



Ahmad Habshee, founder of Urban Salvation: "The best part is a sense of pride, to be able to craft something raw into a work of art, a timeless piece that is functional, sustainable and beautiful. It is a humble profession." PHOTOS: URBAN SALVATION

Handcrafted with passion

A group of young woodcrafters are keeping the tradition of handmade furniture alive. BY TAY SUAN CHIANG

NEED a new sofa, dining table or shelving for books and other knickknacks? Your first instinct might be to head down to the furniture stores or even shop online for a fuss-free purchase that will arrive at your home within weeks. In an age where everything is mass produced, a group of local woodcrafters are out to bring back the appeal of handmade furniture. For them, it's a labour of love, as they pour their time, heart and soul into creating pieces that can last for decades.

Initially with no real experience with wood-working, they turned to YouTube videos to pick up the skills, or found craftsmen to learn from.

With a growing number of consumers appreciating artisanal craft, these woodmakers are encouraged by the response they get. "There is a craft resurgence in Singapore, where people pay more attention to acquire skills. This would certainly mean more appreciation to the consumption and process behind the product," says Alvan Koh, founder of Mokko Wood Studio.

the moisture content in the surrounding air," says Mr Koh.

"This constant dance between wood and air causes wood to expand and contract. This poses a challenge to the craftsman. He has to design the piece such that it is able to accommodate this constant change in dimensions. To not acknowledge and not design with this knowledge would be a fatal mistake."

But for his clients who "have a more refined taste which comes from life experience", getting a Mokko piece means they are getting an individually handcrafted piece of furniture that lasts a long time, with designs that are timeless. "Nails and screws are hardly used and furniture is made with traditional wood joints."

Plus, there is also the close attention to detail, which cannot be found in mass produced pieces. "This is what fine furniture is about, attention to the grain of the wood to accentuate the furniture," says Mr Koh.



Alvan Koh, founder of Mokko Wood Studio, started his company in 2018. "It was a hobby gone mad. Besides bespoke pieces, he also offers art panels done in Kumiko style, a delicate woodwork technique where small pieces of wood are intricately assembled together in repeating patterns. BT PHOTO: ASHLEIGH SIM; PHOTO: MOKKO WOOD STUDIO



Ahmad Habshee
Founder, Urban Salvation

AHMAD HABSHEE had a good run working in the entertainment industry as a technical staging crew and also as a front-of-house supervisor at Marina Bay Sands Theatre and at Esplanade - Theatres on the Bay. But he felt there was something missing in his life.

"I wanted to make a change, I wanted to make an impact," says Mr Habshee, 32. He says he found "salvation" in sustainable wood-working, hence the name of his business, Urban Salvation.

"With woodworking, there is the freedom to create as there are no right or wrong answers. You have to constantly be agile with every piece of wood," says Mr Habshee, who works out of a factory in Tampines. "The best part is a sense of pride, to be able to craft something raw into a work of art, a timeless piece that is functional, sustainable and beautiful for those who believe in me. It is a humble profession."

Besides picking up some woodworking skills from school and while working at the Esplanade, Mr Habshee also learnt from master craftsmen in Singapore, Malacca, Bangkok and central Java.

When he started Urban Salvation in 2015, he worked with salvaged pine wood from cargo pallets and excess Burmese teak wood from renovation projects. As the business grew, he saw the need to find better quality materials without compromising on his sustainability angle.

He now uses wood salvaged from local trees which have been felled, as well as reclaimed teak wood from old kampong houses and furniture from Indonesia. Urban Salvation also partners with suppliers that plant new trees for every tree that is felled.

Urban Salvation is known for its vinyl record cabinets, TV consoles and sideboards, which cost from S\$1,500. Depending on the complexity, Mr Habshee can take from four to 12 weeks to make a piece of furniture.

He says that handcrafted furniture, when built right, can last a very long time. "Think about the furniture our grandparents had from back in the day. Many have stood the test of time and are still around," he says.

