

Timbering up at Liberty's: the fourth floor has turned into the modern British furniture department, a showcase for new work that will change twice a year. CAROLINE CLIFTON-MOGG watches six of the first designers to occupy this space

SPLINTER GROUP

★ PHOTOGRAPH BY GERED MANKOWITZ

Handy & Queen

★ MARCH 1988

LUKE HUGHES
Traditional,
interesting

JOHN COLEMAN
Architecturally
strong

MATTHEW HILTON
Sculptural,
practical

GORDON RUSSELL
Smart, comfortable

NICK ALLEN
Classical
yet modern

PETER MILNE
Dependable,
beautiful

SINCE THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY British furniture makers have been renowned for their work in wood, and even today there is a thriving group of young British furniture designers producing interesting, accessible, and, in many cases, beautifully made wooden furniture. But too often the work of these designers is shown and sold either direct from their workshops – addresses known only to the initiated – or at specialist craft and design shows, which tend to attract the converted. The problem is how to bridge the gap between small manufacturer and large public. In an effort to do just that Liberty's has, for the first time, turned over the whole of the fourth floor furniture department to new British design. We have photographed six of the first group of designers to appear in this new space, each with an example of his work. They are a diverse collection, but they are all united in their desire to make furniture that will find a new and wide audience. Liberty's produced a brief – but one that was by no means limiting: they asked that the designs should be fashionable without being faddy; they should be pieces that could be used as well as admired; they should be well made and they should be able to be produced in small batches.

LUKE HUGHES, who has had his own showroom in Covent Garden now for a couple of years, produces simple furniture with a traditional air – and none the less interesting for that.

JOHN COLEMAN calls himself a sculptor manqué, who turned, with some considerable effect, to the applied arts. His idea is to make pieces that are not only strong in an architectural sense, but are also very useful, and the table here typifies Coleman's designs – simply intended to go beside a sofa or a chair.

GORDON RUSSELL, who comes from Glasgow, is a very stylish designer, whose curved metal and sycamore chair is well proportioned, smart, and even comfortable.

MATTHEW HILTON's designs in metal have been much displayed and admired over the last couple of years, but this furniture is a new departure for him. The antelope table on which he sits has an asymmetrical style and edge that is both sculptural and practical.

NICK ALLEN, with his company Inventive Design, has struck a chord amongst contemporary furniture buyers. His classically designed furniture owes more than a passing nod to the eighteenth century, but the colour and pattern incorporated into his simple pieces are pre-eminently modern.

PETER MILNE's pale-oak furniture is solid, dependable and beautifully made. It is a continuation of the honourable craft furniture tradition in Britain. The different looks of these diverse designers come together well at Liberty's and they share a common wish to take up the new challenges that working with a store represents – mundane problems like costings, deadlines and repeats. There will be a further influx of designers later in the year, and Liberty's seem genuinely determined that the fourth floor will soon be a showcase of all that is good in British furniture design today.