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HANDS ON

FOR A GREAT MANY OF US, FURNITURE WILL BE ONE OF THE FEW MATERIAL RELICS OF A LIFE LIVED IN THE DIGITAL AGE. *Utilitarian objects are among the last physical expressions of our identity, and one of the few tangible 'things' that we will likely hand down to the next generation. In our search for future heirlooms, certain values are slowly coming back into focus: sustainable materials, analogue processes, quality craftsmanship. Banking on these three qualities to foster a new market in custom-made furniture and reinvigorate dying trades, entrepreneur Fred Kimel founded online marketplace Handcrafted to facilitate artistic collaborations between Australian furniture buyers and makers. With the support of a small team and investment grants from the Sydney Seed Fund and Creative Enterprise Australia, Handcrafted has quickly grown into a 200-maker strong community.*

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We can all recall certain objects that provide a backdrop to our childhood memories. For Fred, it's a Persian carpet that stands out most vividly. "When my mother and father first moved in together, they decided to buy one instead of a bed because they loved it so much," he recalls. "I'm told that for quite some time, they just slept on the rug." Watching his own children play on the timeworn carpet conjures memories for Fred of doing the same with his sister; memories made all the more powerful by the craftsmanship bound up in the carpet's weave. "Both my parents instilled in me such an appreciation for the detail and the artistry involved in making it," Fred says. "There's a sentimentality in something handmade that cannot be paralleled by anything mass produced."

Today, custom-made furniture is often seen as an unattainable luxury – a right reserved only for reality TV contestants. Mass production has nudged bespoke craft into the realm of 'too expensive, too hard', while independent Australian makers, on the other hand, often struggle to raise their voice over big brands and their super-convenient replica and flat-pack offerings. "There are such talented makers in our community – it's often just hard to find them," Fred admits. "Many people don't realise that getting something custom made by a local and independent maker is even an option."

Fred and the Handcrafted team want to make custom-made furniture more accessible than it ever has been before by coupling makers and consumers through a user-friendly online marketplace. "You simply post a brief describing what you would like made and shortly after you'll

receive proposals from interested makers. You can then commission the maker you feel is most suited," he explains.

Vetted before they can join the site, Handcrafted's makers are all committed to producing handmade, originally designed, high-quality pieces. Most are, unsurprisingly, bent on sustainability, choosing to use reclaimed, recycled or locally sourced FSC-certified timber for their designs. While some commissions incorporate other materials such as concrete and steel, Handcrafted's current focus remains on makers who specialise in wood craft. Timber, Fred believes, gives furniture a durable quality and a timeless aesthetic, helping create pieces that are made to stand the test of time.

"Buy less, buy well," he summarises. "I feel like that's really important if we're going to consume more sustainably and consciously." It's a mantra that has been successfully co-opted by the handmade furniture industry and something that Fred strongly identifies with – despite not being a maker himself. "I'm certainly no expert, but I've enjoyed tinkering and maintaining (and in some respects restoring) a number of vintage cars, a motorcycle and a 1940s timber boat," he says. "I've always loved working with my hands. Woodwork was my favourite subject at school, and to this day I regret not continuing with it."

"That's what I personally struggled with in the corporate environment, where it's often harder to define and quantify your direct contribution," Fred continues, referring to his previous life as a finance executive. "I love visiting our makers and seeing them work on client briefs, taking raw materials and turning them into beautiful finished pieces. I really



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admire them, and I sense a fulfilment that you don't see often enough in other professions. I genuinely believe that humans have an innate desire to make and create things. And while I don't use my hands in exactly the same way, I've found the 'creation' aspect of building Handcrafted to be a very fulfilling experience."

Since launching in February of last year, the site has quickly accumulated an incredibly diverse, insurmountably talented collective of Australian woodworkers and furniture makers. Family-run businesses, start ups and side projects of all shapes and sizes are represented, as are a relatively large number of female crafters – a sign of the times for this traditionally male-dominated industry. Each specialises in his or her craft, be it furniture making, woodworking, upholstery or parquetry, or guitar, skateboard or surfboard making. Many of these makers operate out of back sheds or small suburban showrooms – and they're often the ones who have the most difficulty gaining a foothold in the market. "Like any small business, there is so much to do over and above the 'making'," Fred says of the typical craftsperson. "We want to empower these artisans to focus on what they love, and have plans to continue building out services to help them better manage and market their businesses." Fred sees his relationship with each maker as a symbiotic partnership. Relinquishing some of the 'less enjoyable' tasks involved in running a small business over to Handcrafted – such as creating a website, SEO, payment, invoicing and shipping logistics – frees up more precious time to be spent in the workshop.

