

In Studio

Modern Craftsmen

A carpenter, a bookbinder and a leatherworker on why there's no better time and place to be making things by hand than right now, right here in the city.

BY JOIE GOH PHOTOGRAPHS BY QUANG TUNG PHAM

"I WANTED TO BE A FOOTBALLER when I was a kid," says 36-year-old Greg Swyny, a carpenter and founder of The Woodwork Initiative, a studio specialising in bespoke carpentry. "I hated anything to do with carpentry, and would even skip out of D&T (design and technology) classes at school."

Dressed in jeans and a plaid button-down, his curly hair pulled back into a man-bun, the lanky and bespectacled arts management graduate looks more like a hipster musician than a carpenter, but he had already been working with wood for two decades. The son of a carpenter who mostly did cabinetry and built-in home furniture, Swyny's father would drag the then 16-year-old along on projects to assist him while he was waiting for his O-level results. The work gave him a bit of pocket money and "kept (him) off the streets", but did nothing to increase his love for carpentry.

"At that point, it just wasn't stimulating enough for me," he explains. "The kind of things we were making were very rudimentary and wasn't interesting, and seemed like a lot of effort for not a lot of payoff."

However, a few years later at age 19, woodworking began to grow on Swyny when he figured out that he could create his own designs from scratch, and became more curious about the medium of wood and what he could do with it. "When I had a greater part in the design process, carpentry appealed to me a lot more," he says. "The whole idea that I could just sketch something out on paper and then build it, was very satisfying."

However, it wasn't until his late twenties that Swyny started seriously considering carpentry as a full-time job, because he wasn't sure if being a carpenter was a viable career in Singapore. Twenty years ago, his father had to deal with an oversaturated and very competitive market that hired cheap foreign labour and imported mass produced items at bargain prices. "But I think the atmosphere has changed, since the old guard are retiring or have given up," he says hopefully. "There's a lot more appeal to handmade work, a lot more respect given to it. Plus, the advent of the internet and social media is actually making the industry more survivable."

Swyny gets most of his commissions through word-of-mouth recommendations, which he says is his biggest platform. His projects are diverse, and range from a custom conference table for the Singapore Science Centre that features an in-built terrarium, to smaller artistic pieces like engagement ring boxes, and whiskey trays made from reclaimed vintage oak barrels procured from a distillery in Scotland. He occasionally also accepts batch orders (a



series of menu boards for the Park Hotel, amongst others), although being a one-man show, he has his limits. "I have a few freelance woodworkers I can call on to help for large projects, but most of the time I'll handle it on my own as I have better control over the quality of my own work," he says.

Apart from his bespoke commissions, Swyny also teaches woodworking workshops, where participants can learn how to operate saws, use wood glue and proper nailing techniques to make their own cheese boards and crates. Despite carpentry being considered a fairly masculine craft, he notes that it's mainly women who show up for the courses. "Guys are just less pro-active in looking for these things," he says.

Like Swyny, leather artisan Xie Hui, who founded handcrafted leather goods label Stone for Gold in 2008, finds that the majority of the participants who show up for his leatherworking workshops are women. Indeed, as I joined in a basic course one sunny week-

NAILING IT From hating his father's craft to becoming a full-time carpenter, Greg Swyny grew to appreciate woodworking when he discovered its creative side.

end afternoon in his atelier on the second floor of a Jalan Besar shophouse, I found myself wedged between a pair of chatty Indonesian girlfriends, a serious older lady and a quiet young woman, who, I later learned, is a jewellery designer and aspiring leather-working apprentice.

Reticent and a tad standoffish at first, Xie truly opens up when it comes to talking about and explaining leathers. Pulling out bolts of different exotic animal skins like goatskin and crocodile leather to show off their features, his love for his craft is palpable as he waxes eloquently about the quality and history of leatherworking. Xie started working with leather as a teenager, picking up the skills and techniques through voracious book research and trial-and-error, “way before YouTube tutorials”. A fan of the tribal punk aesthetic, which features intricate and flashy leather carvings with Native American motifs given an edgy twist, he began with making accessories for himself and his friends, working out of his bedroom. Eventually, with all the materials and tools he had amassed over the years, as well as the growing number of local and international orders he had received, necessity dictated a move to his current workspace, and an expansion of his team to include several apprentices and a digital administration officer.

