

FLYING HIGH

UNCOMPROMISING
ATTENTION TO DETAIL,
CONTEMPORARY DESIGN
AND A UNIQUE MELDING
OF WOODWORKING,
METALWORK AND
ELECTRONICS IS THE
KEY TO BEN CULLEY'S
DISTINCTIVE FURNITURE

by Alan Munro

Infinity. The Oxford Dictionary defines the word as meaning; 'the quality or attribute of being infinite or having no limit; boundlessness.' When he started his new custom furniture venture and decided to call it 'Infinity Fine Furniture,' perhaps Ben Culley was thinking of pushing beyond the bounds of everything that has been done before. Of discarding the limits of imagination.

Or maybe he's a science fiction fan and wanted to boldly go where no furniture maker has gone before.

I don't know. And it really doesn't matter. Because, whether he intended it or not, he has pushed beyond the 'boundaries.' Combining the discipline of the fine furniture maker with his skills in electronics and engineering he is creating superbly crafted pieces that are, simply, unique.

The most striking example of how his unusual combination of skills comes together to create distinctive furniture is a creation he calls the 'wingdesk.' An 'art' piece that is at the same time an entirely practical and workable desk.

Representing more than a thousand hours of painstaking work the beautifully detailed contemporary desk was originally inspired by the shape of the wing of a Dakota DC-3 aircraft, the old 'Gooney Bird' transport plane made famous in World War II.

"I saw a photograph of a Dakota wing-tip in a magazine years ago and it caught my eye," recalls Ben. "I remember thinking what a challenge it would be to try to replicate it in timber so I cut out the photo and kept it.

"After we moved to Australia I came across the picture again and decided to have a go at making a desk that mimicked the profile of an aircraft wing.

"I suppose it was the challenge of the laminating that got me started on it, because I'd never done any laminating before."

The project quickly went beyond building a desk in the shape of an aircraft wing, however.

THE WINGDESK

Ben Culley's 'signature' piece, the wingdesk, was created using Tasmanian Oak, laminated over six oak spars.

The sweeping curve of the top mirrors the profile of an aircraft wing, with the polished aluminium mimicking the chrome finish of an actual Dakota wing, while the metal end-caps suggest the desk is part of a larger whole, ready to be fitted to another wing section.

Inside, the Tasmanian Oak writing area is inlaid with small pieces of Macassar Ebony, giving a richly detailed and classical feel to the very modernistic design.

By entering a code on the desk's keypad, the aircraft style analogue clock pops open to reveal a secret compartment.

'Runway' and 'landing' lights illuminate the work surface. The wiring for the lights, telephone jack, toggle switches and keypad is contained in a tube built into the structure. Careful planning was needed during construction to ensure the wiring was all in place before the final laminations were added.



"I decided to mimic the same construction process that would be used in a real aircraft. I wanted the closed desk to appear as though it was a section of a wing, that might be 'connected' to another wing section, which is the reason for the aluminium end caps.

"I think they give it the appearance of being a section of a larger whole," he says.

While the timber construction of the wingdesk is complex and beautifully detailed (there are more details accompanying the photographs in this article), the addition of clever electronics and custom metalwork adds what has almost become Ben Culley's 'signature' to the piece.

Apart from the custom-made aluminium end pieces, almost a thousand hand-polished rivets continue the aircraft construction theme. A programmable electronic keypad allows access to the interior, which reveals more of Ben's electronics skills.

The interior work surface is lit by 'runway lights' in a chrome lighting fitting, designed and made by Ben. Aircraft style toggle switches are used to turn on the interior lights, and even the clock looks as though it might have come from the cockpit of an old aircraft. There's even a secret compartment.

This eclectic mix of skills comes from an unusual background. Born in the UK, Ben originally trained as an electrician.

"Being an electrician wasn't very interesting. Not much of a challenge. My real fascination was in engineering. I remember when I was thirteen I designed and built a metal engineering lathe. But I didn't become an engineer when I left school because I thought working at it all day might destroy the fascination for me, so I kept it as a hobby."

His interest in woodworking was kindled when he was backpacking in Australia and landed a job as a carpenter's assistant.

"I wasn't a carpenter of course. I just told the foreman I needed a job. He gave me a go and I really took to it. I bought a book on routers and read it cover to cover. I'd never even seen a router before but I was fascinated by the possibilities. It was like discovering engineering all over again."

Back home in the UK his interest in woodworking continued to grow and, in 1998, he went back to college to study furniture making full time.