Another plus of having handcrafted furniture is "the ability to add a bit of your personality into your furniture and your space. So the premium you pay goes into setting your living apart from the many others who fill their space with mass-produced furniture," says Mr Habshee.



Mr Habshee says that when he started, it used to be a lonely path. But over time, many have approached him to ask if they can learn woodworking from him. He trained them for free. "They are now part of my team - strong passionate people with the same ambition to do great work from Singapore all the way to Indonesia," he says.

He is too aware that woodworking or furniture making is a dying trade. "Our skilled labour workforce is small and our future generations prefer and aspire to make digital careers, such as being YouTubers, social media influencers and content creators." He recalls how a young graduate once sought advice from him to make woodworking as a career. "She cried after hearing me share all my struggles to reach my third year," says Mr Habshee.

He has met local veteran craftsmen who have retired, without a younger generation keen to learn the skills from them. He finds it a shame that such skills are becoming rare.

But he hopes to change that, by showcasing his works on social media platforms, where he can get more Singaporeans interested in locally made handcrafted furniture.

Darryl Loh
Founder, The Table Guy

A FEW years ago, while furnishing his new home, Darryl Loh thought it would be a great opportunity to learn a new skill and get some insight into the work of furniture creation. He was in the real estate industry then, purchas-

Alvan Koh
Founder, Mokko Wood Studio

LIKE most people, Alvan Koh turned to YouTube videos when he was picking up a new skill.

He watched woodworking videos because he wanted to make a triangular jewellery box for his wife. He enjoyed it so much that he began watching more YouTube videos, sometimes the same one thrice. "Whatever I watched the night before, I would practise the next day," he says.

He gained a lot of knowledge in his first two years of self-teaching. "But after that, the learning plateaued," he recalls. He began searching for a master who could teach him, particularly in the skill of Japanese woodcrafting.

Mr Koh could not find anyone in Singapore, and finally found an opening at Suikoushya International Craft School in Kyoto, where he spent a month learning from a Japanese carpenter.

Upon his return, he started Mokko Wood Studio in 2018. "It was a hobby gone mad," says Mr Koh, 41, who previously worked in a bank and later as a teacher.

He now produces tables, chairs, cabinets and shelves, using locally sourced wood from fallen trees and also quality imported hardwoods such as walnut and cherry from local timber yards.

"As I work mostly through commissions, no product is ever reproduced. The design process takes up the bulk of time in producing a piece. Each piece also crafted by hand and that means that it cannot be rushed," says Mr Koh. A typical waiting period is about two to three months.

Besides bespoke pieces, Mr Koh also offers art panels done in Kumiko style, a delicate woodwork technique where small pieces of wood are intricately assembled together in repeating patterns. These retail for S\$249.

Mr Koh doesn't shy away from declaring his love for wood. "Living in a city, I think wood presents us with the best feeling of being close to nature." It has its challenges too. "When we work with wood, we must first acknowledge that wood is a living material. Wood breathes and both absorbs and dissipates moisture, even long after it has been made into furniture. The moisture in wood will always head towards an equilibrium with

ing old apartments and renovating them for new tenants.

"During my time in real-estate I became really interested in interior spaces, and how we furnish them is a huge part of that - not just aesthetics but the functionality of daily life," says Mr Loh, 40.

He attended a chair-making course to pick up some rudimentary skills and then continued to develop his knowledge on the job through trial and error working on various pieces, and even blended his own finishing wax.

"A big part of my training comes from the generous advice and guidance I received from seniors in the industry," says Mr Loh, who started his own furniture store, The Table Guy. He says that in Singapore it can be difficult to find mentors and teachers in carpentry, so he considers himself fortunate to have crossed paths with many veteran carpenters.

When The Table Guy started in 2017, it was a one-man show, and Mr Loh focused on simple slab tables, finished to the finest degree. Over time, his clients, mostly couples in their mid to late 20s furnishing their first home, requested more complex types of furniture. So he put together a team of specialists that would allow them to deliver a design-and-build service.

Continued on Page 14