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The lack of learning avenues in the past being one factor, the main reason Xie offers workshops is to bring about a greater awareness of leather crafting and a better understanding of the different types and grades of leather, as well as the processes behind commercial leather goods production and why it’s important to support local artisans. Participants can choose from the basic course, which only requires one to cut basic shapes and punch holes to create a chic trio of cardholder, key fob and luggage tag. The more labour intensive courses include watch strap-making

classes, while the more ambitious can attempt the bucket bag workshop, where one can learn how to make a Mansur Gavriel-esque creation if one has the ability to cut leather with single, flawless strokes (I can’t — I even accidentally stamped my initials upside down and off-kilter).

“Crafters have to always keep up with the trends,” Xie says, referring to the current popularity of minimalist leather designs like simple totes and bucket bags. “The complex, American carving style that I love isn’t very trendy in Singapore any more. Right now, consumers prefer the French style, which focuses a lot more on quality and the finer details like the stitching, and the type of leather used — nowadays, they like the kind of goatskin leather that Hermès uses.”

Keeping up with trends, and evolving to meet current interests, is artisanal bookmaking atelier Bynd Artisan. Founded in 2014 by Winnie Chan, granddaughter of Chan Koon Song, who started a small bindery in 1942 and whose son Percy Chan grew the business into Grandluxe, a book-making factory manufacturing notebooks, planners and diaries, Bynd Artisan offers top-of-the-line handmade leather stationery and handbound books, as well as a customised notebook-making service.

It’s also where I first encounter 74-year-old master craftsman Chong Beng Cheng huddled over a square wooden device, needle and thread in hand, so engrossed in his work that he was oblivious to the world around him. Despite his age, the bookbinder, who goes by the moniker Mr Chong, applies his needle with studied



HANDS ON Clockwise from top: Swyny works out of Home-Fix’s Makers Space, a DIY co-working space for professional and amateur carpenters; the bespoke woodworker’s latest commission is a hay rack for pet rabbits; from locally supplied woods to vintage reclaimed oak and walnut, Swyny works with a variety of materials.





HANDMADE APPEAL Clockwise from top left: Stone for Gold conducts workshops for aspiring leatherworkers; founder Xie Hui launched his label in 2008; one of the most challenging part in leather-crafting is getting the cut right; participants learn how to make a cardholder in the basic course.



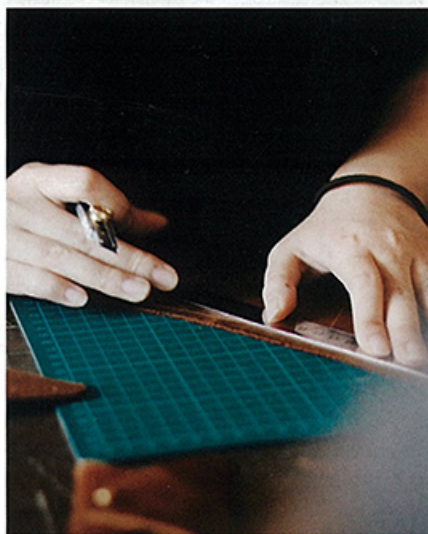
deliberation, slowly, yet with utmost precision. The friendly and soft-spoken former sales and production manager is happy to share his craft — a long-forgotten practice that he learned entirely on the job upon his employment at Grandluxe back in the 1970s.

“I was born in Malaysia, and back then, higher levels of employment were reserved for Singaporeans,” Mr Chong recalls. “So when I got the opportunity to work here as a manager, I took it, even though I knew nothing about bookmaking and binding. I had to learn everything, figure out the machinery all on my own, as the seniors were unwilling to teach.”

