The otherworldly shapes strike you first as sculptures, then as furniture. However, for **Morten Stenbæk,** a self-taught designer and furniture maker, it is all about finding the ideal balance between form and function, elegance and ergonomics. The expressive furniture takes form inside the former blues musician's intricate mind. His ideas materialise in hand sketches and gain substance in his small workshop, a place where everything boils down to his exquisite sense of materials' inherent potential and his excellent eye for measurement and proportion. The many hours of craftmanship result in furniture brimming with attitude and panache, pieces that find their way to discerning private customers, architects working on bespoke projects and galleries in New York.

THE SCULPTURAL FURNITURE slowly evolves from the raw wood into coarsely shaped figures and ultimately a refined form whose prominent wood grain adds an extra dimension and depth to the furniture. **HIS BIGGEST COMMISSION TO DATE** is a dining room for ten, for which he has sublimely utilised the creative opportunities offered by the free-form lamination technique. The inspiration for the sculptural base of the table comes from the growth of coarse grasses.

FURNITURE WITH PANACHE

By **SUSANNE HOLTE**

The smell of wood hits your nostrils the moment you step inside the relatively modest workshop, which is the setting of Morten Stenbæk's daily work. The walls are covered with tools and templates. The shelves display miniatures of some of the furniture now residing in faraway places like New York and Tokyo. Piles of wood, clamps, trestles, saws and filing tools indicate that a furniture maker works here, but any preconceived notions end there, because this self-taught designer and furniture maker has a truly unique approach. There is not a computer or smart CAD tool anywhere to be found here. Everything is hand drawn, and almost every creative process takes place inside the mind of Morten Stenbæk, who describes his method as eye-to-hand. He works intuitively with a strong sense of both the minute details and the final silhouette of the furniture. The process is at once highly controlled and improvisational, involving a faith in his own abilities so profound that he boldly sets them free – a method Morten Stenbæk knows from his many years as a blues musician, a past he carries with him on his upper arm, where 'Blues is King' is tattooed in blue ink.

The new king in Morten Stenbæk's creative universe is wood, both laminated and solid. The former offers almost infinite possibilities for bending and slitting, thus allowing him to create the otherworldly shapes. He manages to give the organic material a new plasticity and constantly refines and challenges the design, though never at the expense of comfort and functional value.

– There is no contradiction between high sculptural value and function, claims Morten Stenbæk, who has shelved the music to concentrate on furniture making. He made his first chair in 2010. It was an armchair with a moulded back and flagline with a distinctive Scandinavian look. The chair sold well, and he spent the profit on his workshop, better machinery and tools.

– In many ways, 2014 became a turning point, both in terms of style and ambitions. Browsing the internet, I stumbled across American furniture maker Sam Maloof (1916-2009), who became world-renowned for his organically shaped furniture, especially his rockers. Maloof's rockers have inspired many, including American Hal Taylor, who has produced his own interpretations of the famous Maloof Rocker. He does workshops and books about his method. Maloof has also written a book about the rocker, and a whole culture has arisen around the production of this special chair – a culture that I'm now also part of, albeit not as much now as I used to be, explains Morten Stenbæk, who made his own version of the rocker after having bought Hal Tyler's book – naturally with Hal's blessing. Hal Taylor was impressed by Morten Stenbæk's new details, and their dialogue has since blossomed into a friendship.

– It led me towards a new expression, something that might not have a Scandinavian narrative, but which in some areas corresponds with the idiom of Finn Juhl. My version of the Maloof Rocker and a number of related designs became the springboard that has let me make a living from my passion since 2016. A substantial commission for my dining chair Flamingo Beak initially allowed me to take leave from my day job, says Morten Stenbæk, who promptly severed that last lifeline to a steady income but has since had a full order book and a work week topping 100 hours.

The dining chair is still part of his collection, and he continues to get orders for his softly shaped solid ash or walnut chair. At the same time, Morten Stenbæk is working on his visual identity, gladly acknowledging his inspiration from figures such as American furniture artist Wendell Castle, who has taken furniture art to new heights. Iranian architect and designer Zaha Hadid's fluid shapes are another source of inspiration.

– We work within the same organic universe where sculptural shapes reign supreme, and just as I let myself be inspired by others, I now also find colleagues crediting me on Instagram. Ultimately, it is about taking the opportunities offered by these highly specialised techniques, says Morten Stenbæk.

– I happily take inspiration from new techniques and designs, but I constantly strive to create my own idiom, one focused on an organic and sculptural design with elegant lines. To me, it's about soft transitions and a continuous flow, but I am also inspired by nature's forms: leaves, stems, branches, grasses, water, waves and animals. Not one-to-one, but rather as a design principle that I unconsciously apply. I always strive for beauty, and there are shapes that please the eye, that have an inherent harmony, explains Morten Stenbæk. He emphasises that most of his inspiration comes from the material itself and springs from the technique. Morten Stenbæk is currently focusing on free-form lamination, a difficult technique to master, in simple terms involving moulding into a 3D rather than the usual 2D shape. During the process, his ideas often come while he is experimenting with various bends and twists.

– Over the years, I've received commissions from a variety of places, from the single teacher who has saved up for something unique to the exclusive galleries and interior architects of New York, which is where most commissions come from today, explains Morten Stenbæk, whose designs are represented at Studio Tashtego. The Danish furniture designer has also delivered three one-of-a-kind tables for the Louis Vuitton flagship store in the Ginza district of Tokyo. That came about via American interior designers Peter Marion Architect, who like many others spotted Morten Stenbæk on Instagram, where he posts his creations.

Here, you can see various types of furniture and lamps. However, the chair is closest to his heart.

– The chair is my favourite piece of furniture. It allows me to work creatively, and there's something fascinating about its being furniture in such close contact with the body. An expressive chair is also easy to integrate in a home, whereas a sculptural table is a really bold choice, says Morten Stenbæk, who gladly goes that extra mile to convince his customers to exercise that boldness. ■

DELICIACURV LOUNGE is the first chair for which Morten Stenbæk has used free-form lamination. The idea was to create a spacious chair with a light and organic idiom. The chair basically functions as a one-person sofa whose large, arched top rail allows many different seating positions. Elastic webbing has been placed under the streamlined upholstery, so the seating is soft despite the low upholstery profile.
THE CONCEPT behind the Columnea series is a classic column with sculptural carvings. The complexity of the carvings varies from table to table. On Columnea No.8, which is made of walnut and partially stained in black, Morten Stenbæk has focused on four distinct lines to underpin the twisting spiral shape.
THE FLUCTUS TABLE (fluctus means wave in Latin) has the wavy shape Morten Stenbæk has used for one-of-a-kind tables for Louis Vuitton in Ginza, Tokyo, for example. The table here, Fluctus 1, is made of white oiled ash. **FLAMINGO BEAK** was the first chair that Morten Stenbæk designed after fully committing to the organic idiom. The idea was to create a chair with excellent comfort and the option to sit in various positions. Many hours of work have gone into making the beautiful top rail, which, like the rest of his furniture, is cut using different hand-held tools. Uniform repetition is the key concept of this chair.