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Bespoke furniture vying with artwork as focus in wealthy homes



From dining tables to coathangers, bespoke furniture is vying with artwork as centerpieces in the homes of a select few connoisseurs. Here Trent Jansen (right) and one of his tradesmen work on a specially commissioned piece. **Louie Douvis**



by [Stephen Todd](#)

In a carpentry workshop in southern Sydney amid date palms and brick veneer bungalows, designer [Trent Jansen](#) and a team of assistants are “skinning” a rarefied beast. The Pankalangu cabinet is named after a creature from Aboriginal mythology and, like its namesake, the body of this curious beauty is covered in shiny scales. In this case, the scales are made from layers of walnut ply and copper, and are designed to emanate a muted gleam, apparent camouflage for the glamorous use to which it will eventually be put – a liquor cabinet for an aficionado of whisky.

The client also commissioned a matching Pankalangu armchair, a capacious tub seat fashioned from wallaby pelt and plush French leather, its back sprouting copper scales giving it the appearance of a hirsute pine cone. You can picture him: kicking back in marsupial hide and hand-honed metal, savouring a rare single malt, contemplating the vagaries of life.

“The client wanted very specific furniture to allow him to engage in a ritual which is really important to him,” says Jansen, 36. “He ordered only one chair, since it’s a passion which he mostly indulges alone.”

As for the designer, working to a specific brief for a particular user “allows you to go into the psyche of the collector. The object becomes the physical embodiment of their values and ideas.”

As the Australian furniture industry matures, an elite squad of designers has begun creating limited edition and one-off pieces for a select few collectors. It’s an informal club that is predicated on a system of patronage not unlike that which existed for centuries between philanthropic patrons and musicians, playwrights, painters and sculptors. Louis XIV had Molière and Lully; Lorenzo de’ Medici supported Michelangelo and da Vinci; Peggy Guggenheim championed Max Ernst (her second husband), Mark Rothko and her beloved “Jack the Dripper” Jackson Pollock.

Commissioning a piece of furniture might not seem akin to commissioning a work of art, but before the Industrial Revolution enabled mechanical mass production, furniture had, by necessity, been handcrafted. In that sense, commissioning furniture is simply a return to the traditions of a venerable métier.

Andrew and Cathy Cameron's house

As the Uber turns off the promenade of Balmoral Beach, an exclusive enclave on Sydney’s north shore, and begins to climb the escarpment, the driver asks me to indicate the house I want to be dropped at. I hesitate between grand edifices, but as soon as I spot the concrete and glass volume with the undulating roofline, I know I’ve arrived.

The house of Cathy and Andrew Cameron, designed by Tim Greer of Tonkin Zulaikha Greer Architects, sits like a silky grey monolith among mature lilly pilly and frangipani trees. Completed last year on a site the couple has occupied for two decades, this new build is specifically designed to house their notable collection of contemporary Australian art. A majestic Imants Tillers painting is hung in the entry, a funky pink Caleb Shea sculpture cavorts on the courtyard terrace. Works by Ben Quilty, Gemma Smith and Bill Henson are poised on polished concrete walls that look as if tailor-made to accommodate their not inconsiderable dimensions.



Designer Trent Jansen invented the “skinning” process in the making of the Pankalangu cabinet, including creating detailed templates of the rows of “scales” deployed to coat the surface. **Louie Douvis**

The Camerons, having made their money through industrial services, are renowned philanthropists. The Andrew Cameron Family Foundation has disbursed more than \$5 million to the arts since its inception in 2005. He is chair of the Art Gallery of NSW Foundation, chair of Artspace (Sydney), a board member of the Sydney Festival, an advisory board member of the Sherman Contemporary Art Foundation and a member of the Tate International Council (London).

Which means a lot of entertaining is in order. So when it came time to decide on a new dining table, a standard, off-the-shelf model was never really an option.

“We needed a table that could accommodate a number of guests, but we didn’t want something too monumental,” says Andrew, who was awarded the Order of Australia in 2014 for services to the visual and performing arts.

Adam Goodrum-designed table



Philanthropist Andrew Cameron at his Balmoral home with an Adam Goodrum-designed table. **Janie Barrett**

Greer pointed them in the direction of [Adam Goodrum](#), a designer he esteems as one of the finest working in Australia today and who had recently completed a boardroom table for another Sydney [arts philanthropist, Judith Neilson](#). Goodrum understood the imperatives of delivering work that is not only fit for purpose but which reflects the personality of the particular commissioner.

