



## Designers are reimagining tabletop games, creating new takes on classics with a heart-warming sense of individuality, says Helen Chislett

**I**n an age obsessed with digital communication, there is something particularly comforting about sitting down with friends or family to play a game – particularly those we have loved since childhood. It isn't just about winning or losing (although some of us flash our true colours over a games board as nowhere else), it is the beauty and tactility of lovingly crafted games that appeal on some deep sensory level.

Designer Rose Uniacke loves playing games, particularly cards – “my favourite is Oh Hell!” – and has created a pack (£99 per twin pack, pictured right) where each suit represents a century, signified by key motifs such as the neoclassical designs of Robert Adams for the 18th century and those of Frank Lloyd Wright for the 20th. “Card games seem to be a dying pastime,” she says, “and these designs give focus to something I love.” Uniacke has also created a walnut Chinese Chequers board (£594) and has made herself a travelling backgammon board in green mohair velvet that she hopes to add to the collection soon.

Playing games has been one of Tim Gosling's abiding passions since childhood: “I grew up in a large family

playing all sorts of card and board games. I love backgammon – it is such a brilliant game of strategy, risk and defence – even though brother number three beats me nearly every time.” Over the years, he has designed many bespoke games sets (prices from £15,000 to £25,000, depending on complexity, examples pictured above) for clients – using combinations of timbers, vellums, shagreen and embossed leathers – but he is a firm believer that a game must feel as good as it looks with perfectly weighted backgammon or chess pieces, for example.

William Asprey, founder of William & Son, sells fine games at his Mayfair store, all of them made by expert craftspeople at the east London leather factory that the business owns: “We design and make games that will stand the test of time and become family heirlooms. Games bring a sense of fun to a room and the bespoke

**From top: a pair of bespoke Gosling games tables, price on request. Rose Uniacke playing cards, £99 for a twin pack**



versions that we create really do reflect the owner's personality.” He also enjoys shaking up the traditional formula: “On our Snakes and Ladders board [£545, pictured overleaf], we have added bugs – for kids that means they win a sweet and for adults it means they down a shot!” Backgammon (bespoke from £1,585) remains a favourite for

him both personally – “it is fiercely competitive” – and in terms of design. “Our boards come in an amazing array of contrasting leathers,” he says.

Leather specialist Pickett offers a diverse range of games including chess (£795), backgammon (£1,595), perudo (£450, pictured overleaf), poker dice (£25), dominoes (£125), Scrabble (£1,995) and bridge (£195). Founder Trevor Pickett describes the ethos as “classic with a twist”, saying, “We pride ourselves on the huge range of colours we offer and recently introduced burgundy





to celebrate our 30th anniversary – that was the most popular colour in the 1980s when we began.”

Luc Goidadin, creative director of Smythson, compares the games it sells to “small pieces of furniture, which are made by extremely skilled artisans”. Popular pieces include the Mara bridge set (£495, pictured overleaf) and the Grosvenor triple game box (£1,995), in printed brown and black calfskin, respectively. “Games can be a real focus in a room, as well as an opportunity for a laugh with friends,” he says. “Playing with an exquisitely created set adds to the sense of occasion.”

Games tables are all part of that theatricality. Davina Pinto Fdeda remembers spending hours as a child watching her parents and their friends playing card games such as canasta: “That probably explains why one of my rituals is to get together with friends once a week for dinner followed by cards. A card table is far more intimate than a dining table – it is a little jewel within the decor.” Her company Pinto Paris has created the Mikado



(€45,000), a contemporary and elegant take on the games table in oak marquetry and black lacquer with optional elements that include alabaster backgammon pieces.

David Linley, founder of Linley, recalls how his mother Princess Margaret used games as a way of breaking the ice with tongue-tied guests: “They are very much an aid to conversation, helping people feel at ease,” he says. “I find, however, that I am much better suited to watching other people play than attempting it myself.” Over the years, Linley has produced its own versions of long-standing favourites such as a domino set (£495) in walnut with sycamore marquetry detail, a backgammon board (£2,595) in red hand-stitched leather and a double-sided compendium (£3,750) featuring Monopoly on one side and Cluedo on the other.

