

The stone RANGER

Stephen Parker's business, After the Antique, creates immaculate replicas of western-classical fireplaces, fountains and garden statuary – often using skilled stone and marble masons in China

With some quarters of the luxury industry currently scratching their heads over China – either in terms of how to access this golden market or, having accessed it, how to keep their presence alive – imagine how useful it would have been to have started your business in China and built backwards.

On the face of it, Stephen Parker had a terribly British idea. Based in the Norfolk countryside, where he had previously worked in his family's food business, Parker had a passion for classical antique stonework and sculpture: garden fountains, urns and pedestals that properly belong in Greek temples; marble sculpture that looks as though it has been plucked from Pompeii pre-Vesuvius; intricately carved fireplaces that one could imagine in the salons of renaissance European palaces. The business he set up, *After the Antique* (meaning: 'in the manner of the antique'), designs and handcrafts these pieces, bespoke, for the ornamentation of high-end homes, gardens and private parklands.

So far so conventional; but Parker's way of going about this was not with a workshop of artisans in a Norfolk barn. Instead he set up a joint venture with a likeminded partner who happened to be Chinese.

He takes up the story: "We sold our family agri-food business in 1996 and I was looking for something else to get involved with. I went travelling, and in Asia came across some very fine carving works, and thought: wouldn't it be nice if we could take classical western design and have it made here? China has a long history of making beautiful pieces, and you don't have to go back more than a couple of centuries to find that Chinese wallpaper and furniture were the height of fashion.

"I've had a righthand man in China from the start, so we built workshops there in 1999 – right at the beginning of the whole movement towards China. The first one was seven hours south-west of Beijing – the last four hours were down bone-breaking dirt tracks. Now we are based about two-and-a-half hours south-west of Beijing, in a place which used to be countryside; now it's part of a large industrial complex within 300 metres of a motorway. It's quite incredible, the change that has happened in 12 years."

From the start, they carried out the drawing work and the bespoke designs in the UK – fireplaces, fire surrounds, garden statuary – and had them made in China. This too has



evolved, and the business now has small workshops in the south of France, as well as in the UK. "So now we can make pieces in warm Burgundian limestone, sandstone, granite or Italian marble in different locations, depending on what is required and what material."

One of the key issues in the early days was controlling the Chinese penchant for freestyle adaptation. European designs are regimentally strict, with detail extremely important, so teaching the Chinese the importance of adhering to what was in front of them was a challenge. It took two or three years, but they mastered it. Twelve years ago, it was not an expensive proposition sending blocks of stone to China to be carved and sent back; nor was 'made in China' a deterrent to persuading European and American customers of the high quality of the Chinese craftsmanship.

The balance has gradually shifted, driven by sizeable salary increases given to the Chinese workforce, rising costs of transportation and a European conscience that sometimes prefers these sculptural pieces to travel in a shorter line from quarry to workshop to final destination. Equally, the Chinese themselves have become enthusiastic collectors of western designed pieces. "The Chinese market has taken off enormously in

the last seven years," says Parker. If we go back to the beginning of our experience, 90% of our business was exported out of China. Now 70% of the business is staying in China – and these are pieces designed to look neo-classical European, not Chinese. They're looking to have the classical European look, and you hear stories of how they are completely reproducing Chateau Lafitte or Versailles there."

Parker himself is the interface with most clients, meeting them in person to ensure the brief is fully understood and overseeing the process from design to delivery. "Our customers are either interior designers, landscape designers or private individuals. About 70% of business comes through the trade, and 30% from individuals direct. They find us on the internet, through small ads in the back of *House & Garden* and *World of Interiors*, and at exhibitions like *Decorex* or the *Chelsea Flower Show*, where we first exhibited in 2005 with a 12-metre long stone temple we built for the *Savills* show garden."

Post-recession, the US business has picked up; in the Middle East antique-looking fireplaces are, paradoxically, in demand for very contemporary, air-conditioned rooms; then there are customers all over Europe, and even Africa. "They like us because we are small and very personal. We sit down with them and draw exactly what they are looking for, sometimes in watercolour so you can get a very good visual of what a finished article will look like. In Norfolk, we have a lot of examples permanently on display in different materials, and if you see something you like, we can adapt it."

(Engagingly, he also owns a nearby gastro-pub, the *Bedingfield Arms*, where clients can be accommodated and see examples of the company's work in real-life situations.)

What's more, repeat business is very likely. A Greek urn, or a neo-classical fireplace or a full replica of Canova's *Three Graces* need not be a one-off purchase, it transpires. One client has fountains and urns at both his north London mansion and his Majorcan villa. Interior designers put a solid marble sink in a superyacht, and follow that with a commission for the yacht-owner's house. The full-size replica of Canova's *Three Graces* sits artistically in the garden of an English client's house in the south of France.

The cost of a bespoke piece depends on the materials and time used – it's not necessarily more expensive just because it is bespoke. A piece of garden statuary starts around £1,000; the Canova replica was around £10,000. But the joy of bespoke is that high end customers can achieve the holy grail of having something no one else has – personalised, if they wish. "We find," says Parker, "that a lot of our Russian clients like to get involved in the design process in a much more detailed way than we had experienced before – as with the wonderful 'medieval' walk-in fireplace for one Russian's London home. When they end up with a big smile on their faces, we know we've got it right."

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