

## AWARD-WINNING FURNITURE

## HAND-CRAFTED

## designs

**The Illawarra is home to one of Australia's leading furniture makers, Rob Chapman, who had recently won the industry's major award.**

In a small workshop within an industrial complex in Unanderra, furniture-maker Rob Chapman lovingly runs his hand across the back of a wooden chair that he and his apprentice have made. He says that making furniture is hugely satisfying; what he's always wanted to do, but he also ruminates on the fact that he is one of only a handful of artisans left; that the "industry has all but been decimated by the free market economy."

Indeed, most of the furniture that Australians buy today is imported. It's often mass produced using cheap labour, and is therefore more affordable than Rob's furniture, which is hand-made using fine Australian timbers and crafted to within an inch of its life. All the same, it doesn't seem right or fair.

"Aren't we condoning the use of cheap labour by buying all these imported products?" asks Rob.

He can't understand the economy of buying furniture that – a few years down the track – falls apart and gets thrown on the junk heap. "It may have been cheaper in the beginning, but it soon needs replacing," he says.

Thankfully, a growing number of buyers are waking up to this, choosing instead to commission artists like Rob.

"My clients appreciate hand-made objects, and the fact that timber becomes more beautiful over time. These are the antiques of tomorrow."

Rob's range includes everything from sideboard dining suites to beds and coffee tables, made out of Tasmanian blackwood, white ash and cedar. It is influenced by Asian and Australian art, as well as the work of Spanish architect, Antonio Gaudi.

"In 2001, when contemplating my next collection, I took a trip to Barcelona and saw the extraordinary work of Gaudi," explains Rob. "I was blown away, not only by the style, but by the idea that someone can refuse to be confined to a particular style, or to make something to a price."

Rob first began making furniture at the ripe age of six. Both his great grandfather and grandfather were heavily involved in the building trade with the family company, Robert Wall & Sons, credited with building some of Sydney's finest structures, including the Government Savings Bank (now Commonwealth Bank) in Martin Place.

Rob grew up in the northern suburbs of Sydney and graduated from the University of Technology with a degree in Applied Science (Building). But, just as he graduated, there was a major slump in the building industry. So, when a friend suggested they start a marketing business, Rob jumped at the opportunity and became very, very successful.

"We started off with just one or two clients, but the business mushroomed to the point where we had some of the largest clients in Australia. The business was successful, but the enjoyment level was low. I finally came to the conclusion that this was not the life for me, so I started researching the furniture business and found a small community of furniture makers who offered a lot of support. It was incredibly refreshing after the world that I had come from, which was all about

A man with a shaved head, wearing a blue button-down shirt, is focused on working on a wooden chair. He is in a workshop or garage setting with various tools and equipment visible in the background. The lighting is warm and focused on the man and his work.

# TOMORROW'S ANTIQUES

[story\_robbyn gower] [photography\_robert clapsu furniture collection & paul james hay]

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money, money, money."

Around the same time, about six years ago, Rob and his wife jumped in the car and drove to Sunwell Park, deciding there and then to make a "sea change."

They later moved to Austimmer and established the workshop at Unanderra.

"The overheads are low here, but the workshop is large," says Rob, waving a hand over the factory/studio, filled with old-fashioned tools - as well as a few power ones.

At one point, the business also "mushroomed" to the point where Rob was so busy managing the business that he had no time to create. So, now he has cut back to employing just one certified trainee.

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The judges of the Furniture Industries Association of Australia (FIAA) award certainly appreciate his skill, giving his Barcelona Collection the "Excellence in Dining Room Furniture" award in 2003, as well as "The Best of the Best" award.

"I used my previous marketing experience to really push myself in the year following the award," says Rob. "This meant shipping my furniture to design and

furniture fairs all around Australia which was an interesting exercise, as my work looked almost alien compared to all the modern furniture."

Today Rob's clients include "everyone from nurses to rich and famous clients" (he wouldn't say who), to the Australian Consulate in Sapporo, Japan.

It is obvious that Rob - who is 36 - loves his work and it is easy to see why. Each object is like a piece of sculpture, with every curve and every line carefully considered, with several intriguing yet subtle features. Few people can resist running their hands over the chairs; they are so smooth and tactile.

While winning the FIAA award has certainly raised Rob's profile, he admits that running a business is a balancing act, with many "highs and lows". He feels that he needs time to experiment, to push the boundaries of his chosen art form.

So, as a way of bringing in extra income, he has started teaching woodwork classes in his factory, one day a week. Day and evening classes are now available, with courses running over ten weeks, and costing around \$450.

"It is a project-based course," explains Rob, whose classes are filling up fast.

See: [www.contemporaryfurniture.com.au](http://www.contemporaryfurniture.com.au), or phone: 02 4271 1599

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