“Andrew likes the honesty of legs on corners of a table,” recalls Goodrum, “while Cathy felt corner legs inhibit conversation. They both liked the idea of modularity, that it could take on different forms according to the event, whether that’s a formal banquet or casual dining or even a stand-up buffet. And they didn’t want it to be too heavy or precious.”

Goodrum – who, as a child, was obsessed with Lego and at 46 retains a fascination with puzzles – devised a system of two three-legged rectangular tables that feature bold inlay panels of walnut, brush box and ash offset by large ornamental brass discs. When joined end-to-end they form a single, long banquet table; when joined side-to-side they create either one square table with corner legs or one square table with central legs, thus catering to both Andrew and Cathy’s preferences. Robust brass fasteners lock the modules in place.

“Given that it would be clearly visible from the first-floor mezzanine, it was important that the patterns performed from all points of view,” says Goodrum, who also customised one of his Molloy tables, designed for local brand Nau, as an elongated reading desk in Andrew’s upstairs study.



Adam Goodrum at the newly re-furbished Quay restaurant with his specially commissioned Quay Chair. **Louise Kennerley**

“The dining table has a sculptural quality which allows it to hold its own among the art,” says Andrew. Given the art on offer, that’s a feat not to be treated lightly.

The Quay chair

Greer and Goodrum worked together again this year on the refurbishment of the multi-award-winning Quay restaurant in the Overseas Passenger Terminal at Circular Quay. In a perfect dress-circle setting over the harbour and the Opera House, “it’s not uncommon to see people sitting there during the day, simply ogling the view,” says [Leon Fink, a seasoned restaurateur and chairman of the Fink Group](#) which owns and operates Quay. “We needed to bring people’s focus back into the restaurant, so we commissioned TZG to rethink the interior, creating a series of discreet dining zones throughout the space. Tim Greer in turn brought Adam in to develop a chair especially for Quay.”

The Quay chair, as Goodrum explains it, riffs off the segmented spheres of the Opera House, its splayed timber legs calculated as quadrants of a circle, evoking the spherical solution by which Jørn Utzon resolved the engineering conundrum of how to build his masterpiece. But it’s in the upholstery that the homage is most evident: the fine leather padding is stitched in the same chevron shape as the house’s tiling, which Utzon had made in Sweden and shipped to Sydney.



Designer Khai Liew in the Adelaide home he designed, with contents including hand-painted wallpaper, cabinets with gold handles and dressers with 2500 hand-cut timber triangles. **David Solm**

“It was important for us to have Australian designers work on the Quay interior, and particularly significant to have Adam work so closely with this iconic piece of architecture,” says Fink.

As the man who engaged legendary American emigré designer George Freedman to design equally legendary chef Tony Bilson’s fit-out at Kinselas in the 1980s, then later at Bilson’s, Fink is a pioneer design patron. “Food, view and design are the three most important elements of all my restaurants,” says Fink, whose other establishments include Bennelong, Firedoor and The Bridge Room.

Broached Commissions influence

Historically, Australia’s material culture – our aesthetics and artefacts – had been imported wholesale from Britain. Carpenters, cabinetmakers and other skilled craftsmen were among early settlers but they found it impossible to replicate techniques and tastes acquired in the motherland in the colony. The wealthy imported furniture from illustrated catalogues; the poor constructed makeshift furniture from whatever they could scavenge.

It’s the specifics of our history that led Melbourne creative director Lou Weis to establish the Broached Commissions design studio in 2011, and today it’s the force behind a nascent but very distinct Australian design aesthetic.

By considering unique Antipodean conditions such as the colonial experience, our relationship with Asia, or our shared European and Indigenous creature myths,

Broached Commissions produces furniture and objects that could only come from this place.

Design Storytellers: The Work of Broached Commissions, featuring pieces by Jansen, Goodrum and Charles Wilson – three of its founding members – as well as Lucy McRae, Chen Lu and Azuma Makoto among others, is on show at the National Gallery of Victoria's Ian Potter Centre until February 2019.

