



Beyond fast furniture

By adding handmade pieces into your home and avoiding cheap mass-produced options, you will enrich your spaces with meaningful objects that are worth keeping and passing down to future generations.

Words JESSICA BELLEF

What's the most thoughtful present you've received? There is a chance the memorable gift wasn't a voucher or a pre-packaged hamper, but rather an item that was lovingly made especially for you. While you may express gratitude for anything gifted, a handmade gesture is something you will likely cherish for years to come. Just as second-hand furniture is infused with stories of the past, a handmade object is imbued with the energy of its maker. A handcrafted object is intrinsically valuable, regardless of the cost of the materials, because it signifies an investment of time and care. When you add handcrafted items to your home, collected mindfully over time, you curate a thoughtful space that is rich with story and meaning. You invite warmth with things that have been shaped, knitted, knotted, printed and painted by human hands. At the heart of handmade is a connection with others and a step toward a sustainable way of living.

A resurgence of the maker movement has shifted perceptions of how a home can be created and decorated. The "farm to table" approach that has swept the culinary world is slowly stirring up the furniture and homewares retail sector. If knowing the origin of your food is important to you, consider your sofa and think about where it has come from. Or the mug sitting next to you, filled with steaming tea. Can you pinpoint its beginning or track its journey to your living room? Parallel to the experience of eating a homemade meal created with produce freshly pulled out of the dirt, owning a handcrafted item bought directly from the maker is a pure and wholesome pursuit. It's a way of life that harks back to pre-industrial times, before machinery

produced things en masse and daily life centred on the local community.

The rise of fast furniture

Fred Kimel is the founder of Handcrafted, an online platform that profiles independent craftspeople and their wares as a response to a retail landscape flooded with mass-produced, inferior-quality products with a limited lifespan. "Like many people, I developed a kind of nostalgia for a bygone era in which I hadn't even lived: a simpler time when people made things to last many generations — and they looked after them," says Kimel. A walk around your neighbourhood during the next council clean-up will reveal the scale of the disposable furniture issue that our society is facing. The rise of "fast furniture" has seen an increase in cheap, mass-produced pieces that are designed for obsolescence, meaning they have a limited lifespan. "As a result, [mass-produced items] aren't made to last and can't be repaired easily. Instead, they end up on our kerbsides for hard-rubbish collections," Kimel explains.

Like fast food, produced with low-grade ingredients that have little nutritional value, fast furniture may fill an immediate gap, but the benefits fizzle out quickly. Fast furniture offers budget-friendly ways to fill homes with the latest interior design trends, and it gives shoppers a quick and convenient solution to pressing home decorating needs. However, corners are often cut to reduce production and shipping costs in the mass-production model, to the detriment of the product, the customer experience and the environment. When you purchase directly from a local maker, the intermediaries of manufacturing and logistics are removed, and the process



of creating the product is more transparent. The fact that you can put a name and face to a handmade object imbues it with authenticity and meaning.

Throwaway culture

The low prices attached to mass-produced items may be appealing, but they come with hidden costs to the environment. The inferior quality of fast furniture leaves it with a very low resale value, and the initial small financial outlay makes it easier to discard a piece once it starts to show signs of wear. A "throwaway culture", coupled with an insatiable appetite for newness, means that Australia is currently dealing with waste management problems. Australians generate about 67 million tonnes of waste per year, according to the Australian Government's Department of Agriculture, Water and Environment; 40

Photography Getty Images



The rise of “fast furniture” has seen an increase in cheap, mass-produced pieces that are designed for obsolescence, meaning they have a limited lifespan.

per cent of that waste cannot be processed or recycled and ends up as landfill. When it comes to homewares, instead of “making do and mending”, the concerning trend leans toward discarding and replacing.

Cheap fix

In modern society, where convenience and speed are paramount, and everything has to be done for the lowest price possible, handmade items represent a meaningful, slow-paced way of life. The prevalence of social media and streaming services that rely on a relentless cycle of content has led to a society that is trend-conscious and hungry for newness. Add to that the rising

popularity of home renovating shows, and the spotlight has shifted onto what used to be a completely private domain — our homes. According to research by Roy Morgan in 2016, 1.6 million Australians bought homewares within a four-week period, spending nearly \$133 million between them. In its 2019 report *Inside Australian Online Shopping*, Australia Post stated that online spending on homewares increased by more than 20 per cent in 2018. Trend-driven items that were once considered a luxury are now available at a lower cost via discount department stores, where a new cushion can cost the same as a takeaway coffee. The lure of

a cheap and cheerful quick fix seems to be too hard to pass up, and it has become the norm to upgrade or replace items when the latest product hits the shelves.

Custom care

Fast furniture, made with inferior materials and churned out via a conveyor belt, has little intrinsic value. A handmade piece can indeed cost more than a factory-produced equivalent from a big-box retailer, but the added cost is an investment in something more significant than the materials, especially if you have an item custom-made. “The true value of getting something custom-made will often exceed the price paid,” says Kimel. “You’re getting exactly what you want directly from an expert local craftsman, receiving a high-quality sustainably made product that is built to last, while also helping to preserve and



support time-honoured skill.” Personalising a piece to suit your individual tastes will nurture a strong emotional connection with that piece. When you get to choose the slab of timber that is to become your dining table, the table becomes an extension of yourself. You will value the piece more highly than a store-bought item with which you have no emotional ties, and the decision to throw it away will be weighed carefully. Working with an artisan, whether it be a carpenter, a lighting designer or a quilt maker, also gives insight into the making process and strengthens an appreciation of craftsmanship. Co-creation adds value.

