

Modern master

The tangible genius of Gregory Clark

By RYAN DORAN



Gregory Clark blurs the distinction between fine craftsmanship and art and in so doing creates furniture that redefines top drawer.

The Artifact Design Group of Wilton recently released its exclusive line, the Gregory Clark Collection. "It's a very limited edition," said Clark, co-owner of Artifact Design Group. "We don't make more than nine of something. They're very high-end, museum-level products that we enter in shows around the country."

Clark grew up in Redding where his parents owned an antique restoration business and shop. "I more or less spent my whole childhood surrounded by antiques, restoring antiques, collecting antiques," said Clark.

The Gregory Clark Collection pieces sell for upward of \$100,000. The company's original collection, Artifact, provides the furniture maker with his day-to-day businesses volume. "It's a lower price point, for the average wealthy person," Clark said of Artifact. "It still can be customized but is more standardized. It's residential, we sell direct to the consumer, interior designers and architects. Our demographics are the captains of industry, art collectors and we even have some movie star and rock star clients."

Clark, who describes his work as formal contemporary, has recently done work for Keith Richards of The Rolling Stones, whom he describes as, "polite and a real gentleman." For the past eight months, Clark has been looking into opening a showroom in Miami, whose Art Basel Miami Beach show has eclipsed its parent show in Switzerland as one of the world's premier art shows.

Clark's first creations were miniatures furniture pieces. "Like most kids I got really interested and obsessed with it," said Clark. "I began to create more and more of them and selling them." When a gallery owner brought his work to the national show for miniaturists at Lockwood Matthews Mansion in Norwalk, the 11-year-old Clark was rated one of the top 10 miniature furniture makers in the country.

In high school, Clark began building full-scale pieces. A tambour desk he built won a national competition sponsored by Stanley Tools and scholarship money that he applied to Rhode Island School of Design. Clark majored in industrial design and consumer product design. After graduating, Clark pursued product design for 15 years as a freelance for consulting firms. He then went to work for Simco Inc. of Weston, the company responsible for developing the first disposable diaper and the granola bar. Clark began working as an industrial designer for Simco and finished his time there with five years as director of the company. In the course of Clark's career – which includes 35-plus patents – he developed products for brands including Adidas and Schick, creating the first razor to contour to a face. "You build a lot of prototypes with whatever you can get your hands on," said Clark. "I was always building."

After Simco, Clark launched a dot-com shoe company, raising \$5 million dollars and eventually licensing technologies he developed back to companies like Cole Haan and Reebok. Furniture was Clark's first passion, however, and after trying to develop his own shoe brand he felt he should try to develop a furniture brand. "Rather than take my ideas and for a relatively small fee, give them to a company, I could develop them and grow something," said Clark. "I was no longer a gun for hire. Here we continue to build equity and our reputation grows every year."

Clark and his wife, Elizabeth, Artifact Design Group's other co-owner, traveled the Italy International Furniture Fair to gauge whether they could compete. "I came back thinking I can do this," said Clark. "We built the first prototypes in our garage and built the first design studio in our house. We designed the business to be scalable so we can grow it." Three years ago, Clark finally bought land on Route 7 in Wilton. "We needed something special and I couldn't find anything out there," said Clark. Clark designed and general contracted the studio and workshop himself. The studio has the furniture workshop in the back allowing clients to peer into the dusty world of fine carpentry as they walk to the showroom.

"It's fun; our clients can come and see it being done," said Clark. "They become part of the process."