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# superior interiors

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how to spend it special interiors edition

more malleable than its more solid relation. As Richard explains: "In effect it is a whole new material, which we felt was missing its creative potential. We don't see it as metal, but as having some of the properties of metal." But that just scrapes the shiny surface of what liquid metal becomes in the hands of the Abells and their team when they layer it with coloured lacquers and semiprecious resins. For one thing, it is extraordinarily beautiful, as Welch describes: "We can tailor specific alloys to produce all kinds of colours and effects that you could not achieve with solid metal. Our work is all about layers – a series of tones, textures and finishes which break through one to another. We like the way the material acquires a patina, becoming more beautiful as it ages." The creative possibilities quickly captured the attention of designers such as David Collins, who commissioned them to produce wall surfaces and a staircase for Nobu Berkeley St when they launched just three years ago. Other blue-chip clients already include Giorgio Armani, Donna Karan, Fortnum & Mason and Alberto Pinto.

However, the work that is most astonishing is arguably that which they produce for private clients, such as bespoke "legacy" pieces, which might typically take the form of a table or wall panel. These are not so much made for clients as with them, and place as much emphasis on the emotional value of a piece as market value. Take, for example, the two tables they recently finished for two young sisters, which incorporated many mementos of their family history from handprints, souvenirs and letters to photographs, jewellery and even hair. The tables join together to become one, but each will inherit "their" table when the time comes. A whole new twist on the idea of family heirlooms, such one-offs cost typically between £15,000 and £40,000. It is projects like these that give them most personal satisfaction, as Ian explains: "Our



## "Our private clients invest something of themselves in the creative process... they are involved every step of the way."

private clients invest something of themselves in the creative process, because they are involved every step of the way. This isn't about having £1m and buying something that everybody else has to demonstrate you have taste. This is about connecting with a part of yourself which you may have long forgotten." These are not glib words. At the core of Based Upon is Ian's role of philosopher-facilitator. The idea of luxury, for one thing, has come under the scrutiny of both Abells. To Ian it is: "To dance while others are still and to be still while others dance. It is creating your own version, making your own rules." For Richard it is a much overused word, which needs revising: "Luxury is not about a brand association or material exuberance – it is about a connection to something so powerful it cannot be satisfied by material wealth alone".

It is this very personal connection that Helen Amy Murray's work generates in her clients and which makes her so passionate about her bespoke work. To say that

Murray (pictured on opening page) produces upholstery textiles would be like saying that Lalique makes glass or Limoges makes china. Her extraordinary creations are the highlight of 100% Design, the stand to which jaded designers head when they have seen enough of whirlpool baths or limestone floors. For Murray brings chairs alive with her witty and inventive talent for cutting flowers, feathers and fish scales – plus complementing geometrics – from single pieces of suede and leather, which are then stitched as upholstery panels. Not that she directs her talent solely at chairs. She has also been commissioned to make wall coverings, bed heads (notably collaborating with the bespoke furniture maker Alastair Graham) and other pieces of furniture, even cladding a client's desk from top to toe in white leather.

It all began six years ago when she was producing a stand for her degree show at Chelsea College of Art & Design. She had developed her signature cutting method while at Chelsea, producing three

dimensional roses from layers of fluffy wadding. At the time, she had no idea how the technique might be used in practical terms, so displayed them as wall panels. She was then approached by a contract furniture company to cover a chair for its stand at 100% Design: "All I could do at that stage was re-create what I had already done on a chair, so you could not possibly sit on it. I religiously stood by it for the whole of the exhibition, but even though it was not at all practical, the response was incredible. I realised I needed to work with a more durable material, so that is how I came to develop the same technique on suede and leather".

Chairs are her main canvas, so she is constantly on the lookout for interesting shapes – mostly vintage wing or tub. Some clients insist on buying new, although privately she thinks this a waste of money: "They have to be completely reupholstered anyway, so it seems rather unnecessary." The cutting is all done by hand – either by herself or her assistant, Heather – and the dyeing is also carried out either at the Hackney studio or at Murray's home close by. However, when it comes to the upholstery itself, she uses a local specialist who has been working with her since her college show.

When people contact her for commissions, she likes to visit them in their

homes, to get a feeling for the space and their own style: "A chair is not a massive purchase – most of mine cost under £10,000 [commissioned sculpted textiles cost from £2,500 for chairs and £1,600 for headboards or wall panels]. That compares favourably to sculpture or art; my clients know they are buying a piece of couture for their home." Over the past year, Murray's star has ascended still further with invitations to exhibit in Paris and as far afield as Puerto Rico. Eventually, she would love her own gallery space: "I now have the confidence to realise my work is fit for a gallery environment and is valued in the same way as a piece of art. I don't feel precious about my work, but I would love it to be bought and appreciated by collectors."

For Murray and the rest of this elite group of couture designers, it seems likely that many of their wishes will indeed come true. +

### INSIDER KNOWLEDGE

**Based Upon**, 020-8320 2122; [www.basedupon.co.uk](http://www.basedupon.co.uk); **Helen Amy Murray**, 020-8533 0669; [www.helenamymurray.com](http://www.helenamymurray.com); **Rima & McRae**, by appointment, 106 Druid Street, London SE1 (07720-330 829; 07932-761 988); **Spina**, 020-7328 5274; [www.spinadesign.co.uk](http://www.spinadesign.co.uk).

Above, from left: **Based Upon's** "design alchemists" are twin brothers **Richard (left)** and **Ian Abell (right)** with head of design **Alex Welch (foreground)**.