Charles Wilson's tallboy



The Khai Liew-designed home in Adelaide. **David Solm**

A key piece from the 2011 Broached Colonial collection is Wilson's tallboy, a slender, seven-drawer storage unit mounted on spindly struts. Inspired by outback structures (the designer was born and raised on a farm in central west NSW) but infused with the elegance of 19th-century Biedermeier lines, one of the limited edition of eight tallboys was acquired by Melbourne businessman Daniel Besen which led to a commission for Wilson to design a 14-seat dining table.

“Being commissioned to design one-off pieces of furniture confronts you with challenges you may never have otherwise considered,” Wilson explains. “It also allows the designer to experiment with processes and techniques, which in turn feed back into the industrial part of their portfolio.”

For the Besens, Wilson devised a streamlined rectangular dining table supported by a nexus of buttresses and struts; calm above, a riot of action below. While it appears

the result of classical carpentry, the table was in fact digitally created and carved by a five-axis router before being hand-finished to a high sheen.

Wilson later employed the techniques learnt in devising the one-off table to create an industrially produced desk for American manufacturer Herman Miller.

Trent Jansen's 'skinning' process

In a similar way, Jansen had to invent the bespoke “skinning” process in the making of the Pankalangu bar. It involves creating detailed templates of the rows of “scales” deployed to coat the cabinet’s surface, then layering first a sheet of ply, then of copper and then another of ply. The exposed, scalloped copper components are then overlaid again with a smaller template that allows the craftsmen to varnish the periphery of each individual piece, leaving the unvarnished part to slowly patina to a moody verdigris.

“It’s a painstaking process which can take months and several assistants to complete,” says Adam Price, the carpenter who works on pieces for Jensen and Goodrum, and is also the skilled go-to person for designers working in wood who want a master craftsman. “I can’t say it’s the mainstay of our business but it definitely pushes us to experiment and in doing so allows us to evolve and the industry to grow.”

The absolute summit of bespoke creation is the Gesamtkunstwerk. The term was used by Richard Wagner in the mid-1900s to describe the complexity of his operas but the concept was adapted by architects and designers at the turn of the 20th century when they began collaborating with master craftsmen to create what today might be referred to as immersive experiences.



A Khai Liew-designed piece. **David Solm**

The idea formed the very foundation of the Bauhaus and would inform much of the Arts and Crafts-inspired work of Charles Rennie Mackintosh and the mystical modernism of Frank Lloyd Wright. Translated into English, Gesamtkunstwerk means a “total work of art”, or “synthesis of the arts”. Such massive undertakings, naturally, are rare.

Khai Liew's bespoke furniture

Adelaide-based master craftsman Khai Liew set the bar high when he delivered 190 pieces of furniture conceived and produced especially for [Indigo Slam, the William Smart-designed sculptural concrete home of philanthropist Judith Neilson](#) in 2016. From a 60-seater banquet table to a chair with daisy-like petals (designed to delight the grandchildren) to the owner's four-poster bed, Liew and a team of eight assistants worked full-time for almost five years to create a unique domestic setting.

When an Adelaide couple approached him to design their new home as well as the interior fittings and furnishings, Liew knew he'd attained design nirvana. “This was such a rare opportunity, so I decided it needed to be a grand house in the South Australian style,” says Liew. “It needed to be quite calm, with a deep, classic ‘eyelash’ verandah that would allow the residents and guests to lounge around, entertain and dine at their ease. It would be a classic South Australian villa updated for the 21st century.”

The brief was relatively open, with one caveat: the owners, who travel often and sometimes for great lengths of time, needed to be able to batten down the house and its contents in absolute security.

So Liew designed it as an elegant strongbox, with deep casement windows in the 18th-century style and robust timber shutters. To let light and air filter in, he devised a hanging system that allowed a gap between shutter panels and casing without compromising surety: the effect, when they are closed, is that of being coddled inside a gently glowing lantern.

Rooms that transform

The floorplan features rooms *en enfilade* – each opening via generous doors to the other – so that discrete rooms can readily be transformed into an open entertaining space. The hallway is almost three metres wide, perfect for grand entrances; solid oak doors disappear discreetly into casements, their panelling, like all woodwork throughout the house, is modelled on the design detail of a particular cabinet in order to create an underlying sense of unity. Against this harmonious background, Liew's feature pieces stand as testimony to the excellence of his craft.