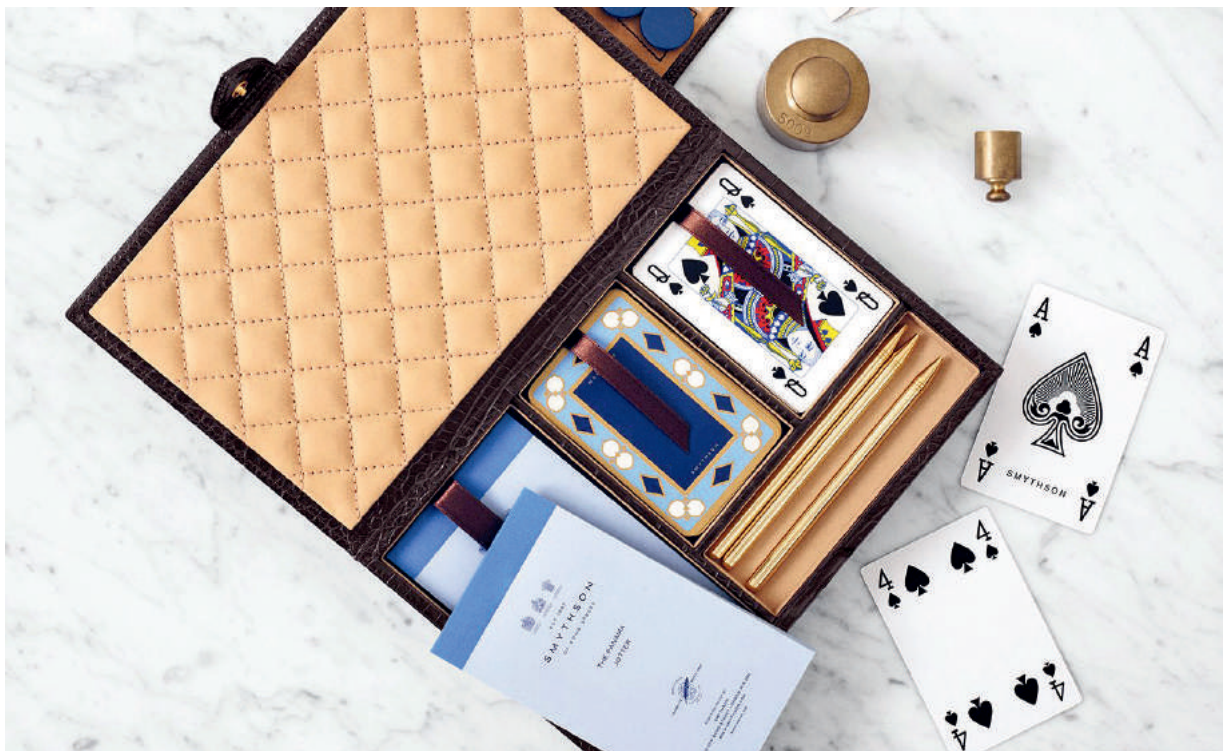
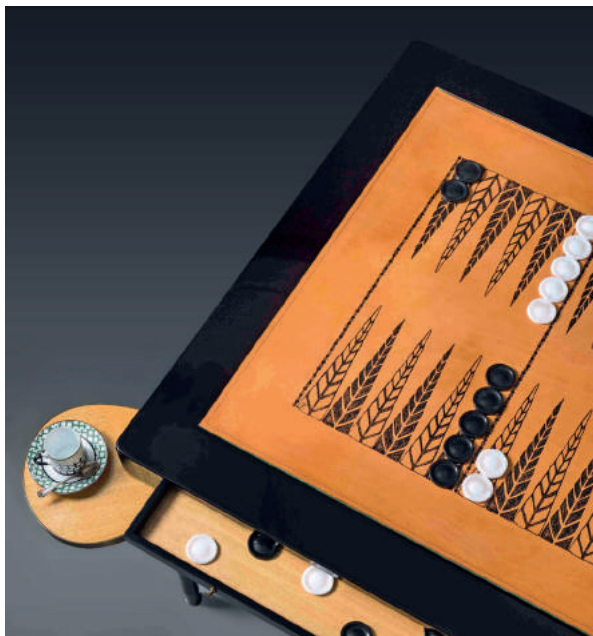
Linley even introduced its own football table (unique piece, £42,000, pictured above) in a brutalist design of rippled walnut and herringbone eucalyptus earlier this year. This reflects the current trend of designers reimagining classic tabletop games into stylised versions, as with Martin Kemp’s ping-pong table (edition of three, each one unique, £85,000, pictured overleaf) for Little Halstock, a collaboration between the interior designer and the master cabinetmaking firm. Kemp chose radial-matched eucalyptus veneer intersected by a single backlit resin line (to replace the conventional central white line), with a net of woven horsehair and copper wire that drops out of sight at the touch of a button. “I wanted to take something familiar and make it extraordinary, with the quality of the finish matching that found in the most expensive cabinetry and bats made with the same craftsmanship usually applied to humidors.” As a designer, he enjoys

