

Mark Asplin Whiteley



Art Deco bedroom,
Monaco



Mark Asplin Whiteley, CEO

Based in Whitby, North Yorkshire, Mark Asplin Whiteley Ltd is a bespoke luxury furniture maker who has supplied unsurpassed quality into the London and global bespoke interior design market for over 30 years. Statement pieces, furniture, kitchens, architectural joinery into listed buildings, yacht furniture, architectural boxes and luxury wooden accessories: these are just some of the bespoke items that they regularly produce. Mark Whiteley, cabinet maker, master craftsman and CEO, writes in the following piece about what is required in a business to consistently achieve the quality that is demanded at the very top of the market. Quality, he says, is key to long-term success.

Curriculum

I was privileged to be at school in the 1970s when woodworking and metalwork was taught. Focus was on the tool and material dynamic – from doing this practical work, intuitions were refined. By developing a ‘feel’ for the material, you could quite literally sense when it called for cutting in the other direction. This early knowledge was crucial to my choosing a career in fine craft. Rycotewood, near Oxford, was the college of choice, to which the UK owes much of its success in luxury furniture manufacturing over the last 40 years.

It is crucial for this country to realise that, by not valuing practical experience in secondary schools and engaging in vocational training at centres of excellence, our thriving creative industries could lose their pre-eminence in the world.

FACTS ABOUT MARK ASPLIN WHITELEY

- » CEO: Mark Asplin Whiteley
- » Managing director: Heath Chadwick
- » Established in 1988
- » Based in Whitby, North Yorkshire
- » Services: Bespoke Luxury Cabinet Makers
- » 28 employees
- » International Supply, fitted and free standing.
- » www.markwhiteley.com

“The culture of the workshop is about creating an environment that celebrates quality through creativity”

Craft

Craft requires a state of mind that is fully attentive; it requires, so to speak, being ‘in the flow’. If you have ever watched a craftsman, there is a certain peace about them: a total psychological unity with their work. Being reactive and responsive to the material, while also having thought through the construction, based on previous experience, is what craft is all about. It requires continuous and considered sensing of the form and of the design.

Culture

For a craftsman to thrive, the culture in the workshop must support the maker to achieve his or her potential. When one has twenty to thirty makers, each with different levels of experience and ability doing bespoke unique pieces, the style of management must fit this mix. The culture of the workshop is about creating an environment that celebrates quality through creativity.

Climate

My management style is collaborative and intuitive. I work from the premise that it is impossible to micro-manage everything with bespoke work. It is not enough to trust them; I also have to demonstrate that trust clearly to my makers. Ex-joiners or makers straight from college need basic experience.

To that end, I assign them to a team leader who assesses them by gradually giving them ever more complicated tasks until they reach their limit of comfort and competence.

Competence

Trusting the team leaders and junior makers to make a myriad of choices, with periodic checking by management, instills a strong sense of ownership. Competence throughout the workshop rises as each maker observes others’ work, others’ processes and the other makers striving for quality. It is a self-improving and self-perpetuating system that requires little management intervention.

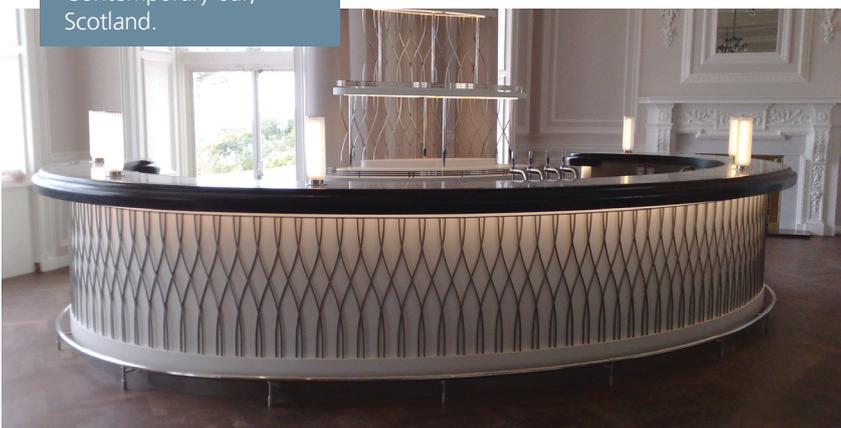
Confidence

Confidence comes to the makers by: allowing them to progress; trusting them with arm’s length control; adjusting their process through initial discussion prior to making; and by offering them the freedom to find their own pace. Confidence comes as each piece of work passes Quality Check. Quality checking is the feedback moment, before and after lacquering, that elevates quality and allows the opportunity for refinement and improvement.

Calibre

The workshop is now only populated by makers who are all working to the same MAW ‘house’ standard. This is why we have regular clients who can then offer this assuredness of quality to their own clients. Some businesses claim to possess utmost quality, but their standards of excellence may not live up to this standard. At Mark Asplin Whiteley’s, we only work at the luxury end of the market which naturally requires a constant adherence to very high standards of quality.

Contemporary bar,
Scotland.



Creativity

With a workshop full of cabinet makers who all read their own drawings, do their cutting lists, machine their components and do the veneering, dovetail cutting, drawer making and inlay work, there is inevitably friendly competition. Craftsman's pride is an inherent characteristic in cabinet makers, as well as having a creative freedom to explore different processes to achieve high quality. As long as the quality is there, the only other measure is efficiency. Those makers who demonstrate the greatest levels of efficiency and creativity are promoted to the position of team leader at MAW.

Cutting edge

A 5-axis CNC Router (a machine that helps cut the basic template which is then further refined by humans) is now essential to maintain efficient manufacturing processes, even in a bespoke workshop. It takes the drudge out of some of the tasks, while also increasing accuracy. In the current climate of uncertainty, of keeping costs down, of responding to reduced turnaround times and of competing for work, the CNC helps gain us much needed efficiencies. Skilled craftspeople, linked with the right supporting technology, is a potent combination for a workshop. Our cutting edge is the marriage of the two: immense experience in craftsmanship with up-to-date machining technology.

Customer service

Quality making at MAW is backed up by our unique customer service. We visit sites or client offices to: conduct initial consultations; perform site surveys; provide estimates and quotations from sketches or drawings; and do the workshop drawing.



Contemporary kitchen in Walnut, Country House

We then manufacture with a broad variety of luxury materials, and wrap, deliver and install using our own makers, both home and abroad. There are very few workshops that operate to this level, but MAW has done so for thirty years. Every step in the process as described above, from inception to sign-off, adds to the final definition of quality.

Our impact on the market

From being appointed Viscount Linley's workshop manager in 1986, to setting up my own workshop in 1988, I have set the benchmark for many other workshops in terms of quality standards and price. MAW continues to innovate and inspire the field of bespoke luxury furniture making by continuing to embrace excellence in craftsmanship. It is at MAW where quality is fundamentally understood, valued and evident in every piece of work. No machine or mass manufacture can hope to replicate this.

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