

Connoisseurs who love art deco-style furniture turn to modern master Frank Pollaro, writes **Kavita Daswani**

INTERIORS

The art of wood

Frunk Pollaro was 16 when he came across pictures of furniture made by Emile-Jacques Ruhlmann, a Parisian master craftsman whose work was among the finest of the French art deco style of the 1920s, and collected by the world's top museums.

Although Pollaro grew up in a blue-collar neighbourhood in New Jersey, where his father worked as a demolition contractor, he was captivated: there was something about the sheen of the exotic woods that Ruhlmann used, the patina of the Macassar ebony and amboyna burl, the hand-buffed surfaces and intricate workmanship yet strikingly simple silhouettes. In that instant, Pollaro knew what he wanted to do with his life.

"The proportions, the use of the rich, opulent materials, were such subtle and elegant designs that they intrigued me right from the start," Pollaro says.

Today, Pollaro – who still lives in New Jersey – is the only person in the world hand-crafting Ruhlmann pieces, often surpassing the quality of the original. In the two-plus decades he has been in business, he has custom-made pieces for actors Robert De Niro and Steve Martin, business magnate Larry Ellison and record and film producer David Geffen, for their homes, yachts and corporate suites. Brad Pitt ordered a desk for Angelina Jolie's birthday, and has since requested several more pieces.

In the past five years, Pollaro has registered an uptick in orders from around the world; he has shipped cabinets and armoires, chairs and beds to private buyers in China, the Middle East, Russia and Europe. Each piece costs in the tens of thousands – Pollaro's signature item, a Coffre d'Or gold-inlay cabinet, carries a price tag just shy of US\$100,000. His focus remains art deco-inspired, emphasising form and using exotic wood veneers and materials such as shagreen.

"The name has just sort of got out there, and is getting more well-known," he says. "There's a lot of interest



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Frank Pollaro (above)

in museum-quality Ruhlmann reproductions in the Far East."

That serendipitous chance encounter with the magazine article in his teens was all Pollaro needed to solidify his early interest in furniture building. A little bedside table he made for himself at the age of 11 is still in his workshop "somewhere".

"My dad demolished buildings for a living, and I think seeing those buildings fall when I was a little boy affected my subconscious," he says. "It made me want to create. I knew when I was 11 that I wanted to make furniture and I never changed my mind. I started to make a lot of pieces for myself."

Once Pollaro decided that Ruhlmann would be the departure point for what would eventually become a thriving business, he travelled to as many museums as he could, including New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Louvre in Paris, to research Ruhlmann's work. He learned

everything he could about acquiring and

handling rosewood and satinwood, immersing himself in woodworking techniques, much of it with a Hungarian master cabinetmaker, Frank Klausz, who befriended him when he was still in his teens.

"I had some very good mentors, enthusiastic and generous with their time and knowledge. And I taught myself as much as I could," he says.

Everything is done in his 20,000 sq ft workshop in Union, New Jersey, where Pollaro employs 25 people. He has worked there since 2006, moving from a smaller facility in a nearby town. Despite the growth of the company, he has no plans to outsource or change anything.

"Moving production outside of this facility would lessen the tight control I have over quality," he says. "We produce everything under one roof. That's what allows the quality to remain. I literally still hand-select the veneer for each project."

The almost couture sensibility of the operation means production is extremely limited; Pollaro estimates he makes fewer than 150 pieces a year. Half of his annual output is made up of Ruhlmann reproductions; the rest is newly designed work, created either by him or one of a stable of interior designers he works with.

The sways of the economy aside, things are booming for Pollaro, presumably because the people who can afford US\$25,000 club chairs and US\$80,000 cabinets won't let a financial meltdown interfere with their style. "Our revenue in 2010 was up 50 per cent over the previous year – and that was our best year to date," he says. His clients – regulars on *Forbes* magazine lists – are prepared to wait a year or two for a piece, aware of the labour involved.

"On the level we're working, most of the pieces are very challenging," he says. "There's a tremendous amount of engineering and physics. We have to understand these things. We have to merge physics and geometry, to make it not only beautiful, but functional and aesthetically perfect."

He displays pieces occasionally at trunk shows in Los Angeles, New York and Monaco, and is considering holding a showcase in Paris within the next year.

When Pollaro is not at his workshop, he is overseas scouring stores and suppliers for the finest wood he can lay his hands on.

"A large part of my time is spent examining and collecting wood," he says. The Macassar ebony he is so partial to – a rich, black/brownish wood with light streaks and a tight, fine grain – is from Indonesia. A lower quality sub-species has been found in China, and is often passed off as the real thing.

"It's a cousin of it, and looks like it, but it's not quite as rich or as fine.

But to the trained eye, there's no comparison. And I will not build my furniture out of sub-standard wood." Out in the field sourcing, he says that only two of 100 logs of Macassar are genuine – and, of that, he will buy only 1 per cent of what he sees. Still, he has one of the largest private collections in the world of exotic woods.

"They are very rare, beautiful and my clients come to me because they want, and can afford, the real thing," he says. At a store in Paris once frequented by Ruhlmann, Pollaro found Ceylon satinwood crotch, one of the rarest timbers in the world, with a golden finish and a tight grain. This batch was wrapped in newspaper dated 1913; he bought the entire stash, which was in a small box, for US\$10,000. "It was spectacular," he says. "For a guy like me, there's a lot of romance and nostalgia in a place like that."

That the world's supply of top-notch woods is dwindling is cause for some concern, so Pollaro snaps up as much as he can when he sees it.

"The wood suppliers know I'm always looking, I'm the first call they make, because they know when it's good, I'll buy it."

It's been a while since he went furniture shopping for himself, preferring to outfit his home and office with pieces he makes.

"I'm disappointed with what's out there and what's available for purchase. I was looking for some furniture for a guest bedroom, figured I could find it in New York. But I was so disappointed with the quality that I went back and made it myself. Everything is mass-produced these days, being made cheaper and cheaper. Cheaper means lower quality. And I'm at a point in my life where I don't want to surround myself with things that are less than quality. The people who shop here understand that; they are people of developed means, who want to fill their lives and homes with the finest art that can be bought, and that's what we're creating. Our chairs are not furniture, they are artwork you can sit in."



Pollaro reproduction of Emile-Jacques Ruhlmann's cabinet on still legs (above) and of Ruhlmann's gold-inlay cabinet (below); bar and stools (far left)