**Clockwise from above: David Linley walnut and eucalyptus football table, £42,000. Pickett leather perudo set, £450. William & Son Snakes and Ladders board, £545. Alexandra Llewellyn Marilyn Monroe backgammon board, £15,000, and Palm Ebony games table, £18,420**





Clockwise from right:  
**Martin Kemp** for **Little Halstock** ping-pong table, £85,000. **Hillsideout** x **Hermelin Billiards Milan** Pool Table **Light Tropics**, €38,000. **Smythson** calfskin **Mara** bridge set, £495. **Pinto Paris** oak marquetry and black lacquer **Mikado** games table, €45,000



the personality that games areas reveal: “Nothing demonstrates the character of the owner more than the place in which they choose to entertain and be sociable.”

Similarly, the Pool Table **Light Tropics** (edition of seven, plus one artist proof, €38,000, pictured above right) is a limited edition pool table by **Hillsideout** in collaboration with **Hermelin Billiards Milan** that **Rossana Orlandi** unveiled during **Milan Design Week** in April. A mix of Italian and certified Amazonian wood, it features colourful inserts reflecting **Hillsideout**’s aim to produce “emotional” objects with personal value.

For other designers, the traditional-style games board is a canvas of which they never tire. **Alexandra Llewellyn** has already built up a considerable reputation for her bespoke backgammon designs since launching her studio in 2010: “I love the idea of using the very strict geometric format of

backgammon as a vehicle within which to introduce different combinations of materials and techniques, such as marquetry, handpainting, engraving and embossing. My designs are conversation pieces as well as games.” Along with her fully bespoke service (from £14,000), **Llewellyn** has collaborated with creative luminaries such as **Alice Temperley**, **Terry O’Neill** and the estate of **Milton H Greene** to produce designs such as the limited edition **Marilyn Monroe** set (£15,000, pictured on previous page), featuring never-before-seen photographs by **Greene** of the actress printed onto a black poplar board inlaid with brass triangles. **Llewellyn** also creates a variety of other games, including the limited edition **Skull** poker set (£12,500), executed in intricate marquetry that features sycamore, walnut, oak, Masur birch and 4,000-year-old bog oak, with 500 traditional clay poker chips. Another design is the

beautifully conceived **Palm Ebony** games table (£18,420, pictured on previous page), a backgammon board played on a radial design that flips to a chess or cards table, with mother-of-pearl playing pieces and ebony dice shakers. For her, the appeal of games is not just the craftsmanship, materials and design, but the purpose: “Time is our greatest luxury and games create time for conversation and for so much enjoyment – they really do bring people together, which I love. I first played backgammon in Cairo as a child with a man 10 times my age – we didn’t share a language, culture or religion, but we played and laughed with the game as our shared language.” ♦

#### IN IT TO WIN IT

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