Architecture professor Desley Luscombe with her Adam Goodrum-designed piano credenza. **Peter Braig**

Pieces such as a pair of tall, walnut Minton dressers (named after the Minton room of London's V&A museum), which feature more than 2500 hand-cut timber triangles on the front that pick up and deflect light. Or the sled-legged Rem cabinets with what Liew calls "a fine tint of gilding" inside the recessed features of the doors, creating a subtle sheen. His Dancing Girls cabinet flaunts 23-carat gold handles that have been gilded to a high polish by fourth-generation, Adelaide-based, master craftsman

Bernard Goble, who delivered them in fuchsia-pink silk tissue paper, wrapped like precious jewels.

“My work is all about bringing as many South Australian craftspeople together as I can on a project, be it a house or a fine piece of cabinetry,” says Liew, who was born in Malaysia in 1952 and migrated to Adelaide aged 19. More than a dozen contributing trades, including cabinetmakers, wood carvers, French polishers, trompe l’oeil painters, rug-weavers and upholsterers, have been brought to work on the project.

Glass artist Jessica Loughlin and ceramicist Kirsten Coelho created unique light shades and fittings, luminous sculptures. And Liew called upon the services of former *Vogue Living* editor and now interiors consultant, David Clark, to provide a decorative backdrop to the rooms.

4 months to craft wallpaper

“Khai and I have known each other for a long time and despite our somewhat different aesthetics we work really well together,” says Clark. “For the Adelaide house we took inspiration from the elegance and layers of texture in [Luca Guadagnino’s](#) film *I Am Love*, starring Tilda Swinton.”

To Liew’s design scheme, which is almost Palladian in its logic, Clark added flourishes such as the watery patterned-silk carpets by Sydney’s Robyn Cosgrove and hand-painted wall finishes by de Gournay.

“De Gournay set up their own installation to hand-paint especially for the dining room,” says Clark. “Because the ceilings of the house are so high, de Gournay’s artisans needed to extend the sky and the ground of the wallpaper pattern. It was designed to take the placement of furniture into account, and they moved motifs around so that, for instance, the feathers of a bird would appear beside a cabinet. It’s the sort of attention to detail you can get from only the finest craft-based houses. It took four months to complete.”

In the library, Liew’s Pagoda cabinet in black bean timber serves as a cloak check, posed against pale-green silk raffia wallpaper. “I’ve just begun designing the coathangers to go inside it,” he says.

Not just for the wealthy

Not everyone who commissions designers to create special pieces is super wealthy (although many certainly are). Desley Luscombe, former dean of the faculty of design, architecture and building at the University of Technology Sydney where she is now a professor of architecture, commissioned Adam Goodrum to design a unique piece for her that embodies very particular memories. “I am the daughter of the working classes, my father was a carpenter,” Luscombe recounts, “and one day he found a hulking old upright piano, a beast of a thing, and I decided to learn how to play it. I asked my French teacher, who had been a concert pianist in Europe, if she would tutor me.”

The French teacher in question was Elisabeth Unsworth, née Volodarsky in Paris, who having migrated to Australia after a first divorce was then married to Australian artist Ken Unsworth. “Elisabeth was, let’s just say, emotionally charged and Ken would regularly yell at me because I couldn’t play very well despite all his wife’s best efforts,” remembers Luscombe. “It was harrowing.”

After Elisabeth Unsworth died in 2009, Luscombe realised she “liked the memories the piano evoked but had little fondness for the actual object. I didn’t know what I really wanted, apart from wanting the thing gone.”

It was during a conversation with Goodrum at the opening of the first *Broached Colonial* show in 2011 that she decided he might just be the man to transform her memories into something, anything, else. “Adam was very encouraging, he listened to my story with apparent interest, then told me he thought it should become a contemporary piece but not so far removed from the original form that I no longer remembered it.”

So she gave Goodrum her childhood piano and some months later he brought it back as “a fabulously shocking new creation” – a credenza, or low storage console conjured up from the ebony timber of the piano casing with shelves made from the felted hammers and a zig-zagging front panel devised from Elisabeth Unsworth’s sheet music which had been lacquered to a hard sheen. Today it holds pride of place in the living room of Luscombe’s Woollahra home.

“It shows the power of design to communicate beyond the physical aspect of the object itself,” says Luscombe. It also shows the intensity and richness of the rapport between patrons and the designers who shape their lives.

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