Handmade for healing

A handcrafted piece possesses weight and presence; it’s an outward expression of the inner self, symbolising time well spent and a job completed. The process of making provides value by giving the maker a sense of purpose. Think about the experience of pulling a perfectly baked cake out of the oven or arranging a bunch of flowers just so. The feelings of accomplishment associated with creating something out of nothing are instant mood-boosters, elevating levels of confidence and motivation. Making something by hand produces many emotional and mental benefits, and studies indicate that handiwork, such as sewing or knitting, decreases anxiety and elevates mood. In their book *The Creativity Cure: A Do-It-Yourself Prescription for Happiness*, Carrie Barron and Alton



A handcrafted object is intrinsically valuable, regardless of the cost of the materials, because it signifies an investment of time and care.

Barron, a psychiatrist and physician respectively, say, “If we stop using our hands in the way they were meant to be used — to construct, create, repair, stir, mix, and manipulate — we churn within and become depressed.” When you make something with your hands, the repetitive nature of the movements relaxes and frees the mind. In an increasingly digitised world, creating something tangible gives

the maker a real-world experience, with a physical outcome that can be held, caressed and shared.

Head, heart and hand

You invest in something that matters when you embrace handmade, whether you are purchasing a handcrafted piece from an artisan or you get crafty and create something yourself. A handcrafted object



home
HOMEMADE



takes on the warmth and soul of the maker, reflecting their creative expression and the careful process of making. A home layered with handcrafted pieces represents a considered and mindful approach to decorating. Your wellbeing and the health of the environment is supported when you choose handmade over mass-produced.

The good news is that consumption patterns are shifting in Australia, as noted in the phasing out of single-use products like disposable coffee cups, straws and

How to harness the happiness of handmade

- Visit local handmade markets, galleries and open-studio events, and support the makers.
- Make art and craft with the little ones in your life and display the outcomes.
- Fill your day with simple handcrafted pleasures, like lathering up with a bar of handmade soap or lighting a scented candle.
- Enrol in an art or craft workshop and get lost in the process of making.

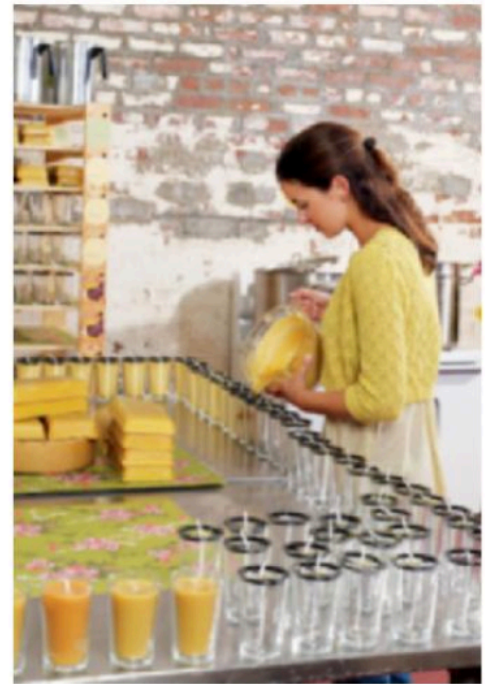


plastic bags. Further to that, global research by Unilever in 2017 reported that a third of consumers choose to buy brands based on their social and environmental impact, and one in five consumers say they would choose a brand if its sustainability credentials were made clearer on the packaging or in the product's marketing. When it comes to buying items for your home, Kimel espouses valuable advice: "Choose carefully and invest in a smaller number of pieces that you really value. This change of mindset is the only sustainable path forward." It pays to decorate your home with head, heart and hand.

The benefits of handmade

Handmade is more sustainable

Independent artisans who create small quantities will inflict less of a negative impact on the environment compared with the businesses that mass manufacture and distribute widely. Energy consumption, waste and the creation of damaging by-products is minimised by the hand-making process, and high-quality handcrafted items are built to last, meaning they are less likely to end up as landfill.



Handmade celebrates traditional skills

According to the World Crafts Council Australia, crafts are intrinsic to the idea of what makes a civilisation. Ancient societies and their cultures were built by hand; handcrafted objects from generations past tell unique and significant cultural stories. By supporting artisans who employ traditional techniques, you are contributing to the longevity of that practice and keeping an essential facet of culture alive.

Handmade can be customised

While customisation and bespoke items can be more expensive than an "off-the-shelf" purchase, the satisfying result is a piece that is tailored to your exact needs. You gain an insight into the time and energy required to create a piece when you speak directly with a crafts person, adding value and meaning to the final design.

Handmade supports individuals

When you purchase a handcrafted item, you are helping an independent maker by providing them with the means to continue making. Championing someone's creativity is a feel-good situation for all involved; the maker gains a sense of pride and purpose, and you become the custodian of a special piece that brings you joy.

Handmade items are unique

Slight imperfections in a handcrafted item represent the presence of the maker. They are a beautiful reminder of the item's origin and uniqueness. Reject a "one size fits all" approach to homemaking and choose handcrafted items that add a layer of meaning. It's a step toward creating a nest that genuinely reflects your individuality. 🌿

Jessica Bellef is a Sydney-based author and freelance interior stylist. Find her at jessicabellef.com or @jessicabellef on Instagram.

Photography Getty Images