

# DECORATIVE ARTS

## 2018 Started Like a Firecracker.

Last week I received an email invitation to my ten-year high school reunion and this week the company I have been working with for the last 9 years, Capocchi Armadale has closed its doors for the last time. I wouldn't say these two instances affected me negatively, but I definitely felt compelled to write this article.

When I left high school, like a lot of people I had no idea what I was going to do. I mean I seriously had no idea! I had some short-term plans, to go to schoolies, to play football and play in the band I was in. However, no real goals or direction. I loved playing music and considered going to TAFE to study songwriting and composition. I also enjoyed making things, I wasn't very good at it but I enjoyed the "idea" of making things like beds, sculptures, houses, lamps - whatever. Working away in a workshop seemed "cool and creative" to me. Which looking back, is a crazy way to make a decision, like many people I was making a life choice based on what seemed cool to an eighteen-year-old. I just feel so lucky and grateful that I nailed my first major choice.



At school I studied Design Technology, I really enjoyed solving problems and I was fascinated that a piece of timber could become something useful. Music and Woodwork may sound like I had options or a plan, but the issue was that I had no confidence in my ability and I was genuinely average at both. I was ok with guitar and I liked woodwork, but it didn't come naturally to me and I wasn't great with my hands, so I was very apprehensive.

Three months after school finished, in early 2009 I was jobless and my Girlfriend at the time even tried to line me up with a job at a factory through her Dad because they were certain I was doing nothing and going nowhere. Quick side note, I went to that job interview with no shoes and no CV, strangely I didn't get it. At the same time, my brothers and five friends were working at a factory down the road and they wanted me to join them. The money was very good for an eighteen-year-old with no skills, but it seemed like a dead-end and I have never been the kind of person to follow a crowd.

2009 was bleeding into March, four months had gone by and I was still not studying and not working. I decided I would look for an apprenticeship. I figured I had to earn money, so I may as well get some sort of qualification while I was figuring out what I wanted to do and working with timber was my main objective. I flirted with the idea of starting a plumbing apprenticeship because everyone was adamant it paid so well. However, after failing an entrance exam for a Pre-Apprenticeship and after attending a job interview with a Plumber, I quickly discovered it wasn't for me. I managed to organise ten to fifteen job interviews with different trade groups - kitchen cabinet makers, carpentry teams, door makers and joinery companies. I was completely honest with every interviewer, explaining I'm only going to work here long term if I enjoy it and I really don't know what I want to do in life. I received job offers for almost all of them, I declined them all. At that time building kitchen cabinets or making doors again and again seemed so repetitive, I felt like it would grind my soul into wood shavings.

Fair to say my family and friends were very confused by my lack of direction and couldn't understand how a beggar could be such a chooser. I began searching furniture companies and had become extremely interested in slick, minimal, modern furnishings with clean lines and simple finishes. Then, I stumbled across a job description online, I remember the title was "Entry Level Decorative Art and Antique Furniture Restorer". Antiques were the other end of the spectrum for me, the opposite to the aesthetic that I enjoyed. Having very little idea of that what the job title meant and what the job entailed, I was interested, and I applied. I received a call from a Consultant at MAX Employment. After a brief chat, he couldn't believe I was only eighteen, commenting on how well I spoke and how confident I sounded. I am an extrovert and when I was eighteen I resided somewhere between confident and cocky, I probably still do. Anyway, he organised an interview for me at Capocchi Antiques, in Armadale.

After trawling through the Capocchi website, I was absolutely amazed. I couldn't believe what I was seeing, in fact, I had no idea what I was seeing. Turned Timber Legs, Brass Mounted Commodes, Bronze Sculptures, Wrought Iron Hall Stands, Marble Top Deco Buffets, Crystal Chandeliers, Chinoiserie Cabinets, Designer Italian Lighting, and Ornate Mirrors.



I wanted this job, I wanted it bad, I wanted it so bad that when it was time for the interview, I dressed in a suit. No joke, a suit, I don't know what I was thinking, all I remember was that I wanted to impress these guys. The suit, by the way, wasn't a good suit, it was dark brown, op-shop purchase. I think I had worn it to a year 10 social and Oaks Day 2007. I don't want to bang on about my outfit, but I matched that brown suit with a white shirt, white belt, and white shoes. I must have been an absolute sight, I am getting horribly embarrassed just thinking about it!

Off I went in my 1989 Holden Apollo and drove 30kms to Capocchi in High Street Armadale. I had never been to Armadale, I had never driven on tram tracks and my first impression was that Armadale seemed very affluent. Little beachside Jamie, grew up in Mordialloc and felt like a fish out of water. Their interiors blew me away, which made me a little nervous for the interview. Nevertheless, the interview went very well, I was offered a three-month trial and told I would be working at their workshop in Oakleigh.

