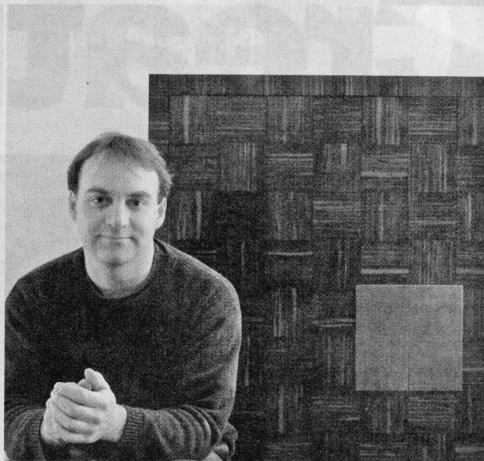


THE WISDOM OF ANTON GERNER



Anton Gerner has an instinctive admiration for simple lines.

PICTURE: CATHRYN TREMAIN

A natural – going with the grain

By JENNY BROWN

AT THE age of 35, furniture maker Anton Gerner has a young face and a strangely sagacious attitude towards a trade he has mastered in terms of technicality. He has gone full-circle from simplicity to extraordinary technical complexity, to return to simplicity of line, form and execution. As a designer and craftsman, he has made such a name for himself that his East Hawthorn workshop and showroom has only his first name on the facade. His pieces are dubbed "modern antiques" and about 80 per cent of his business is from clients who come back to commission or buy more pieces of exhibition-quality furniture.

How does one so relatively young have such a history? Natural talent is part of the story but he had such a precocious interest in working with wood that at the age of 12 he made a presentable hinged box in pine. Aged 15, when other boys in his class at Kew's Preshill were making chopping blocks and trays, Mr Gerner was putting together tables and chairs.

He was, he says, intrigued by his own ability "to create something that wasn't there before".

When his peers were studying maths, he was skipping class to continue fiddling in the woodwork room. "I spent more time doing it than I should have," he admits. "And I still don't know how I got away with it."

While Mr Gerner left his alternative secondary school to attend a wood-working college for two years, he says self-learning was essential. "I was reading every book that I could lay my hands on. I was going to exhibitions and furniture shops and looking at design and looking underneath everything."

He says he has a photographic recall of almost every piece of furniture he has seen. "I don't copy them but I do get inspiration." He was also willing to experiment to keep himself entertained with new challenges. "I was learning fast."

Fast and sometimes expensively: woodcraftsmanship is about the material as much as the shape, function and method of construction and a passion for wood led him through and beyond the fashion for Australian native timbers to a taste for finer, pricey European, African and American furniture-grade timber.

Burr walnuts, rosewood, beech, macassar ebony, American oak and sycamore can be horribly expensive if a mistake is the outcome. "And yeah," he says, "I was doing some reasonably complicated joints and trying all sorts of different styles, so I was also learning how things fail." Some consumed 400 hours of work and some

were wonderful failures. Those failures make up the furniture in his own house. In the way of most tradies, he says: "I've got nothing good at home."

Though Mr Gerner was able to open his Hawthorn workshop and showroom by the time he was 25, his custom came mainly from word-of-mouth recommendations; from people admiring his pieces in the homes of their friends.

"New clients tell me they like the 'presence' of various pieces they have seen. But they might want something bigger, or something in a different timber." After agreeing on a commission, Mr Gerner will visit the client's home to see the setting and get a feel for the proportions that will make a piece even more individual. "And normally I tell them what kind of wood it will be made from," he says, grinning.

Mr Gerner has an instinctive admiration for simple lines and began by making pieces that referred to Shaker-style plainness and functionality. Since then, he has been entranced by art deco, not in a way of slavish imitation he says, "but it is still a strong influence".

Failures constitute the furniture of his own house. In the way of most tradies, he says: "I've got nothing good at home." ¶

"It's timeless, it's simple, it is about quality and I'm also pretty interested in the materials they used; the timbers, the chrome, the shark-skin and the leathers. I take deco and I simplify it even more."

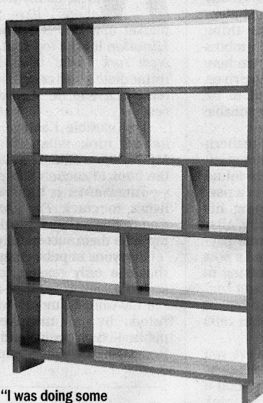
So he's back to simple, which suits the market's tastes. "People want the one big feature piece; the big table or the entertainment unit, something that is going to last because of the materials, the design process and the construction techniques. I try to make them timeless."

The market is also wanting dark chocolate brown rather than more warmly coloured woods. The red gum phase is ebbing – "far too pink" he contends. It will possibly be replaced by paler woods. "But there will always be room

for macassar ebony," he says, and his personal favourite, walnut burr. He'd have a go at Brazilian rosewood "if there was any to be had".

But anyway, he's getting interested in other materials such as metals and mirrors.

"There is so much more I could do with furniture," he says. "I have so many designs in my head. If you asked me right now, I could draw 50 different pieces, at least."



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