Handcrafted relies on many of the same word-of-mouth principles that have driven the furniture commissions business for years. The only difference now is that makers' stories are told to a much wider audience on the Handcrafted blog, and reputations are sustained through a moderated review system. For those featured on the site, Handcrafted can be a super-charged marketing platform. Chic profiles showcase makers from behind the scenes and document special projects. "We believe in uncovering the stories behind the products we buy; the stories that too often remain untold," Fred says. And the internet, it turns out, is the perfect place to do that.

Handcrafted is part of a new crop of businesses that occupy the fast-expanding space where old-fashioned and cutting-edge are synchronised. "Technology is actually helping to facilitate a resurgence in traditional craftsmanship," Fred affirms. "No longer confined to master craftsmen passing down their skills to their apprentices, knowledge is now so much more accessible online." Going online, he says, also promotes accountability and a renewed focus on using environmentally sound materials and methods. But digitisation, as we know, is also having a converse effect on buyers: "Within this fast-paced world, people increasingly value the slower, the analogue, the imperfect... Things that are reminiscent of a simpler time."

Woodworking and furniture making are particularly time-intensive tasks; they involve a level of skill and patience that not all of us possess. For many of Handcrafted's customers, buying handmade furniture is







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an easy way to align themselves with the slow living movement while also obtaining bespoke products that buck the trend for the mass produced. “They are often very personal items,” Fred says of the site’s commissions to date. “There was a valet chair that was made by the wife of an architect to suit his very specific tastes... A box made to house the ashes of someone’s father... A man who commissioned a four-poster bed to look like the one his wife had dreamed about since she was a little girl.” Just like Fred’s Persian carpet, these are objects valued over and above their utilitarian functions.

Customers stand to benefit from their interactions with the Handcrafted platform in other ways, too. There is a strong experiential aspect to the business that grants everyday people a rare opportunity to collaborate with artisans. Customers always depart with a renewed respect for craftsmanship; some have been known to increase their project budget two- or three-fold once they realise what’s really involved in executing a design. To better cultivate these grassroots alliances, Handcrafted prioritise matching buyers and makers who are in close geographical proximity to each other. Customers are often surprised to learn that there are artisans living in their own neighbourhood, Fred says. Currently, the site profiles makers from every Australian state and territory, and a handful from New Zealand.

Many customers have been known to take full advantage of the artistic license Handcrafted affords them. There have been “plenty of weird, wacky and wonderful project briefs,” Fred recalls, including a gumboot remover, a coffee-table-to-dining-table conversion and a bedside table made with secret compartments. “Different people value different things,” he laughs, speaking also to the qualities people pursue when buying custom made.

Of the myriad advantages of investing in a Handcrafted piece, it’s the value associated with ‘handmade’ that seems to capture the imagination of the modern, mindful consumer most readily. It’s something that Fred approaches with pragmatism. “How to define ‘handmade’ is a fascinating question,” he says. “I personally like the UNESCO definition: ‘...Produced by artisans, either completely handmade or with the help of manual or mechanical tools, as long as the direct manual contribution of the artisan remains the most substantial component of the finished product’. Many of our makers incorporate machinery into production – in some cases, they may even utilise computer-aided design tools and CNC [computer numerated control] machines to assist them. Yet such processes are always accompanied by a huge amount of expertise by the craftsperson in the design, joinery and finishing.”

Doing business in an environment where boundaries are constantly shifting and the definition of handmade is being pushed further and further, Fred believes that the ability to clearly articulate and enforce Handcrafted’s standards will be vital to customer loyalty and the company’s future success – especially as they discuss plans to accommodate new trades such as jewellery making, metalsmithing and textiles. “Etsy loosened their definition of handmade and as a result has lost some of its authenticity and community support,” he cautions.

Handcrafted has already expanded into custom shop fits, but “we don’t profile large-scale cabinet making operations that focus on poor-quality materials and production methods,” Fred says. While the Handcrafted model prompts obvious comparisons with other community marketplaces, including Etsy, Fred is more likely to cite platforms that put human experiences ahead of material goods, such as Italian Stories – a European start-up that “connects travellers with local Italian craftsmen” – as his source of inspiration. “I believe in businesses that are built on a higher meaning and purpose over and above the pursuit of profit,” he says. “When you work directly with a bespoke maker, there is an individual story that accompanies every item.”

handcrafted.com