Although I had not met any of my new co-workers, I was extremely excited to start my new job. When I first arrived at the Capocchi Workshop, I was shocked and amazed. To someone that did not understand furniture, clocks, brass work, sculptures, and lighting - it looked like junk, expensive junk, but junk nonetheless. Everything was stacked on top of itself and to an untrained eye, the stock looked dusty, faded and damaged. On the other hand, the pieces that were being restored and delivered to the shop in Armadale were looking astonishing, I had to learn more.



The head restorer at Capocchi was an Englishman by the name of John Atkinson, an absolute master craftsman who had worked with the company for thirty years. This guy could do everything, nothing was too difficult. He could build and turn anything out of timber, he could colour match any finish, repair marble, fix clocks, he could weld, braze, he was a master with a spray gun, he tooled leather, bronzed statues, cut and coloured glass and he did it all with a thick east-end of London accent. John never had a 'Job Description', John's ability was so broad, he never fit into any category, he was just a problem solver. I knew that he was my guy, I knew I had found someone special. Although he was abrasive at times, I was sure that if I could stay close, learn and listen to him - I too could do it all.



Capocchi had little interest in taking me on as an apprentice, they wanted me to work and learn onsite. Which I can appreciate, and I definitely did the majority my learning through working with John, but I knew I needed a qualification. I kept asking Capocchi if I could go to school to study Furniture Maker or Furniture Design and they kept saying no. So, I just put my head down and worked, my goal was to be the best employee they had ever had. I was undoubtedly the least talented and least knowledgeable person in the workshop. But my plan was to outwork everyone, I would work any amount hours they asked, I would work on any

job they wanted, no matter how mundane or filthy. I tried to finish everything to the highest possible standard I could, and I never, ever complained. I did this for 12 months, then I hit them with an ultimatum; either I go to school or I leave. I'm so proud of myself, at that age to be so persistent, and willing to put in the work necessary to build up some leverage in the company and ultimately achieve my goal of going to furniture making school.

I completed my apprenticeship a year early because I was on a mission to learn as much as I could and get back to working full time to help the business and be the best restorer I could possibly be. Furniture making is different from most trades, as it doesn't have to adhere to any kind of Australian Standards - if you work hard, fast and finish everything asked - you're signed off.

For over eight years I worked hand in glove with John Atkinson and I absorbed everything he generously taught me. I learnt it all and I'm so happy I did because for the last two years I have been the head restorer, running the Capocchi Workshop. This may not be a big moment for most people, but for me, it was the biggest achievement in my life. To be doing something I absolutely love, and I get to do it every single day is phenomenal. What makes it extra special, is that the first five years I spent working as a restorer, kind of sucked. Honestly, I swept floors, cleaned toilets, scrubbed bass mounts, stripped paint, sanded timber for days at a time, polished scratches out of plastic and waxed an ungodly amount of furniture. However unenjoyable the task, I knew I was learning and I found that stimulating, for the most part. I also worked crazy long hours meeting every deadline possible, which I actually enjoy - I love deadlines.



I also owe a great deal to the owners of the company Phil and Liz Capocchi, they have been dream bosses. I have learnt so much about interior design and space perception from Liz, who is an absolute interior Jedi. We have set up countless displays, photo shoots, house, and furniture auctions together and she taught me a whole different side of the industry and I am so grateful. Phil Capocchi has imparted incredibly valuable business and practical advice too. Phil has always pushed me to learn new skills and get the best out of me. He would fly all sorts of different items from Europe to Melbourne, some things I had never seen

and had no idea how to fix and he would always say "you're going to have to learn because you're fixing it". That trust he placed in me is something I never took for granted.

Phil and Liz are now retiring, and I have spent the last two weeks installing the Capocchi Collection Auction, with Leonard Joel's Auctioneers. Which will be the final auction of their stock and selling at scale. At the same time, I have helped open an Antique and Vintage Furniture and Decorative Arts shop called Capocchi Collingwood with Ange Capocchi and Steve Mckinnon, Phil and Liz's daughter and son-in-law. We are all so excited, positive and enthusiastic about this new business, the new showroom and new workshop in Smith Street Collingwood. It only felt right to reminisce and review the journey.



I'm so grateful for my time at Capocchi and it is all thanks to that uninformed, naïve, eighteen-year-old, who waited for five months declining jobs offers, while everyone around him was working or going to university, he sat jobless until he committed to the job he liked. Capocchi Armadale taught me so much, it has shaped and prepared me and now I have landed in a place where I am enthusiastic and driven to work harder, achieve more and grow more. Right now, I am fascinated by how time changes everything and I'm so excited for the future and ready to embrace the changes the next ten years has to offer.