

PROFILE JENNIFER VERRALL

Beyond the veneer

Furniture craftsman Anton Gerner is making tomorrow's antiques today.

TO ATTRACT attention at the recent DesignEx in Sydney, a town renowned for its high-camp tastes, Melbourne furniture maker Anton Gerner showed a range of arrestingly original pieces.

One was a small burr walnut table so highly figured that it looked like an animal pelt. The accompanying chairs were upholstered in faux leopard skin, a match that caused the suite to appear almost alive.

Another bigger piece was visually even sexier. The veneer on a large square cabinet was an ingenious checkerboard of macassar ebony. From a distance it looked like a weaving. But it's not. It is smooth-to-the-touch wood.

Gerner, 34, has been in business for 15 years, long enough to be recognised by local architects and interior designers as a craftsman capable of making highly refined furniture to their specifications or, as he prefers it, stunning pieces that spring from his own creative instincts. His pieces regularly win awards.

The grandson of a jeweller and son of an architect, from the age of 15 Gerner knew his future was working with wood. At school, when other boys were making trays, he was constructing tables and chairs and itching to get into something much more complex.

He says the impulse to try new design and technique drives him through every piece. "By the time I'm 90 per cent done with a piece, I want to get onto the next."

On leaving school, Gerner worked part-time with local cabinet-makers and for several years attended the Melbourne School of Woodwork. From then on, his course was self-determined. "I read a lot, went to exhibitions and experimented. I didn't have a plan, I just kept going."

At the outset, Gerner was entranced by the simplicity of American Shaker furniture. "I liked the design aesthetic and the plain timber," he says.

"Slowly though, as I started discovering different woods and techniques I started adding more detail and more interesting handles."

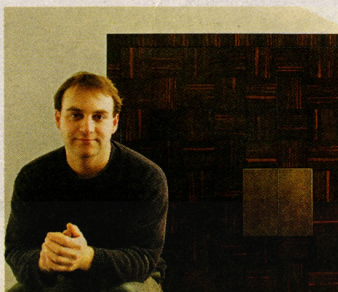
Inlaid details in contrasting woods started to appear. Patterns of squares across facades became his signature for some seasons and slowly, Australian woods gave way to an increasing use of fine European timbers.

Gerner says Australian native timbers "don't always suit high-end furniture making, for which you need really smooth, perfect finishes.

"Anyway, a lot of Australian timbers are misused to create table tops that are just too heavy and chunky."

While much of his work is commissioned, Gerner's preferred mode is to create from an inner vision. His current inspiration is not contemporary furniture but increasingly, antiques. "I look at a lot of antique cabinets because to me, the proportions are right. Stripped of the (Victorian or Edwardian) detail, they are very functional.

"I find much contemporary furniture cheap, and badly constructed and finished.



Like much that is fashionable, they are made for brand names and for people trying to get into the market.

"Too often they are too heavy. They have too many curves and they're just not comfortable. They haven't been well thought out because simple things don't work. Tables are too high. Chairs are too low and drawers don't open very easily."

Gerner takes up to eight weeks to bring a piece to fruition. "I'm very fussy about finishing. You can feel my pieces on top or underneath and they are smooth."

The recent reorientation of Gerner's work towards Art Deco satisfies his creative curiosity and allows him to use the figured wood he hoards for years. "I've cleaned it (traditional Deco design) up and simplified it again. I think it works because it fits so well with contemporary environments.

"I started being interested in Deco about two years ago and I see a lot of scope in it."

Still a young man, Gerner sees himself on the beginner slopes of a career that he says is governed by an overarching ethos of making tomorrow's antiques today. Top of his wish-list is an ambition to tackle whole-house projects and offshore clients.

■ Anton Gerner's showroom is at 24 Victoria Road, Hawthorn East, phone 9813 2422. Website www.antongerner.com.au

The macassar ebony cabinet, top, appears to be made of woven wood.

PICTURE: SUPPLIED
Above, Anton Gerner.

PICTURE: CATHRYN TREMAIN
Burr elm has been used for the console table, below.

PICTURE: SUPPLIED

