

by Anton Gerner



## Meet Anton Gerner

For my first article for AWISA – The Magazine, I thought I would tell you a little about myself and my business.

As a self-employed furniture designer and maker, my position in the furniture industry is a somewhat unusual one. I don't manufacture in high volume and a lot of the work my business produces is done by hand. Our projects are a mixture of private one off commissions, architectural work for interior designers and architects, small batch production and making exhibition pieces. I work in a contemporary style, mainly in wood, but often combine other materials such as glass, metal and stone.

I was first introduced to Woodwork in year 7 at school. I was hooked immediately, spending more time making things from wood than I should have, as this was the most interesting subject for me. I just enjoyed making things. While other students were making chopping boards, I was already making dining tables. My interest in furniture design progressed from here and now I enjoy not only the design process, but also the actual crafting of an object that I have conceived.

After finishing school I had no formal training as such, but did complete a course at the Melbourne School of Woodcraft in Fitzroy, Melbourne in 1989. I am basically self-taught, with many hours spent reading books and magazines on woodwork and design. I found I learnt quickly as I went along by making mistakes. I practiced the techniques that interested me and experimented on exhibition pieces.

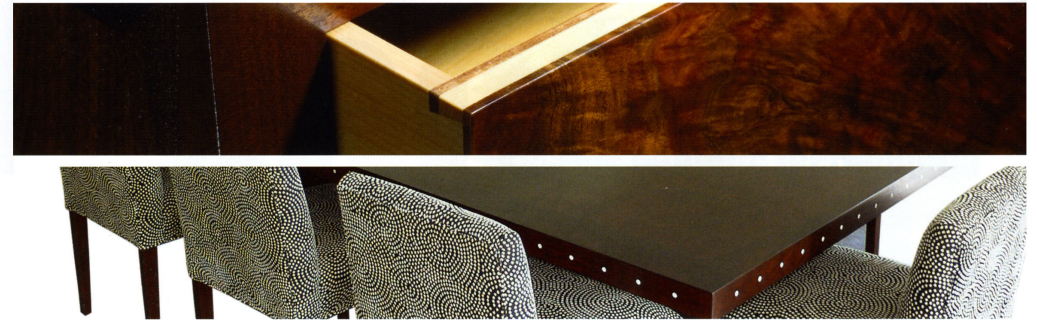
It is the quality of the furniture that sets us apart in the marketplace.

Starting my business was a somewhat unplanned path, but resulted out of the fact that these were simply nowhere to work in Melbourne where I felt the sort of work I was interested in was being done. At first I completed basic commissions for family and friends, however a clientele quickly developed who appreciated my work. I exhibited extensively to show what I could do and was soon booked up for 6 months with commissions. As the work increased I slowly built up my collection of tools and machinery, enabling me to become more efficient and to complete a larger range of designs and projects. Eventually after working as a sole trader for many years I incorporated to become Anton Gerner Furniture Pty Ltd and now employ several assistants to help me with my work.

My workshop is small, but highly efficient with a small showroom attached to the front where I can meet with clients and show examples of my work. I have found having a showroom vital to making sales, as having actual pieces to show clients is far better than relying on photos. Potential clients can open doors and drawers, touch the work and see the level of quality and finish.

I use a range of both hand and machine tools. The workshop is fully equipped with all the basic woodwork machinery, as well as some specialised machines such as vacuum veneer pressing equipment. I like simple machines that work well. My theory has always been to buy good quality machines and keep them well maintained. Hand tools are used for many operations, where setting up a machine for a one off task is just not practical. Superior results are often achieved with handplanes and scrapers and fine dovetails cut by hand. I like to see some traces of handwork on a piece, as I believe this gives it personality, unlike that of a piece made entirely by a machine.

I use a huge range of timbers from around the world, in both solid and veneer. Indeed many of the rarer timber species I use are only available in veneer. The choice of which timber to use for each project depends on a number of factors. The client's budget, the availability in the required size and the desired colour or grain to suit



a particular design. I like to combine different timbers in contrasting colour and grain to create interesting details. I have a personal preference for darker timbers such as walnut, blackwood and ebony.

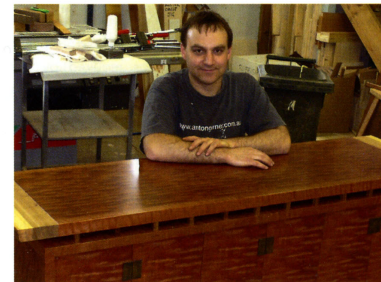
For design inspiration I look mostly at things other than furniture. I often notice details in buildings and objects in everyday life. Any product that is made well, from cars to dinner plates inspires me. If they are made well and look good, I take notice and interest in them. I am often asked if I am inspired by a particular designer. Well not really, however I am very fond of all things Art Deco.

Many of my ideas are developed over a long period of time in my head. I have a huge database of designs which I want to complete and I often sketch my ideas on paper. Some designs are developed on paper easily, while others need full size prototypes to be made. I have a photographic memory for my ideas and designs and can naturally draw on these as needed.

Over the years I have learnt that any design can be built, it's just a matter of how long you want to spend on it. For my everyday commissions I have to design pieces that are straightforward to construct, as I have to work to a cost that the client is prepared to pay.

As I have my own design style, which is part of what my clients are investing in, I generally like to minimise the involvement by others in the design process. Clients often want me to design a piece for them in a particular style, using a certain type of wood, for an unrealistic price. It is my job to work within these constraints to come up with a design that suits their requirements. Sometimes this is very easy, but other times it is not always possible and a compromise has to be reached.

As a designer it is my role to interpret my clients ideas



and requirements by using my years of experience to work through the brief to design a piece that both the client and I are happy with.

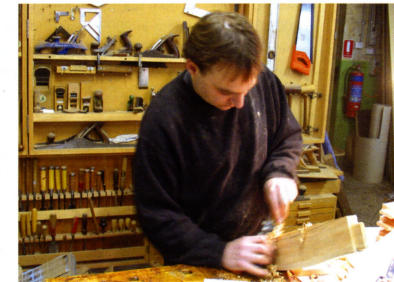
When constructing pieces that are going to last, certain design elements come into consideration. I use traditional joints, which are very strong and can often be used as a design feature and incorporated into the overall look of a piece. For exhibition pieces however I often design more complex pieces, where time is not such a consideration.

As hand crafted furniture cannot be rushed we generally have a 12-16 week delivery timeframe, once the design is finalised and the deposit paid to confirm an order. Depending on the size and complexity of the commission sometimes this is even longer.

My work is costed like any other product in the market. There is the cost of materials, labour, workshop overheads, a profit margin and GST. When quoting I use my experience to estimate how long a piece will take to make and accurately calculate the cost of materials. While I don't always get it right, overall things seem to average out OK.

I am totally obsessed about quality. No piece leaves the workshop until I am happy with it, even if that means it is running late. Daily I monitor the work completed by my assistants and constantly discuss the quality of the product we are producing. It is the quality of the furniture we produce that sets us apart in the market place.

Being a small business owner my daily roles include: meeting with clients, ordering and selecting materials, delegating tasks to my employees, arranging deliveries, marketing and bookkeeping. As all of this is in addition to actually designing and making furniture, you are probably wondering how I do it. Simple – lots of hard work. Lucky for me I still find all this fun, so I don't really have to go to work at all!



Anton Gerner's studio is small but highly efficient, with a range of both hand tools and machine tools.