

## LIVING BY DESIGN JENNY BROWN

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# Dovetailing into demand for quality

A craftsman goes against the grain, creating timeless furniture a world away from the superstore flat-pack.

IN AN age when furniture is sold like fast food, it is possible to kit out an entire household from a superstore or a flat-pack megastore on a modest budget and in a single morning's shopping. Hawthorn wood craftsman Anton Gerner understands the appeal of fast-assembly furniture: "You can get it now."

When his clients decide they want a particular piece to stand as a feature item in the hallway or in the new extension of their *Grand Designs* home, unless they find what they want on his showroom floor, they might wait for three to four months while he draws up, builds and finishes a piece in his workshop. For a chest of drawers, they could pay between \$4000 and \$20,000.

Last year, the 41-year-old furniture maker took more than 200 hours to make a desk that cost the client, who co-designed it, \$18,000. But the desk won't be going out in the hard rubbish when furniture fashions change, and the client can be sure that what they have paid for is unique and crafted for longevity.

Since he started his business at the age of 24, Gerner has been making modern classics that will stand as heirloom pieces for generations. He says clients have been increasingly reacting against "seeing the same imported stuff in

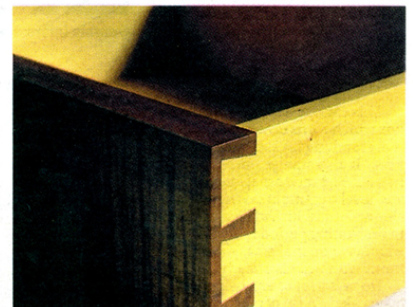
every other store and are seeking artisan pieces that are not just stamped out". Customers are "not only going for quality, they are now wanting something amazing".

Gerner became fascinated with the design and creation of timber furniture in his teens. He left school early and spent two years in a formal furniture-making course. During that time, he says, "I learnt more than they could teach me". Gerner is happy to be pushed to make remarkable furniture. "It's good for me," he says.

That view is consistent with the definition of the craftsman as someone who not only makes things by hand but also is forever perfecting their skills and seeking higher levels of quality.

"I set my own challenges to make things better and to learn something new. The challenge is perfection," Gerner says.

He pulls a drawer from a chest in his showroom and points out the finessed dovetail joints that will be hidden within the piece. He insists that the workmanship inside, under and at the back of pieces be as good as it is on the



Anton Gerner in his workshop (top); fine dovetailing (above); finished pieces (below).

PICTURE: LUIS ENRIQUE ASCUI

surface. Fingering the dovetail, he says the joints are his current preoccupation. "I can still get them finer and more perfect just by doing it again and again and again."

About 30 per cent of Gerner's clients have little idea what they want. "But they know they want something they won't see in their friends' houses," he says.

Most are happy to co-design to their specifications and in the rare woods that Gerner displays in a collection of treasures. Fiddleback blackwood and Huon pine, both Australian timbers, are among his current favourites.

He also hunts down highly decorative African

timbers and loves the swirly figuring and unusual grain of burl timbers, which he turns into pieces suggesting the "simple" lines of art deco. "I'm crazy about deco," he says.

On a recent trip to New York, Gerner was lucky to be given access to the backroom storage spaces of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, where he examined furniture made by those he considers the true masters of the craft, such as Emile Ruhlmann. The French-born craftsman was so rigorous he would destroy pieces that failed to meet his ideal of perfection.

"His furniture is a bit crazy but to me he was the greatest designer of all time," Gerner says.

Gerner and his apprentice are kept busy with commissions that he tailors for designated spaces within clients' homes.

But in his head, he says, there

are "enough ideas for pieces that I have no idea yet how I will even build. I've got 100 ideas. Enough challenges to keep me going forever".

He hopes to organise an exhibition of some of these self-generated commissions. So far, he has completed three that have taken two years of his spare time.

Gerner says his aim in "these pieces that I really, really want to make" is to demonstrate what John Ruskin defined as the ultimate romance of true craftsmanship: that "the joy of the maker is communicated in the piece".

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