



Milan Direct founders Ruslan Kogan, left, and Dean J. Ramler



Above left: Eero Saarinen's 1948 Womb chair; above, Arne Jacobsen's Swan chair; below, Charles and Ray Eames' classic design; below centre, the iconic Barcelona chair design by Mies van der Rohe

# Hooked on classics

Iconic furniture designs of the 20th century are now off the prohibitive list with the help of two Aussie furniture lovers. By SHARI TAGLIABUE

**M**OST of us know what it's like to have champagne tastes on a beer budget, and even more frustrating is dreaming of sleek Euro-chic but having to settle for comfort over charisma. Hello budget-priced puffy couches. For those who covet classic designer furniture, the investment required to furnish your home in iconic pieces is hard to stack up against mortgage repayments, school expenses and the cost of living.

Melbourne lad Dean J. Ramler might have grown up surrounded by couches but he's no slouch. He worked for eight years in the family furniture business that his grandfather founded. He also studied for a double degree in marketing and management, so at 26 years of age and with time in Europe under his belt, he was well equipped to recognise what he thought was a gap in the market.

"We wanted to buy an Eames reproduction for ourselves, and couldn't afford \$2000. When we looked into it we found you could easily sell it for \$1000 and still have a profit ... \$2000 is ridiculous. One company had the market to themselves for ten years," he said incredulously.

The concept of reproduction furniture might ruffle the feathers of purists, but Dean says that all furniture is a reproduction of a design.

"All of these products had patents on them for the first 50 years, and all those patents expired at the end of the '90s. There are 2000 companies in Europe, the US and Asia making these reproductions. They were designed in the '20s, '30s and '40s, so you're either buying a reproduction or a very old chair," he said.

Dean and his business partner Ruslan



Kogan went to China and visited around 100 factories. They shortlisted the ones they thought were the best, and now have a burgeoning business, with orders doubling each month.

"We literally sell direct from the containers to the public. It took us all day to unload the first container, before we realised it was probably better to outsource that!" he laughed.

"We started with one container and that went really well, we had a great response. We now have around 20 full containers on the water, and our bargaining power has increased. "Customers love it because we cut out all the middlemen. We've just negotiated with a few of the factories to drop our prices," he said.

With all the chartbusting artists of furniture design represented, the only perceivable

problem is having to decide between a Le Corbusier or an Eames, and that's just two of the famed designers whose work is reproduced. There are other options too – you can have the fabled Mies van der Rohe Barcelona chair in the synthetic 'classic' versions for \$399, or in the 'Premium' version made of Italian leather for \$579.

"Our competitors sell the same chair for \$2000," he said.

So if you thought those Barcelona chairs you coveted were non-reproduction because they were thousands of dollars, think again. They are, so it looks like the number's up for exorbitant mark-ups. The imported furniture gravy train has officially derailed thanks to Dean and Ruslan's 'Style for All' attitude.

"Our aim is to make designer furniture available for all Australians," said Dean.

Now style needn't be the province of the uber-rich, and that's probably just what the original designers intended.

**"Our aim is to make designer furniture available for all Australians"**

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