Today, Mr Chong is an educator at Bynd Artisan. The self-taught bookbinder now teaches workshops on how to bind notebooks by hand, and one of his most popular courses is the medieval bookbinding workshop.

“A Dutch man came in to learn medieval bookbinding from me, but he gave up after two hours because he said it was too long, and that he’ll come back to finish it,” Mr Chong says with a barely audible sigh. He points out the messy stitching and mistakes, which he had been trying to undo and rectify. “That was a month ago.”

At almost six hours long and costing \$200 for a session, the medieval bookbinding is Bynd Artisan’s most challenging workshop, which Chan says is “not something you can come for fun and take some [pictures for] Instagram”. Each page, made of pure cotton,



needs to be carefully torn by hand to give its edges an authentic, raw effect. Folded in half, they will then have to be painstakingly punched along the folds so they can be stitched together — again, page by page, hole by hole, with needle, thread and a lot of concentration.

Medieval bookbinding, Mr Chong explains, differs from regular binding “through the stitching”.

He pulls out two leather-bound samples and runs his finger down the spine of the first. “See, it’s smooth and flat,” he proclaims “The pages are stitched together with a chain stitch.”

Picking up the second, he turns it on its side to display its peculiar ridged spine. The ridges, he explains, are due to the cords that form the binding structure of the book, as each page is stitched onto the supporting cords that lie horizontally across the spine.

“The cord can be any material you can find,” he says. “If the book is very big and thick, you can use copper wire or even copperplate as the cord to form the spine. In the sixteenth century,



TURNING THE PAGE Clockwise from left: Master craftsman Mr Chong went from being in charge of automated machines to championing handmade craft; the spine of a medieval-bound book is raised and ridge due to the cords that form the structure; after assembling a book, participants can personalise their work with foil-stamped names or initials.

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that’s how bibles and books were bound.”

The entire stitching process is arduous, but made easier by the wooden loom-like device that Mr Chong designed and built by hand to simplify the process. It does not have a fancy name — the septuagenarian simply calls it a “bookbinding structure” — but it was adapted from medieval bookbinding frames and does double duty as a stitching guide and book clamp for gluing and binding.

Once the pages have been stitched together, special glue sourced from Italy is applied on the spine and left to set, while the leather cover is assembled. Bynd Artisan offers a selection of colours and leathers, so each participant can customise their own combination, as well as foil-stamp their names or initials in gold or silver for a truly personalised product, which they can then take home.

Participants for the bookbinding workshops come from all walks of life, from retired housewives to pre-teen schoolchildren, says James Quan, Bynd Artisan’s co-founder and husband to Chan. “There was a dad who told me that after his daughter made a notebook for herself, whenever she had to write anything in that particular book, her handwriting is especially neat and she really put all her best stuff in there,” he recalls. “Because she had put together the notebook herself, she had become more mindful when it came to using it.”

Potential competitors also occasionally attend the courses, like the aforementioned Dutch visitor. “He told me he came to learn because he wanted to set up a business restoring old books,” Mr Chong says. “But he’ll have to come back and finish the course though.”

Despite the competition from cheap, mass produced goods, Chan and Quan are optimistic about the local crafting scene. “We hope that in time, we can rival Japan’s craft industry, not just in quality but in terms of support. The Japanese are very nationalistic

— they’ll say their paper is the best, their craftsmen are the best,” says Quan. “Hopefully one day, we’ll say the same thing about locally made, locally designed products.”

“We can already see it now with all the new local brands coming up,” adds Chan. “Five years ago, the idea to

support local is so much weaker. It may take 20 years, or even one generation from now, but we have to start somewhere. We have to start to think about our own identity, which is so much more than just food.”

However, the craftsmen view the learning of their art in a more philosophical manner. “We’ve become a society that calls on others to do things for us,” says Swyny. “A lot of the younger generation now are realising that they can do things on their own and are more interested to learn a bit more about it.”

“The most important thing you learn from (crafting) is patience,” Mr Chong proclaims sagely. “Just to be able to sit in one place for hours and work through each step all the way till the end. That’s the most practical thing about being a craftsman in this modern world.” ■

