

WORDS JAN HOWLIN
PORTRAIT ANTHONY BROWELL

CHARLES

CHARLES WILSON'S CAREER AS A SUCCESSFUL AND INNOVATIVE FURNITURE AND

WILSON

INDUSTRIAL DESIGNER HAS HAD A SEEMINGLY UNSTOPPABLE UPWARD TRAJECTORY

One of Australia's most talented industrial designers, Charles Wilson has notched up a growing record of successful product launches, exhibitions and awards over the last twenty years, while creating an impressive portfolio of furniture and homewares. Associated with high quality local manufacturers like Woodmark International and Danish brand MENU, which distribute his products worldwide, and with local retailers Zenith and King Furniture, Wilson has more recently turned his hand to limited edition pieces for the growing collector market.

I caught up with Charles Wilson at the Potts Point flat, in Sydney, where he both lives and works. He also spends some of his time at the farm in Forbes, in central western NSW, where he grew up. Here too, he says, "work is what he does", in part because of the reality of life as a freelance designer. "I tend to work all the time. It's a full-time job coming up with new ideas. I'm very conscious of the fact that I always need to get more [designs] into production, because while a lot of my work has enjoyed quite long periods of market success, nothing lasts forever." It's more than that, though. "I love answering a brief or exploring what might lie in a brief and how I can contribute to it," he offers at one point. At another: "I really enjoy the design process of resolving problems, of structure and mechanics... I've always loved designing things in the round." Later: "I love the ability to perfect an idea in its prototyping and development stage." And, he also loves production. It's a clear case of a man who has found his metier – and the following is roughly how it happened.

Growing up, Wilson was interested in art and music and was always going to pursue a creative direction. "I do have a mechanical bent," he says, "but I'm also interested in the way things look and

feel and how we interact with them." Although he couldn't have articulated this at the time, he says that somehow he intuited (correctly) that industrial design would suit his skills. In the late 1980s, straight from school, he enrolled in industrial design at Sydney College of the Arts, where he rebelled against the conservatism of the "very traditional" Modernist teaching, although he adds, "Ever since then I've felt privileged to have had that classic Modernist education." While Modernism remains fundamental to Wilson's practice, he says that these days he doesn't so much adhere to its dictums as find they naturally filter through his creative process.

On completing his studies in 1991, he and a group of fellow-graduates established an industrial design workshop in Surry Hills, Argo, an operation Wilson describes, with characteristic self-deprecation, as his "non-business." Within the year, however, the 'Herbert' barstool he had designed while he was still a student had attracted the attention of the Design Institute of Australia, and Wilson was nominated 'Best Young Designer of the Year.'

Then, in 1994, with the aid of an Arts and Industry Grant from the New South Wales Ministry for the Arts, Wilson's first furniture design was put into production. His experiments with plywood led to the 'SW1' swivel chair, which was taken up by Norman + Quaine, who approached Woodmark International to manufacture it. The distinctive sinuous lines of the 'SW1' created a stand-out design statement, but it was the ergonomic success of the design that led Wilson to a new respect for the importance of comfort and usability. As testament to its appeal and quality the 'SW1' swivel chair has remained in continuous production since 1995, and was acquired by the Powerhouse Museum, Sydney,

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for its permanent collection in 1998. It was this introduction to Arne Christiansen at Woodmark that some years later provided "a terrific break" in Wilson's career. In 1990, Christiansen had decided to shift the focus of his family-owned company from importing to manufacturing locally, and with the production of the 'SW1' swivel chair, Woodmark began its now established practice of promoting Australian designers and helping bring their products to market. When Christiansen approached Wilson asking if he would like to design a compact lounge, Wilson, seizing the opportunity, wasn't going to stop at one. He presented Christiansen with an extensive array of designs that they then condensed into three substantial ranges – "a whole catalogue of furniture," that was launched, momentarily, with design retailer Corporate Culture in 2001. "It was a big step for Corporate Culture to show that much support for Australian design," says Wilson, "as it was for Woodmark, who hadn't ever made such an ambitious collection before." It was also a major achievement for Wilson who won wide acclaim around Australia and internationally for his 'CP1', '801', 'Lamella', and later 'Julep' ranges. Since then Woodmark has produced his 'R50' sofa, his curvaceous 'Boulder' lounge and ottoman, and the beautifully sculptural 'Heron' chair.

All of Wilson's designs remain in production, and boosted by its recent merger with commercial manufacturer, Luxmy Furniture, Woodmark anticipates launching more of his furniture down the track. In addition, Wilson has established an ongoing collaboration with King Furniture, which has resulted in the hugely re-configurable 'Andrea' range, with more in the pipeline. He has also designed a chair for Herman Miller South-East Asia.

