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Classic Style of a Heller Original

by Mary Stack



What do Hong Kong, London, Venice, Riyadh and Las Vegas all have in common? Well in addition to being dazzling metropolises, they all house furniture created by Norwell designer, Walter Heller.

Fortunately you don't have to travel on a Lear jet these days to see Heller's work, there are examples of his distinctive designs and meticulous restorations all over New England. A Czech by birth, Heller's master craftsmanship can be seen adorning private homes, museums, hotels and office complexes. Just recently, he completed the installation of three floors of seating for the new State Street Bank offices in Boston. Commercial projects such as this allow the designer to put his artistic and engineering skills to the test and allow him to apply his seasoned knowledge of streamlined production.

Heller enjoys the stimulation that comes with this kind of design challenge. "I derive as much pleasure from restoring an antique piece of furniture as I do creating a custom chair for an exacting client," he explains. On the day that I visited him in his workshop/studio, he was carefully re-covering a leather sofa that he had designed and created for a customer some years before. These are the kinds of discriminating clients that Heller attracts and seeks, individuals who have a high regard for the excellence of his handcrafted precision and who are willing to pay the price for such quality. Excellence does not come cheap.

Heller is a rare find in the modern design world. His roots are firmly anchored in his extensive European training and coupled with this is his 40 years of experience

in the international arena of furniture making. This allows Heller to inject an unusual combination of talents into his designs, whether Old World reproductions or cutting edge creations. His commissions run the gamut from designing comfortable seating for a Brookline maternity suite to creating a chaise for a Marblehead artist from silk chartreuse, which cost \$3,000 for just seven yards!

Heller began life as an apprentice saddler and tapiezer in Bavaria at the age of 14. However sewing leather hurt his fingers, so he shifted over to cutting cloth and then trained as a furniture maker. By the time he was 18 years old, he was an accomplished leatherworker, machinist and cabinet-maker so he decided to try his fortune in America, coming first to New York in 1957. Within a short time, Heller was working for himself and ever since has more or less been a single man operation. Heller has employees to assist him when project needs demand, but he prides himself on directing all of the work he accepts, working long days and weekends.

“Creating a piece of furniture means incorporating many aspects into a perfect fit,” explains Heller. “The design of the frame, application of the springs, the type of stuffing used in the cushions must all be carefully coordinated to bring about the desired end result.” And perhaps the ultimate test of all good design? “Style is important, but comfort is imperative.”

If a designer can be compared to champagne Heller would likely be a vintage Bollinger, but he prefers the comparison of a simple potter. “You build up from a base with your hands,” he says, “so you need the artistic ability to create a form, which I guess must be an innate gift.” Many

intricate wooden forms hang from the walls of his workshop, alongside an assortment of different sewing machines and huge collection of pattern books. These are the raw materials Heller uses to continually mold his reputation for creating custom furniture designs for a discerning clientele. Piles of design magazines on his desk featuring articles about Heller or photographs of his work, are testaments to his long and varied career.

In keeping with his perfectionist approach to creating quality, Heller is fastidious about the raw materials he uses. Great emphasis is placed on incorporating natural fibers into his work. Heller highlights an interesting Eco-concept in this approach. “Reupholstering an object is a primary method of recycling. It creates a new lease of life for an old piece of furniture and thus saves resources.” Probably few people have ever considered the common sense implications of this strategy, yet it has valuable application in relation to the conservation of finite supplies of old and new natural resources. Heller believes strongly in using natural materials like cotton, silk and down and not just from the aesthetic standpoint, he remains concerned about the environmental aspects of synthetics. Sheep, cotton and flax plants, on the other hand, are renewable resources and their products are biodegradable, which Heller maintains, is all to the good.

But putting Eco issues aside for just a moment, I ask him if he is concerned about his furniture legacy. Will his sofas ever be passed down like a Bauhaus, for instance? He laughs quite modestly, “I really don’t know but I did once see an ad in the Bargainhunter which said “original Heller furniture”. There is no disputing this fact, whatever the fate of the furniture he is a European original.

