

*lifestyle*  
**LEARNING  
CURVES**

In his County Cork studio, JOSEPH WALSH bends nature to his will, crafting majestic pieces that have turned his family farm into a hub of innovation for makers all over the world

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In the former hay store on his family's farm, Joseph displays two of his works: *Lilium II* (left) and *Lilium III* (right). Both were made using layers of wood veneer to create sinuous curved forms





THIS PAGE ANTICLOCKWISE FROM TOP *Fartha Wood Mural* painted by Ed Miliano is a striking backdrop for Richard Ginori porcelain and a 1906 gramophone in the parlour of the farmhouse. In the attic, a wood-panelled bedroom features a portrait of the craftsman Masaki Kondo by Raoul de Gendre. The 18th-century house and farm buildings are arranged around a courtyard. OPPOSITE Joseph on the original red-painted wooden settle in the kitchen, with the Detroit-based artist Chris Schanck

Joseph Walsh's family has inhabited the same fertile slice of land in Fartha, County Cork, since the early 18th century. They were tenant farmers, later awarded the freehold to what has, over the years, grown to 150 acres. He says, however, that his ancestors first came to this part of the world long before that. Records show that a number of Walshes (literally, 'Welshmen') crossed the Irish Sea in the 13th century to help build a Cistercian abbey in nearby Tracton.

More than 800 years later, the designer would make his own significant contribution to one of the local churches that eventually replaced the abbey centuries after it was destroyed. At the age of 21, just two years after setting up his own furniture-making studio, Joseph was commissioned by a brave and forward-thinking priest, Father George Murphy, to create sanctuary furniture as part of the restoration of the church, which dates from the 19th century. When Joseph takes me to see these striking pieces, I meet one of the parishioners. 'Joseph's done very well, hasn't he?' she says. 'Did you know some duke or prince in England paid him tens or hundreds of thousands of pounds for a chair?'

Joseph learnt of those ancient Cork Walshes in 2015, when he was awarded an honorary Doctorate of Arts from University College Cork, which also presented him with a family tree. By that point, his work had become famous well beyond his county and country, and was exhibited all over the world. The chair that the parishioner mentioned is likely a reference >



*There is a sense of a shared purpose, similar to what the men who once farmed this land might have felt*





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Joseph has assembled a team of specialist makers from all over the world. The designer with his friend Eamon O'Neill on *Resurrection*, the latter's fishing boat in Kinsale. Joseph designed sanctuary furniture for Sacred Heart Church in Minane Bridge nearby



to the two dozen 'Enignum' chairs that Joseph made for the Great Dining Room at Chatsworth House in 2017, having received a commission from the Duke and Duchess of Devonshire. The Duke once said that they did use the chairs, but added, 'I expect that some day they will become regarded as too important to risk being damaged.'

Joseph is self-taught and left formal education before he had reached his teenage years. This is not a subject that he is particularly interested in discussing, explaining simply that he is 'better at learning than at complying' and that he has 'always had a curiosity and thirst for information'. His childhood was one of exploring and experimenting with the tools he would find on the farm. He tinkered with agricultural machinery and made his first dresser at the age of 12. When he was in his late teens, he began working with bent wood – a skill that he learnt from a boat builder in nearby Kinsale. 'It opened up so many possibilities,' he says.

For the past 20 years, Joseph has been ushering the 18th-century farm buildings into the next stage of their evolution, and today they are a centre for designing, making and exhibiting his work. The house in which his grandfather was born is now used as a place for meetings and a staff canteen. Across the courtyard, the former potato stores have become an office, gallery and studio space. Beyond a field is a former hay store in which monumental-scale pieces are made by hand; the vast proportions of the building has allowed a socially distant working environment since long before the term has existed. And the team has been busy over the unsettling spring and summer this year. The studio's projects have long lead times and there were existing commissions to fill; new projects came in and, with them, the promise of many more months of work for Joseph's employees.

The work is extraordinary, with layer upon layer of wood veneer forming structures that twist, turn and spiral in ways that seem to defy the laws of physics. A series of large-scale >



Joseph (centre) in the studio with members of the design team (from left): Javier Alvarez, Laurance Liu, Lucille Bonnard and Martin McGloin



sculptures comes under the category of ‘Magnus’; one-off, site-specific creations – which are the mainstay of the studio – sit within the ‘Opus’ collection; more domestic pieces are part of the ‘Dommus’ portfolio of work. The Latin names that Joseph gives his creations might seem self-consciously lofty if it were not for the fact that they are genuinely majestic things to behold.

Each begins life as a free-form sketch: fluid, continuous lines of pencil on paper that call to mind the seance-induced spirit drawings of the Victorian period. Developments in technology have made it easier to interpret these other-worldly scribbles into three-dimensional forms, which are later turned into small models, then refined and eventually scaled up to the final size.

He has hired makers and technicians from around the country and around the world: Japan and Taiwan, Germany, France, Canada and beyond. And there is a real sense of a shared purpose, a drive towards a common goal similar to what the men who once farmed this land might have felt. Joseph says that, when he was a child, all the farm workers used to come in from the field to have lunch together and he wanted to recreate that atmosphere. Twice a week, Una Crosbie, who runs a local café in Kinsale, brings lunch to the >



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Flowing sketches in pencil are the starting point for many of Joseph’s designs, which are then modelled in wood. Gabriel Hielscher and Jonathan Otter inspecting ash timber in the workshop. An ‘Enignum’ chair made from ebonised walnut – two dozen were commissioned by the Duke and Duchess of Devonshire for the Great Dining Room at Chatsworth House in Derbyshire



ABOVE Constructing a ‘Luminoria’ table, commissioned by a private client in New York. RIGHT A scale model in olive ash of the ‘Enignum VIII’ bed, which was also created for Chatsworth





cottage-cum-canteen for all of the makers, technicians and administrative staff to share. 'It's hard to keep up a workplace disagreement when you're asking someone to pass the salt,' Joseph explains. At one o'clock, drawn by the aroma of shepherd's pie wafting across the yard, the team wind their way from their stations for lunch.

Over the three days that the photographer Mark and I spent with Joseph, it struck me that although he seems a fairly private person – far more fluent when speaking about anything other than himself – he is also someone who values and nurtures social connections. He has a knack for gathering people together to share their ideas and experiences.

In September 2017, he launched Making In, an annual one-day event held at the farm, to discuss and celebrate design, art, craft and architecture. There are seminars led by creatives from all over the world and guests come from far and wide (and many from just up the road). Last year, the local hotels were completely booked out, creating a buzz in the community and a boon for the local economy. This year's event will no doubt be different – smaller, and possibly filmed so that those who are unable to travel can still participate – but it will go ahead.

When Joseph, Mark and I went for dinner in Kinsale on our last night, I noticed that many of the people we encountered seemed to know who Joseph was; there were plenty of nods of the head, hellos and quick chats. I couldn't decide if it was because the designer is something of a local celebrity or if Kinsale is such a small town that everyone seems to know everyone else. Perhaps it is a bit of both □

Joseph Walsh: [josephwalshstudio.com](http://josephwalshstudio.com)



ANTICLOCKWISE FROM TOP Making In is an annual gathering of creatives hosted by the studio – seen here is *Clio*, a sculpture by Manolo Valdés. The ruins of Ringrone Castle, where Joseph has been working on an arboretum for the past five years. A communal lunch outside with members of the team, including Una Crosbie, Gabriel, Lucille and Jonathan

