



TAKE A SEAT

Words Francka Sullivan

WATCH A SIMPLE PIECE OF FURNITURE ORIGINATING FROM ANCIENT JAPAN BECOME A WORK OF ART, A BUSINESS OR A MEANS OF RAISING FUNDS FOR CHARITY – BRINGING TOGETHER CREATIVE COMMUNITIES ALL OVER THE WORLD



The roots of Zaishu begin in ancient Japan. The name is derived from the Japanese word 'zaisu', which refers to a seat without legs used in traditional homes. The design is inspired by the simple wooden beams found in Buddhist temples.

The Zaishu, the seat and the project, was launched by Australian designers Matthew Butler and Helen Punton in Melbourne in 2004, based on the principles of sustainability, creativity and community. The unique design concept was purely incidental: it was at an installation at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art that a flat-packed pine box was boldly transformed into an individually painted, slot-together seat by a group of local artists.

Zaishu is a funky combination of substance and style. It uses internationally certified sustainable Australian-plantation Hoop pine, innovative ideas and a collaborative design approach. The Zaishu is an extremely versatile table or seat where form and function mesh beautifully. The hand-printed artwork on each panel is produced by diverse artists and expresses a powerful sense of aesthetic while embodying conceptual artistry at its finest.

Given all the hullabaloo surrounding the marketing of sustainable products, Butler was ahead of the game long before it was fashionable. Although, as he describes: 'In the early days it was simply about being responsible and using plain common sense. We now feature the "eco" credentials because climate change has thankfully

become a bigger topic.' The pine plantations are run by Forestry Plantations Queensland on both government and private land. They have Australia Forestry Standard Certification to the international sustainable-forest management standard as recognised by GECA (Good Environmental Choice Australia), and Zaishu has a GECA eco-certificate. The chair has minimal factory involvement and there is just one production process: the laser-cutting. Each Zaishu is hand-painted or printed using water-based inks and varnish, and can be assembled without glue or nails.

An important aspect of Zaishu is the Zaishu Project, an international initiative based on a number of interactive projects with artists and communities in India and Europe. The project's global scope has been elucidated by Butler as 'an international collaborative event, recording patterns, designs and cultural texture from around the world on sheets of plantation-grown veneer'.

The founders are true believers in promoting consciousness-raising ideas and social and environmental responsibility. Some projects are non-profit, while others are commercial ventures. They have worked with Warli tribal artists in India whose traditional art was being lost due to modernisation and digitalisation techniques. A new project will be launched in Argentina in spring 2009 to create artwork for a new screen-printed Zaishu, with proceeds from sales going to support a children's organisation.

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Global Zaishu projects have carved out their own identity. Organised in different locations around the globe, these art initiatives are acclaimed by galleries, design magazines, schools and art lovers. The painting and assembly take place at interactive community gatherings instead of in factories, and there is a serendipitous element of chance to the whole idea. The Zaishu project themes reflect a multitude of designs ranging from cross-stitch to Utopia, and each project is open to emotional interpretation. Jennette Snape, a former student of Butler's, decided to order some Zaishu panels online and is involved with the very first Zaishu art project in the Netherlands, *Is this seat taken?* Every project is approached differently, thus subscribing to the philosophy of Zaishu as a catalyst for social interaction.

Snape stresses how important it is for projects to be organic and unexpected. She is working closely with a progressive crew of international artists in Amsterdam. In late autumn 2008, the artists gathered in a huge warehouse space to express their individualism designing and painting the panels. Most of the artists came by bicycle, and materials were transported on two wheels. The creative atmosphere was celebratory, with loud techno music and even a barbecue. Painting, stencils, collage, tattoo designs, burning, silkscreen and tyre prints are a just few of the techniques that were used. She is working alongside Jacob Plooi, Jaap Simonis, Hollywood Mark, Laser 3.14, Weasel, Geert van Kerckhove, Christopher Costuna, Esther Mosselman, Naad and Thomas Reineke to mention a few. The group range from conceptual artists to urban graffiti freaks. You can visit the blog they have set up at zaishuwordpress.com to see how the panels were interconnected with other artists' panels, resulting in twenty new limited-edition Zaishu chairs.

Snape's enthusiasm is contagious, and she likens the current project to an adventure: 'It is a very physical journey – the chairs being sent from Australia to Europe, and then a kind of emotional journey for the collective of artists as they set off into the imaginative realm, and finally ends when a seat or table personalises someone's home.' ■

zaishu.com

THE PROJECT'S GLOBAL SCOPE HAS BEEN ELUCIDATED AS 'AN INTERNATIONAL COLLABORATIVE EVENT, RECORDING PATTERNS, DESIGNS AND CULTURAL TEXTURE FROM AROUND THE WORLD ON SHEETS OF PLANTATION-GROWN VENEER'



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