they needed to align and balance the many angles. 'Some people would have seen this design as impossible,' says Matt White. 'I was intrigued rather than daunted – though I've never worked so hard for anything in my life.'

What results is something 'very close to Matali's original design, perhaps even improved by the details added that weren't considered initially', says Matt. The biggest challenge for him was trying to 'understand' and cast the paktong: 'each of the components has different melting points. It was extremely tricky, even nasty.' Some techniques were used more than 200 years ago, like the 'split-casting' used for the hollow chain that hides the wire – 'I think this is the first time an invisible wire has been done,' says Matt. 'I had no idea how to achieve it until I began to scribble.'

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THIS PAGE A secret button on the 'Glissade' desk (far left) allows the entire surface to slide sideways, revealing a hidden compartment for a laptop. 'Diamonds Are A Girl's Best Friend' (left) is made of paktong, a silvery-gold alloy so rare that it no longer existed, and huge panes of glass mouth-blown in Germany