

Art Deco Renaissance

Craftsman David Boucher brings unique Art Deco styling to Rolls-Royce.

Words by **Eli Solomon** Photos from **Rolls-Royce & Boucher & Co.**

A short press release from Rolls-Royce caught my attention recently. Bespoke Art Deco and contemporary furniture maker Boucher & Co crafts stunning coachwork for a Rolls-Royce Ghost; Project is the first collaboration of its kind with an Australian firm; Shagreen derived from sustainable sources.

It brought back fond recollections of another craftsman we had featured way back in *Rewind* 004, West Australian artisan and coachbuilder Cliff Byfield, the Ettore Bugatti of the Southern Hemisphere. Here, what Rolls-Royce had commissioned David Boucher's company to do was on the other side of the Australian continent, out in Toowoomba, Queensland.

The Art Deco period resonates well with *Rewind* and many of our readers. Independent contemporary furniture makers producing bespoke coachwork for top class automobile firms are few and far between in this day and age. We were fascinated to discover that David Boucher and Boucher & Co. are far from your ordinary furniture builder.





BESPOKE ROLLS

One recalls the late motoring historian Leonard Setright’s quote on Rolls-Royce from his tome *Drive On!*

Like Tatlin and Ford, Royce had a head full of machinery – but none of it was allowed out until every known convention had been applied to its perfection...

This spirit has endured under the stewardship of the marque’s custodians. The difference today, of course, is that the factory now builds its own bodies instead of utilising a coachbuilder. The custom work comes later. Owners may desire a personal touch or particular addition such as a custom wooden decanter holder, vanity case with inlaid mother of pearl, or handcrafted case in mahogany or Burmese teak. Nothing out of the ordinary for a Rolls-Royce owner.

SELF-TAUGHT ARTISAN

David has been working with wood for 37 years. He tells me with infectious enthusiasm, “It’s been getting more and more fun. I’m really starting to dig into what it is I love and what I do.” He is referring to the inventive art of woodworking and the exquisite cases that have secret compartments that he specialises in. “It gets even better with a compartment and another secret compartment...it just goes on and on,” he explains. “I liken it to being in an incubator where I’ve got this team of amazing people. The things that we’re able to create and develop are extraordinary,” he elaborates.

David is a self-taught artisan who is now a respected expert on Art Deco furniture. Growing up on a farm in Australia, the Bouchers learnt to fabricate what they needed, necessity, the mother of invention. He is among



a spectrum of world class craftsmen, fabricators and builders living Down Under, such as Cliff Byfield and John Hunting (*Rewind* 003).

“My father was an inventor. I grew up with that real ethos of watching things being made and created out of nothing,” he tells me. Both parents were also heavily involved in the theatre and David grew up imbued with the fascination of magic on the stage.

For a period, he was earning his keep working in a road gang. “One day, I returned home and told my wife that I was sick of digging holes in the ground. There was more to life than

this,” he reveals.

Always good with his hands, his wife suggested he apply his skill to making furniture. At 22, he did just that, reading up on lots of books to understand the techniques involved in woodwork. “I’ve tried a lot of things that didn’t work, but at the end of the day, if you refuse to quit, you are going to win.” This philosophy of dogged determination saved him “from many a dried creek.”

In the 1970s, he started working on very simple pine furniture, when pine wood was popular. A business setback in 1982 saw him and wife Margaret relocate to western Queensland.

Restoration work became his mainstay, and here, David mastered how “real” furniture was made. Eventually, David was approached to make missing pieces of furniture, and from that came commissions for complete pieces. It soon led to creative ideas. “On a bigger piece, I thought we could put some secret compartments in them... That was the beginning. And people just loved secret compartments; they loved the trickery. And it just got bigger and bigger. And all these amazing things started to develop. You press a button and this opens, and that comes down...it’s great fun,” he tells me cheerfully.

PUSHING THE BAR

The first time David applied his talent to a car was when he was entrusted with restoration work on a client’s classic Rolls-Royce in Toowoomba. What started as a simple job turned out to be that a lot of the timberwork on the car had to be replaced. From a vintage car, he next found himself working on the interior of a boat.