It is no surprise, then, that Wilson's growing reputation positioned him as a furniture designer. But as an industrial designer he was not content. "I am by nature interested in designing just about everything," he says. One of the benefits of being his own master (he has never worked for anyone but himself) is that he is able to work on speculative projects of his own, which are an important part

of his practice. He has also been very successful in bringing some of these products to market by entering them into exhibitions and competitions. His design for some canisters won the Launch Pad New Design of the Year in 2005; and his 'Pacific' vase and silver 'Candelabra' were finalists, in 2004 and 2005 consecutively, in the Bombay Sapphire Design Discovery Award. As a result, 'Candelabra' – an elegant form in which two crossing arms are neatly held together by a magnet – went on to be manufactured in nickel-plated zinc and distributed around the world by Danish manufacturer, MENU. It was also purchased for the Powerhouse Museum's permanent collection.

In 2006, Wilson won the Bombay Sapphire Award outright with a design for an adjustable rocking stool called 'Spool' that was original, eye-catching and witty. Object Gallery's then-Director, Brian Parkes, who was on the judging panel, said "Charles has the full package." He described 'Spool' as "an outstanding product design that required great skill in the design process," at the same time praising the designer's interest in new technology and materials. The award provided Wilson with \$20,000 in prize-money along with a trip to the Milan Furniture Fair in



ABOVE MENU 'Candelabra'
OPPOSITE PAGE
The latest collaboration
between Charles Wilson
and King Furniture





TOP LEFT 'Onyx' vases
ABOVE Blackwood side tables custom designed and made for Government House
OPPOSITE 'Tall Boy' for Broached Commissions

2007. There have been other products too, of course: a shoe-horn, also produced by MENU, cutlery for WMF, cookware, various lighting projects and street furniture, and along with the speculative projects, there are those based on commissions. Since mass production is a central feature of his Modernist design practice, it's curious, says Wilson, that in recent years "I've ended up with more and more of my work in one-offs and limited editions."

First came a prestigious commission to design furniture for the State Drawing Room at New South Wales Government House as part of the Historic Houses Trust's 'Furnish a Future' project. The outcome was an edition of six Tasmanian Blackwood side tables, the elegant lines of the design cleverly translating a sense of traditional cabinetmaking into engaging contemporary terms. Then, in 2011, Wilson was invited, along with Trent Jansen and Adam Goodrum as core designers, to join a unique design venture called Broached Commissions, which was instigated by Creative Director, Lou Weis, and Managing Director of Euroluce, Vincent Aiello. Broached Commissions was established to recognise the place of contemporary Australian design in its historical context and to foster the creation of innovative bespoke pieces in limited editions, based on specific narratives from our history. "Everybody wants a narrative these days," Wilson quips, but in response to the initial Broached Commissions project focused on the colonial era, he produced the seven-drawer 'Tall Boy', which draws on the makeshift vernacular of the colonial period in rural Australia to create a striking new form.

Lou Weis believes there is great potential for Australian design to differentiate itself in the world scene by drawing on local history and culture. But Wilson isn't entirely convinced. "An Australian flavour? Well that's not really my bag," he says, although he also acknowledges the agricultural influence in his new 'Serif' stool. Through Broached Commissions Wilson has also designed some couches for the uniquely Australian design hotel the Molonglo Group is creating in New Acton, Canberra, Hotel Hotel, which is set to open in late 2013. Wilson says the collector market and limited edition or one-off design-work has expanded around the world in the last decade or so, and that as a result of projects like these, it is now a significant part of his work.

While this rundown of Wilson's career could give the impression of a steadily soaring trajectory, Wilson laughs and concedes only that it's been a "pretty chaotic progression" with "moments of success along the way." For all of his products that have made it on to the market, he says there have also been disappointments. "Some of the work I'm most proud of, designs with real innovation in their function and use, I've had the most difficulty finding manufacturing partners for." Despite these frustrations, he often re-visits these ideas years later and finds he is able to resolve the issues that had held them back. There were also hard times, particularly in the early years, when he supported himself working as a model-maker for an industrial design workshop, and where he honed his skills in hand-making prototypes.

