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Issue 03
Display until 09/30/15

\$15.00 USA
\$18.00 Canada



ISSUE **03**



Fire / Wood

Nicolas Meyer's approach to design and craftsmanship is firmly anchored in his traditional Swiss training as a furniture maker and balanced with his Bauhaus-influenced intellect.

WORDS Sandra Henderson

Nicolas Meyer is not one thing, not from one place. Born in Germany and raised in Switzerland, the multifaceted founder of Nico Spacecraft has put down roots as an artist, designer, woodworker, and furniture maker in British Columbia, Canada.

A sincere dialogue about design and wood quickly reveals the man is at once both an intellectual and a craftsman. No surprise, he seeks balance in everything he does.

Meyer grew up in Hamburg, Northern Germany. With a real estate-developer father and an antique-collector mother, the boy was exposed to architecture, construction, and fine furniture throughout his childhood. The parents separated when he was ten, and he moved to Switzerland with his mother.

In 1991, Meyer lived in Vancouver for half a year to improve his English. He returned to Switzerland to complete a traditional four-year apprenticeship in furniture making, which he finished a year early by virtue of prior education, excellent marks, and extraordinary talent. All this time, British Columbia remained on his mind.

The decision to return four years later to settle in Canada was spiritual as much as rational. “Things just feel right, and you find your place where you want to build your life,” Meyer reflects. Having spent the first ten years of his life in Hamburg, he was influenced by the ocean, water sports, the city’s harbor as “gate to the world,” the metropolitan lifestyle. In Switzerland, where he lived until age twenty-five, he later fell in love with the mountains and skiing. “Vancouver combines all of that. This is one of the few places where you can probably ski and kayak on the same day,” says the expat. “On top of that, this was my place. I grew up in this tension between Hamburg and Switzerland. As a kid who is constantly in between these two places, you wonder, what is your home.”


Today, Meyer is a designer, a woodworker, an artist — his creative drive the common thread. As child, he wanted to become an inventor, broke a lot of things, took them apart to understand them. In his later teens, he eventually began fixing things. “I also read a lot. I came to design and wanted to study architecture,” he says. He originally planned to study interior architecture in London after his apprenticeship in Switzerland. By that time, however, he’d already lost his heart to Vancouver. “I was too impatient and thought, I’ll go to Canada and find my way to design with what I have.”

His apprenticeship as well as the subsequent decision to practice, not study, were driven by his readings: the Bauhaus philosophy in particular — “Most of all, Walter Gropius and his manifesto, which expresses how the core of creativity can only come out of understanding a craft,” says Meyer.

The Bauhaus Manifesto guides Meyer to this day, everyday. Together with his wife, Jess Meyer, he runs Nico Spacecraft, a small design studio with integrated wood workshop that produces kitchens and baths, furniture, custom spaces, and architectural elements. The company’s full-service design division has its own name: Baumhaus Atelier — presumably a nod both to Meyer’s enthusiasm for all things Bauhaus as well as to his passion for trees (*Baumhaus* is German for treehouse). “It’s about striking the balance between being in front of the computer screen or a sketchbook and actually being in the shop and working with materials,” he says. “When I spend too much time in the shop, building all the time, I itch to sit down and sketch out ideas, whereas when I’m in the office too much, I lose touch with the reality of structure, weight, and smell, and how things actually connect.” The creator admits he usually knows he has overextended himself at the drawing board when he starts designing things that don’t work in the real world.

When the designer completely loses himself in the details — or, as he calls this foible, “taking the typical German-Swiss approach” — then his wife, who studied fashion design and now handles the company’s business side, provides the balance, telling him to take a step back. “When I get stuck, Jess looks at the entirety of the design perimeters and pulls my head out of my behind. We complete each other not just as life partners but also in our work.” Like her husband, Jess Meyer has called multiple places home before settling in Roberts Creek. She was born in Taiwan and brought up in Singapore and later in Tehran, Iran. The couple is raising their two children in the small beach town with





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— Nicolas Meyer



Nicolas and Jess Meyer working on the Black Tusk console.

a vibrant arts community on British Columbia's Sunshine Coast. Before, living in Vancouver had meant the parents missed out on all the babies' firsts, which at the time the nanny got to experience in their place. Something needed to change. And after a one-year journey of searching for the right property, the Meyers found their home with five acres of land on which to build the shop and a garage they converted into the design studio. "Now we eat every meal together, and the kids come running to show their faces in the shop or in the office after school," the father says.

The family also loves to travel together, often to Mexico or back to Europe. "I miss the mountains of Switzerland," Meyer tells. "Aside from the skiing and the snow, the mountains provide me with tranquility. Sometimes, it helps to reconnect to your roots and the way you were raised."