Ben and his wife Sam came back to live permanently Australia in 2003, settling on Queensland's Sunshine Coast. He started Infinity Fine Furniture shortly after arriving.

"I knew what I wanted to do," he says. "Make really fine contemporary furniture, but with a difference."

At this point though, making furniture was, like his engineering projects, still little more than a hobby. He had never really worked in the furniture industry. After finishing his two years of study, he had returned to a job as an electrician to save enough money for the move to Australia.

"We purposely moved out here without any furniture. Partly to create a portfolio I made all the furniture for our house, sofas, beds, tables, chairs, everything."

That was a couple of years ago and since then the business has grown as his reputation has developed. Infinity Fine Furniture is now well established and creating three different 'levels' of furniture.



AV CABINETS

The same attention to detail found in the 'museum' quality art pieces is continued in Infinity Fine Furniture's 'bread and butter' range of audio cabinets.

Constructed in 18, 25 or 32mm MDF and finished in a 2-pak paint finish inside and out, an infra-red receiver is incorporated into the cabinet carcass so that equipment inside can be operated without the need to open the solid doors.

Soft-close drawers provide DVD and CD storage while the generously proportioned cabinets and shelving are designed to accept heavy, high-end hi-fi units, on full-extension shelves, which will carry up to 45kg.

Surge protected socket outlets are fitted inside with plenty of room for the rat's nest of cables inevitable with modern hi-fi/home theatre systems to be hidden away.

Ventilation grilles on the floor and back of the unit ensure cool running of electronic units.

ALSO PICTURED

A contemporary dining table in Queensland maple.



A modern glass-top desk finished in a 2-pak laquer.



One of Infinity's 'Silver' series, this modern 'Benchmark' coffee table is detailed with through mortice and tenon joinery with complex interlocking mitres, pegged with oak.



The company's 'Infinity Gold' range is limited to the one-off art pieces, like his wingdesk and the 'Lady Penelope' hall table. He also makes a range of contemporary coffee tables, bedside tables and other smaller pieces he calls 'Infinity Silver.' Still essentially custom-made one-offs, the 'Silver' range is more affordable than the unique quality pieces he calls 'Infinity Gold.'

A recent addition has been a collection of cleverly designed, cleanly styled audio units, in 2-pak painted MDF. His 'bread and butter' line, these too show great attention to detail and use classical construction techniques.

That's how Ben Culley works. Making modern furniture in the old, traditional way. Hand cut joints, hand laid veneers. There's little heavy machinery in his Sunshine Coast workshop. And no automation. Hand tools, immense care, and a deeply felt passion for the materials he works in, wood or metal are what motivate the man.

"That's the way I was taught," he says. "And it's also the way I prefer to build things anyway."

He mostly works in solidwood, bringing to each piece an uncompromising insistence on quality and attention to detail. Unusually, he also designs and makes all of the metal fittings that so often feature in his work.

"I won't bother making common things like the rivets that feature in the wingdesk, but where a piece demands a specific metal fitting, then I'll make it, usually in brass."

He also designs everything himself, by eye and trial and error. He has an innovative and thoroughly modern approach to design and, for someone with no formal training in design his concepts, mostly, work superbly well. He has a good eye as well as good hands.

In this age of automation, factory production and substrates made from paper cores, Ben Culley represents the other side of our industry, proof positive that we can still turn our hands to the beautiful, timeless pieces that will become tomorrow's antiques and museum pieces.

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LADY PENELOPE TABLE ▲▲

Contemporary and classical at the same time, the 'Lady Penelope' hall table is strikingly elegant.

The floating top features book-matched Camphor Laurel in a Blackbean timber frame.

Constructed using some sixty joints with both multiple mortise and tenon and dovetails featured, technically, the legs provided the greatest challenge. Curved on two profiles, they needed numerous experimental jigs before the curved legs could be successfully realised.



Ben Culley, in his workshop on Queensland's Sunshine Coast.



CURIO CABINET

One of Ben's 'art' pieces, the curio cabinet is another example of how his engineering and metalwork skills are used to enhance a design.

For example, removing one of the drawers reveals a knurled brass thumbscrew. Releasing this allows the column of drawers to spin on sealed bearings, to show a hidden door which, when opened, reveals a secret compartment fitted with turned brass pegs. Intended for the safekeeping of necklaces and jewellery the compartment is a good example of the thought that goes into these custom pieces.

The random pattern on the front of the cabinet is a play on the old children's game of 'pick-up-sticks.' Created using dyed Boxwood inlaid into the cabinet front the pattern adds another element to the almost Oriental look of the curio cabinet.

ajm:FACT FILE

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