Although acknowledging the value of this experience, he says he doesn't miss it for a moment, as he's been a thorough convert, over the last ten

"Everything in a design must contribute to the message of that design"

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years or so, to the new computer technologies, parametric modelling and rapid-prototyping techniques, which save an enormous amount of time, and are "accurate beyond belief. The old ways were really clunky by comparison. I'm not anti-craft," adds Wilson, "but in my work, it's the technology that's of interest." While his design process still begins with sketches, he now routinely sends files off to Hong Kong or elsewhere for prototyping. He points to a fully-machined prototype of the 'Serif' stool, saying "a machine-head has carved that out of solid aluminium. These technologies are amazing!" Another recent project is a series of onyx vases, robotically machined in Italy to a translucent fineness.

There is one particular difficulty that remains for Wilson however – and that's a reluctance to talk about his own work. He acknowledges that it "certainly has something of a signature about it, there's a direction... maybe it's a sort of robust, organic type of design." Lou Weis says Wilson is "an extremely erudite designer, who knows about the history of design and picks from it. He doesn't do anything unknowingly," Weis adds, and suggests Wilson is loath to speak about his work because he thinks it should speak for itself. If that's so, what might it be saying? With its singularity of focus, candid materiality, and reductive aesthetic, its international Modernist message is clear. (Wilson did say: "Everything in a design must contribute to the message of that design.") But surely there's more to a signature: an appreciation of classical elegance, a feeling for the curvaceous? A refreshing lightness, perhaps a fineness and firmness combined – in the side tables for the State Drawing Room or the 'Candelabra', for instance – that creates a particular poise? We can see innovative twists in construction or function. An enduring quality is certainly another a hallmark... there is one sure-fire way to recognise the work of Charles Wilson however: everything he designs has his name on it.

CHARLES WILSON
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CHARLES WILSON TIMELINE

1968	Born and raised on a farming property in Forbes, New South Wales	
1991	Graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in Industrial Design from Sydney College of the Arts (SCA)	
1992	Named Design Institute of Australia's 'New Designer of the Year' for 'Herbert' barstool	
1993	Established studio workshop, Argo, with five other designers in Sydney's Surry Hills	
1993-1995	Taught at Enmore TAFE, Sydney	
1994	First production design, 'SWI' swivel chair, for Norman + Quaine produced by Woodmark International; Designed street light cluster system and modular bus shelter for Sydney City Council	2006
1994-2003	Taught Design Studies at SCA	Winner, Bombay Sapphire Design Discovery Award for 'Spool', 'Boulder' and 'R50' sofas launched by Woodmark International; Represented in national touring exhibition: 'Freestyle, New Australian Design', Australian Design Award for MENU 'Candelabra'; Designed Blackwood side tables for NSW Government House
1995-1997	Consultant to design firm Schamburg + Alvisse; 'Regalo' light launched at Salone Internazionale del Mobili, Milan	2006-2007
1998	'SWI' swivel chair purchased for the Powerhouse Museum's permanent collection	2007
2001	Designed 'CPI', 'Boi', 'Lamella' and 'Julep' ranges for Woodmark International	2008
2003-2010	Taught Industrial Design at University of Technology, Sydney	2009
2004	Exhibited in 'Tyranny of Distance', Tokyo Designers Block; Exhibited in '40 Degrees Contemporary Australian Design', Berlin; Finalist, Bombay Sapphire Design Discovery Award with 'Pacific' vase	2010
2005	Finalist, Bombay Sapphire Design Discovery Award with silver 'Candelabra'; Danish	2011
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manufacturer MENU produced 'Candelabra'; Awarded Australian DesignMark for 'R50' lounge. Winner of Launch Pad 'New Design of the Year' with a range of canisters; Designed cutlery for WMF, Germany; 'Boulder Lounge' and 'Ottoman' launched for Woodmark International

Winner, Bombay Sapphire Design Discovery Award for 'Spool', 'Boulder' and 'R50' sofas launched by Woodmark International; Represented in national touring exhibition: 'Freestyle, New Australian Design', Australian Design Award for MENU 'Candelabra'; Designed Blackwood side tables for NSW Government House

Finalist, IDEA Designer of the Year with 'Heron' chair, 'Shoe Horn' produced by MENU Designer of the Year, Home Beautiful Awards; 'Cassandra' boxes developed by Beclau, exhibited at Workshopped 2009

'Andrea' range of sofas and tables designed for King Furniture

Designed 'Arlit' chair for Herman Miller, 'Tall Boy' for Broached Commissions

'Dressing Table' for Broached Commissions; Launched 'Serif' stool

'Serif' and 'Counter Serif' stools launched at Superstudio Temporary Museum of New Design, Milan, Interpretations III Exhibition, Object Gallery; Carved Onyx Vases; 'Tall Boy' shown at Design Days Dubai





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ABOVE Blackwood sidetables custom designed and made for Government House
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