Wood Stock

"Look around, and it's obvious — I love wood," Meyer laughs. "Because you never really stop learning about it. Technically, when you cut down a tree, it's dead. But wood itself continues living; it moves, it changes, it breathes, and you cannot apply any rigid rules, because no tree is like the other, and everything, everything influences its properties — where the tree grew, the minerals it fed into its system, the wind . . . If a tree sits in a wind corridor, it develops tensions on one side, and it can counterbalance these forces to find its equilibrium with the environment. All this is imprinted in the wood. Each piece you work with will react slightly differently. That teaches me humility."

For all that, a wood whisperer he is not. Fellow woodworkers may profess driftwood, even a tree stump, speaks to them, revealing what it wants to become. The craftsmen are merely the tool. "I can respect that, but I am more intrigued by structure, structural integrity, and physics," says Meyer. "Even a tree trunk never really inspires me to do anything. What I do want to do is cut this apart and reassemble it."

Meyer's view of today's common practice of kiln-drying wood is ambivalent. He understands the necessity of expediting the process and killing the creatures living inside the wood. In Switzerland, where he learned the craft, most wood is still naturally air-dried for many years, allowing the material to maintain its structural property. Meyer explains that "cooking" the wood extracts moisture at a speed that destroys the integral structure of the wood fibers, the cells collapse, and the wood becomes brittle. "I see these drawbacks when humans don't work with the wood but force their will onto it because they have a schedule to keep, and they are pushing for high turnover, needing the cash flow."

The advocate for responsible woodworking practices himself would prefer to exclusively use air-dried wood. "But it's not feasible. It's an ideology, and whenever I can, I do." He also works with salvaged materials and appreciates a good story behind the wood — and so do his clients. For instance, "White oak is rare here on the West Coast," Meyer begins a tale. "Ninety-some years ago, one of the first skip-pers planted this white oak tree here . . ." Meanwhile, after splitting, the tree was deemed unsafe and destined for firewood. The community was in uproar about cutting down their heritage oak. Meyer and a miller friend arranged a crane, milled the wood, and air-dried it over the years, until a client emerged from Vancouver who appreciated the story and the historic value the tree represented.

Nordic-Swiss Authenticity

His Hanseatic birthplace and Swiss training shaped not only Meyer's design sensibility but also his work ethos, for better or worse. "When I first came to Canada, I was extremely rigid," he reflects. His first gig was renovating a house — working out of a garage, with limited resources and tools. "In Switzerland, there is a machine for everything, and there is a way of doing everything. That's how I was trained. But this rigidity of 'This is how you do things, and there is no other way' was initially hard for me to overcome." In hindsight, that first Vancouver project taught him that there are many dif-

ferent practices. “That was a very valuable lesson I apply to this day and that has become an integral part of my approach. Once again, there is a fusion, a balance between the static world, the reality, and how you get to understand it. Only if I understand, I am suddenly able to discover all the different options of what this will allow me to do, and that’s where my creativity kicks in.”

The designs of Nico Spacecraft are exquisitely modern. Sustainability is essential in everything the family-run company does, even their two-story workshop received a Green Design Award from the Canadian Wood Council in 2010. But what Meyer keeps touching upon in discussing his work is authenticity, his clients’ shared yearning to connect with what is real. “People are going back to the craftsmen, back to working with the designer, and being involved and understanding the story.”

Storied Pieces

Indeed, there is a story behind all of Meyer’s works and usually to the wood he’s using, too. Take the CurveChair, a piece of sculptural furniture — as well as a piece of art. For endless hours, Meyer carved the sensuous lounge by hand after a clay model he made. “That chair, in many ways, represents everything I am doing,” he says. “There is an organic process involved, there is a structural process involved, and we know where the wood came from, there is a story.” The wood came from a development site at Simon Fraser University and was made available to woodworkers of British Columbia to provide a design for an exhibition. “It was a marketing thing for them, because they had to take down quite a few trees at that site,” Meyer remarks. “One of them was this huge maple, so we got the maple wood and submitted this chair. It was on display at the Pendulum Gallery in downtown Vancouver for three months.”

Meyer’s latest series — its cynosure a console table — is inspired by The Black Tusk, a stratovolcano and a pinnacle of rock at 2,319 meters (7,608 feet) above sea level near Whistler, British Columbia. “After a month of dynamics between Jess and me, we ended up with the Black Tusk console,” Meyer says. Individual solid sticks of oak wood were laminated to create different shapes, giving each a sculptural character. The assembled piece was then charred by flames, wire brushed, and coated with oil. “It struck a nerve with people — and with me, because, again, there are the two elements I enjoy, a balance between art and then the design and craft.”

“For art is not a profession. There is no essential difference between the artist and the craftsman. The artist is an exalted craftsman.”

— Walter Gropius, Bauhaus Manifesto, 1919

The Black Tusk console in turn inspired a collaboration with local graphic designer and artist Lee Roberts, who, after he saw the sculptural table at a photo shoot, sent Meyer a sketch of a raven, made from wooden sticks like the Black Tusk series. “I was inspired and challenged to take this technique I’ve applied to the Tusk and take that to another level to make this raven,” Meyer says. The resulting bird sculpture is titled “Sense of Silence.” ▲

