



shape and the vivid colours implied something about Australia.”

The jug was designed for The Republic restaurant in Canberra, a concept that Mr Foster says came to him in a matter of seconds while he was driving. The complex production techniques involved in making it are still evolving 20 years later. Even the colours are much loved, and retailers beg for them not to be changed, although stores can order exclusive limited-edition tones.

“I didn’t take overseas opportunities, including an invitation to design for Alessi, but founded Fink and Co,” Mr Foster says. “Design is personal — I was too attached to the landscape and wanted to be part of the story, just like a lot of Australian artists. In the 1970s my parents spent two long-service leaves travelling through Australia, looking at indigenous art. I was sitting in the car staring at the landscape. It must have an affect on the psyche.

“The jug gave the opportunity to move into the foray of design here. We bought a 100-tonne hydraulic press and never looked back. Our philosophy is to survive in the local environment and move outward.”

Mr Foster’s work, along with examples by other Fink designers, are in museums in England, Scotland, Portugal and Germany, and in our own National Gallery, Powerhouse and Parliament House collections. Even Italy’s “factory of Italian design”, the Alessi museum, features Mr Foster’s creations.

“People here are open-minded to design but have to understand not to buy the throwaway, a copy or a poor rendition,” he says.

THE COWBOY WAY

At MAP International, Chris Connell and his business partner Raoul C. Hogg hold court in their sleek, white-on-white St Kilda Road showroom. Against this backdrop, the most refined contemporary furniture has grace, wit and the most delightful colour.

They opened their small furniture-design showroom in Collingwood but soon moved to South Yarra. “We were cowboys doing things by ourselves, by the seat of our pants,” Mr Connell says. They worked with recycled materials before it was fashionable.

Two of their pieces, the Placky table and the Pepe chair, were selected by MOMA in New York for its prestigious 1995 exhibition, *Mutant Materials*. Their work was on show alongside that of the world’s leading designers, and the image of the Pepe chair was even used in promotional materials for the show.

A friend of their’s from Melbourne attending the show saw crowds gathering around the chair and was outraged that Pepe had been ripped off, not imagining it could be the real thing by the boys from his home town.

“At the time, Pepe was miles more complex than anything we had done or even thought of,” Mr Hogg says. “It

involved pattern-mould makers, steel frame fabrication, complex upholstery, CFC-free foam technology, self-skinning foam. This was something that large Italian companies with long development programs made.”

Pepe was such a hit that Australia Post used it as an image to commemorate a century of merino wool, and the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney has one on display.

“We have always been aspirational and interested in extending our experience, and still are,” Mr Hogg says.

Mr Connell adds: “We have stuck to what we believe in — well-designed, well-resolved, practical and affordable furniture.”

If there is a disappointment for them, it’s the erosion of the domestic furniture manufacturing industry, the popularity of cheap knock-offs from overseas, and people thinking that close enough is good enough.

“It’s basically landfill,” Mr Connell says, adding that the lesson for the furniture-buying public is to not choose replicas that rip-off the original designer’s concepts and hard work.

“Buy furniture that is by someone — buy less but buy what’s good,” he says. “The real thing has quality, is well designed, has been many years in development and is locally made with integrity.”

“We could have gone to China to manufacture but we are immersed in Australian culture so we manufacture here with Australian materials,” Mr Hogg says. “Our manufacturers are good, positive people who want to make nice things.”

RIGHT PLACE, RIGHT TIME

Also in the MOMA *Mutant Materials* show was the Madam Ruby lamp, by Celina Clarke and Simon Christopher, who at the time were recent industrial design graduates. Made from recycled automobile tail and brake lights, the Ruby came in red, orange and white.

Talk about being in the right place at the right time: the pair was visiting New York on the way home from the Milan Furniture Fair and showed their lamp to the MOMA gallery shop. The curator was called in and, simple as that, Madame Ruby was in the show. MOMA later acquired the red version for its collection, while another is on loan to the Powerhouse.

“Being in the show gave extra cred and made an impact in certain circles,” Ms Clarke says.

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Below: Robert Foster and his famous creation.

