

# Creating for the sheer joy of it

*Bob Mitchell is combining art with furniture and coming up with unique creations*

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THE NEWSWEEKLY

More than a decade ago, a burnt-out Bob Mitchell retired from a 30 year career in furniture design and thought he'd never return.

"When I left the furniture business, I thought it was for good. It was stressful. Calls from manufacturers telling you they 'want this today,'" he said.

He spent his new-found freedom doing what had inspired him to go to art school in the first place: painting and photography. But just seven months ago, Mitchell, who has lived in Vero for 12 years with his wife, Barbara, started designing furniture again. This time, however, it wasn't to earn a paycheck, it was for the sheer joy and creativity of it.

"I wanted to design something that had never been done before," he said.

And he did. His beautiful, eclectic, handcrafted tables, each in its own unique shape, evoke Berlin Bauhaus art of the 1930s. But it's not just the attractive shapes the tables come in that is so alluring, it's what they're covered with: digital paintings by Mitchell. In fact, it was while working on a digital painting that he had his 'ah-ha' moment.

"When doing my art one day, I thought, why don't I use my furniture background and tie it back with my art," said Mitchell.

He begins with rough sketches, and once he decides on a table structure, he focuses on the

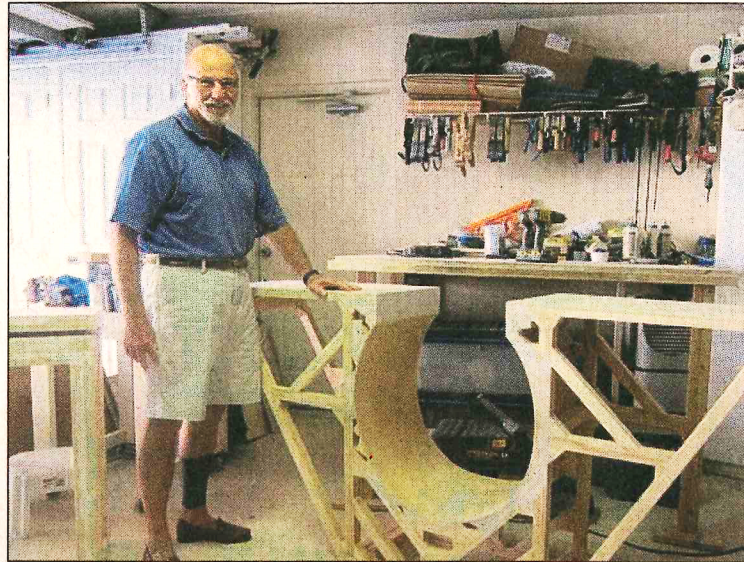


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Bob Mitchell with a work in progress.

painting that will cover it. He either makes a digital painting from scratch, or makes a digital copy of one of his hand-painted works using a highly sophisticated art copying machine.

Often, he will repeat this process a few times, making 10-15 mock ups of the potential table, which helps him decide which 'sample' he ultimately wants to create. "I (always) want very classic modern Bauhaus, something they have never seen before," said Mitchell. "I like to do things that haven't been done."

Thinking differently has been a constant theme throughout Mitchell's life. In the mid 1970s, after he had spent the first five years of his furniture designing career at Heritage Furniture, he formed his own company in Lenore, N.C., Mitchell Provost, with his friend Greg Provost.

The team built furniture for some major brands including Rooms To Go, Sears, and Desoto.

But the real game-changer happened in the late 70s, when he and Provost started to build furniture for Universal, a small company out of Hong Kong that would eventually become one of the largest, if not the largest, furniture manufacturers in the world.

"We were one of the first companies to work overseas accounts designing in Asia," he said.

Universal hired the two Americans because they wanted to break into the American furniture market and needed American designers to do that. "They were such a start-up. They didn't know how to build furniture, but they wanted to come to the US market so they needed to hire American people in every aspect of the furniture building process," said Mitchell.

This meant he and his partner had to spend a lot of time flying overseas to Asia, where

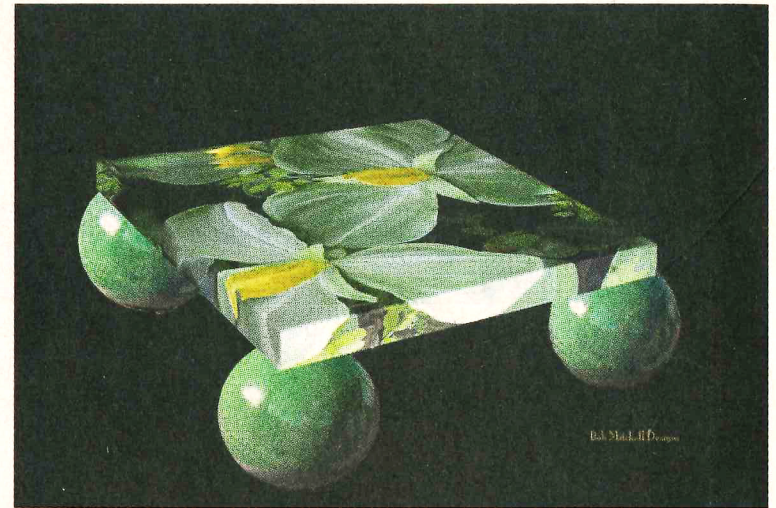


PHOTO BY BOB MITCHELL

One of Mitchell's favorite muses: Nature.

Mitchell and Proust would design the furniture for their home market. Once the pieces were built with the help of local builders, they would be shipped back to the U.S.

After a few years of doing this, Mitchell says he and Proust could see that the future of furniture design might very well be with Asia. But they were in the minority; few others in the American furniture business had the acumen to see Asia's potential because back in the 70s and early 80s, approximately 90 percent of the furniture in the U.S. was made domestically.

"American manufacturers could not grasp the immense changes that were going to happen in furniture back then. They thought Asia would never amount to much," he said.

Were they ever wrong. Today, almost all U.S. furniture is made in Asia because its labor, materials – everything -- is cheaper for American manufacturers.

This makes what Mitchell is currently doing, designing and building the gorgeous tables in his Vero Beach studio, all the more unique.

In the seven months since Mitchell started making the tables, he has sold only one. The venue was an art show at the Vero Beach Museum and his table sold within the first hour for \$1,250. The woman who bought the piece is an international antiques furniture organizer and advised Mitchell to charge at least three times that amount for the next table he sold, a price she said she would have paid if he had charged it.

She also encouraged him to advertise his work, something he is reticent about doing.

"I'm not interested in art for that. I do it for pleasure. That's how I got into it," said Mitchell. "I don't want to start something where there's a marketing situation. Let marketing be itself, whatever that is."