

ASK THE EXPERTS

## STRAW MARQUETRY: CREATIVITY AND CRAFTSMANSHIP



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Luxurious finishes don't come much more alluring than straw marquetry: its raw materials – flattened lengths of straw – may be humble, but with a lot of patience it can be

**DIRECTORY**

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transformed into surfaces that shimmer. Popular in the early 20th century and highly labour-intensive, the technique is being revived in the UK by a few specialist artisans, including **Simon Orrell Designs**, which focuses on designing products in exotic materials such as shagreen, parchment and mother of pearl. Straw marquetry is a fairly new technique in Simon's portfolio – and here he explains how his dazzling objects come about.

## What's the appeal of straw marquetry to you personally?

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It gives an amazing lustre. As it catches the light, it completely changes as you move around it. It moves like nothing else does: it almost dances. And if you have starburst shape, or the movement is going in different directions, then there's much more impact than if all the straw goes in one direction. That's more complex though, and takes a lot longer.



Simon Orrell Designs' Avila cabinet; straw marquetry has a wonderful lustre that makes each piece 'dance' as you move round it

## Why did you decide to introduce it to your portfolio, and where do you learn the technique?

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Our job is to look at what our clients want, and we could see

do SIMON ORRELL DESIGNS

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that they were going to a handful of established companies in France for straw marquetry – so we just thought, we should do it here.

We love working with new materials, and we're known for what we can do with 'difficult' materials such as shagreen, parchment, mica and shellwork. Not many companies are willing to go through the stress and hassle of working out new techniques, but that's what we love most about our work – it's what makes it interesting. So we taught ourselves to do straw marquetry: one of our cabinetmakers said he'd be interested in it, and in the end it took him about a year to perfect it.



The fan motif on this jewellery box recalls the art deco period, when straw marquetry reached its creative peak

## How's it done?

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We buy the straw from France ready dyed, but what we've found is that they'll do a batch and then that colour disappears to be replaced by something different. I think it's because it takes the dye differently depending on what season it came from, how wet it was, or how much sun it got.

For us, the first job is to grade the straw by width and colour; a lot is discoloured and has to be thrown away.



A close look at a sunburst design reveals how precisely each straw needs to be cut and glued into place

The basic tools of the trade are a scalpel, and a lot of patience. You split the straw, then flatten it out with a hammer. The pattern will be pencilled out on the finished board so you then glue the straw down, trim it to fit with the scalpel and then leave it to dry, section by section. It's laborious – even a jewellery box can take a week to ten days, factoring in the drying time. A square foot is about a day's work when you add all the hours together, not including the drying.

If the finished object is going to get some heavy work, like a dining table, we'll finish it with a polyester lacquer, otherwise it'll just get a wax finish.

## **Why do you think straw marquetry is popular again?**

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The traditional sunburst motif taps into the trend for art deco-inspired pieces, but we also like to look at what hasn't been done before, which is why we've introduced more modern designs, and some really bright colours. But we can definitely go further, playing with more patterns, seeing how much more intricate we can go.



The traditional sunburst motif gets a modern look with the addition of a super-bright colour palette on a Simon Orrell Designs lamp base

Its popularity might also have something to do with how hard it is to do. Modern timber marquetry is all laser cut now, but you can't do that with straw: there's a value in something that is truly hand-made.

## What else do you do?

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Interior designers come to us for quite a wide range of materials that not many other people do. We're constantly experimenting. At the moment we're making some drum tables using selenite – wands of crystal made from gypsum – and a new one is playing around with the possibilities of salmon skin. We have a workshop in the Philippines that does

most of our shellwork – cowrie shells, oyster shells, all these bonkers things. All the research is where the fun is.



Two cabinets created by Simon Orrell Designs in black lip shell, used in a scheme by **Studio Indigo** © Andreas von Einsiedel



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