In March 2013, David was invited to speak to a group of about twenty Rolls-Royce customers at the launch of the Rolls-Royce Art Deco Ghost in Sydney. The showroom was dressed in some of Boucher & Co’s fine work. There, he met Dan Balmer and Paul Harris, general manager and regional director of Rolls-Royce Motor Cars for Asia-Pacific respectively. The subject of exotic hides was discussed, in particular, the use of shagreen and the beautiful finishes Boucher & Co. had developed for furniture. Would, Balmer and Harris inquired, it be possible to do something like this inside a Rolls-Royce?

Over the ensuing nine months, the enormity of the project became evident. “The reality was that it was far, far more difficult to do what I had ever



anticipated that it would be. It turned out to be one of the most difficult projects I had ever done,” recalls David.

EXOTIC HIDE

Rawhide shagreen, it appears, was prized for its durability and greatly favoured amongst the elite of Britain’s Regency era of the late 1700s to 1837. It was a popular material for watch cases, book bindings, cases for scientific instruments and spectacles, and for telescope barrels and sword handles which required a rough texture for better grip.

Similar to rawhide shagreen is the skin of some species of stingray. Calcified, rough surfaces project in place of scales. In more recent times, there has been a renaissance in the use of shagreen, and David

has often incorporated this distinct material into the designs of his bespoke furniture. Working this into the interior of a modern Rolls-Royce Ghost, however, is his most challenging project yet.

One who has inspired David is Émile-Jacques Ruhlmann (d. November 1933) whom the *New York Times* named “Art Deco’s greatest artist” in 2009. It was Ruhlmann who came up with the idea of using stingray skin and sanding the top leather down as raw stingray skin is “bumpy and bony”. The end result is white centres of each of those bones in relief. The final outcome, David tells me, is a beautiful finish.

David was so fascinated by the material that he travelled to France





and Italy to study the techniques involved in processing shagreen. “And then, we started experimenting,” he says.

The length of time it takes to process the hide is about three to four months and uses “around 16 different processes or techniques.” The smooth, pebbly feel of the surface under the fingers belies the painstaking effort required to obtain the finished article. The difficulty, says David, is sanding the bony surface. Once sanded, the hide is inlaid into the timber and then lacquered. The inlay work itself takes several weeks, with a further few more weeks required for the polishing. All of this is done by hand. David relates with satisfaction that a loyal customer has told him, “No one comes close to what you are doing, so I’m going to have to resign myself to the fact that I’m going to have to keep paying you to do what you do.” A worthy compliment, no less.

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ART OF PERFECTION

“I am so inspired by the whole Rolls-Royce story. When you walk up to the car, you look at the beautiful car, and you think, that’s it, it’s a nice car. But that’s just a quarter of the story. You look inside the doors, and you see these amazing finishes in detail, and the craftsmanship that’s in it,” relates David. To have been elected by a brand such as Rolls-Royce to work on a prototype interior is a dream come true for the Australian whose company has become recognised as a very niche global luxury brand. “I’ve been using Rolls-Royce as my yardstick for over 35 years. I spend time thinking, ‘How would Rolls-Royce do this or that?’ Here we are, working with Rolls-Royce,” he muses.

The Ghost entrusted to David is a one-off project for Rolls-Royce to prove that the concept behind the use of shagreen is indeed possible in a car.

It entailed completely new processes for Boucher & Co’s small team of craftsmen. “The end result is that we now understand exactly what can be done, and we have ideas for other things that can be done,” says David.

The final appearance inside the Ghost is a luxurious and smooth finish, protected by a triple compound lacquer to ensure that the material can withstand 30 years of abuse.

What’s next for David is the exciting prospect of experimenting with new techniques and processes using shagreen and other similar materials, and coming up with new creations. One notion comes from a lampshade he created using shagreen. There is talk that the material may be used as innovative lighting overlay to create a soft surreal effect in the interior of a car. ◀

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Shagreen...there were stingray-covered pieces of furniture discovered in King Tutankhamen’s tomb. It goes back a long way. It was used in the 16th century and was really rediscovered in the early 20th century. The Art Deco movement was experimenting and looking for different things, looking for change and innovation.

– David Boucher

