



Frank Pollaro

FRANK POLLARO is the owner of Pollaro Custom Furniture Inc., a 45-person fine furniture shop in Hillside, N.J. Founded in 1988, Pollaro specializes in custom-made art furniture for residences, superyachts and select corporate environments. The style of the work spans a variety of periods from classical to Art Deco to modern. Pollaro is the pre-eminent source for recreations of the master works of Émile-Jacques Ruhlmann. His work is collected by connoisseurs and art collectors on five continents. The furniture features rare and exotic materials combined with impeccable craftsmanship. Frank is considered a leading expert on veneering and inlay work. He has lectured nationally on veneering, business and the work of master furniture designer Ruhlmann. Pollaro's clients include more than 50 of Forbes's Richest List Members, CEOs such as Larry Ellison, Jeffrey Katzenberg and David Geffen, as well as celebrities including Brad Pitt, Angelina Jolie, Robert DeNiro, Jerry Seinfeld and Alec Baldwin. His work has been featured in *Architectural Digest*, *Forbes*, *Elle Décor*, *Art & Antiques*, *Departures* magazine, the *Malibu Times*, *The New York Times*, as well as on HGTV's "Modern Masters." His articles on the craft have been published in *Fine Woodworking*, *Woodshop News*, *Woodshop Business*, *Custom Woodworking Business* and many others. Pollaro has been awarded five separate U.S. design pat-

ents for various original piano designs for Steinway & Sons. Pollaro has built more Steinway Art Case pianos than any firm in history. Recently, the Pollaro team designed, engineered and built Steinway's serial number 600,000 piano, a Model D Concert Grand Piano called "The Fibonacci," which sold for a record price.

On the Professional Side

After one year at The Art Institute of Philadelphia, Frank realized interior design was not for him. He missed the tactile feel of cutting wood and creating things with his hands. In 1988, he founded Pollaro Custom Furniture. He took out an advertisement in *New Jersey Monthly* magazine hoping to get exposure to potential clients in his general geography. The ad cost \$350, which was a huge amount of money for an out-of-work and broke kid from Jersey. But at 21, he had a business strategy of running as many ads as possible in magazines and newspapers. His hope was to turn a 300-square-foot garage into a furniture and cabinet shop. Turns out, one of those ads landed Frank his first job, a buffet with ebony details, that sold for \$3,500. With that first job he also hired his first employee, Jerry Marano, who was a close friend, and who still works with Frank today. Jerry is the director of finishing.



IRIBE CLUB CHAIR.
*Museum-quality reproduction
of a Paul Iribe design, circa
1913. Hand-carved, 24k gold
gilt wood. Hair on hide and
genuine python skin.*



ART DECO-STYLE CABINET.

Amboyna burl with synthetic ivory details. This cabinet is inspired by Ruhlmann and is in the Art Deco style.

EBONY COCKTAIL TABLE

TOP. *Macassar ebony. 50" long x 36" wide. Radial basket weave in Macassar ebony bow-shaped dining table. The veneer pattern is a 96-piece sunburst with faux ivory dots and dentil details.*



Frank always wanted to make fine furniture but realized he needed to accept work from four different kinds of customers to keep enough money coming in: kitchen and built-in cabinetry, architectural millwork, high-end furniture and museum-quality furniture. The difference between high-end furniture and museum-quality furniture was in the attention to details and materials. As the workload increased, so did his shop space, number of employees and growing pains. By 1995, the business was at full speed ahead but its financials were a train wreck.

Due to a liability issue with a glue manufacturer, and the subsequent damages, Frank's company had to re-manufacture many projects at no charge to the clients, in order to maintain his reputation. This left his company in significant debt, with money owed to the IRS, suppliers, banks, employees, family and friends. This was a turning point. Frank had to convince all debtors that he needed time and patience while he restructured the company's finances. They agreed and over a period of three years, he finally paid everyone in full.

In 1995, with more than \$600,000 worth of debt, it was clear that they weren't making money. At that time, Frank was doing work for Steve Beck, a retired CEO with an M.B.A. from Stanford. Steve offered to help Frank with his business problems as a consultant. Steve showed Frank how to dissect each area of the business, and how to design solutions for each financial problem. Steve's goal was to help Frank to get his financial portfolio to be as successful as his furniture portfolio.

Steve found that the only area of profitability was the production of museum-quality furniture. The other three sectors were losing between 15 and 80 percent – about 33 percent on average. Steve recommended that Frank stop building three-quarters of the pieces he was making and focus on one sector: museum-quality furniture.

Frank told Steve that if he stopped doing three-quarters of the business there would be no more money coming in. Stopping most of the business wasn't a choice.

Steve replied: "You don't understand. If you do these jobs you are losing money. You're better off not doing them. Even if you stand still you'll make more money." That was a hard pill to swallow and it took an immense amount of discipline and focus to turn the ship around.

Discipline is learning how to say no to jobs that will not be profitable. Focus is concentrating on the jobs that have the most profit potential, and then making sure that they are carefully engineered so that every dollar can be realized. Frank says the most important lesson for his company's transformation was developing the mantra: "What you focus on grows." His focus was on making the best furniture in the world, which in turn made his furniture company the best. This didn't happen overnight. In 2005, he focused on museum-quality furniture only and gross sales were much lower than previous years. But his earnings were up, just as Steve said. As each year unfolded, his company and reputation grew, and today Pollaro Custom



DINING TABLE. *Macassar ebony with synthetic ivory dentils, and featuring Dupré Lafon dining chairs.*

Furniture Inc. is without a doubt the best museum-quality furniture company in the world. Pollaro now employs 45 people in administrative, furniture making, finishing, gilding, eggshell work, carving, metalworking and upholstery roles, all housed in a 60,000-square-foot workshop. The shop utilizes no computer-controlled equipment, and they pride themselves on hand work. Frank contends that CNC machines leave the furniture devoid of vitality. So instead, Pollaro has a collection of old American machinery, some pieces dating back to 1897. The shop has abundant lighting, clean air and an acoustical ceiling that provides a quiet environment, even when the biggest machines are running.

There have been other business ventures that Frank has explored. One was Flamingo Veneers, a company dedicated to selling high-quality hardwoods and veneers. It was a natural fit because Frank was already purchasing some of the finest veneers in the world. His thought was to help make some of those available to custom furniture shops around America that might not have the sourcing capabilities to buy quality material. But selling veneer detracted from the core business of building furniture and he closed the company in 2000.

In 2008, Brad Pitt commissioned a custom desk from Pollaro Custom Furniture. Frank personally delivered the desk to Brad's chateau in the south of France. During the installation, Brad and Frank found that they had a common passion for furniture and fine details. They discussed design history and their appreciation of materials, old and new. Most importantly, they shared a commitment to perfection.

During their discussion, Frank noticed a sketch book on a nearby table and was intrigued by the hundreds of sketches that Brad had created during a 10-year period. Frank encouraged Brad to allow his company to transform his drawings into three dimensions. Brad enthusiastically agreed to move forward. In reviewing the sketches, they selected what would become the initial pieces of the Pitt-Pollaro collection, which is still actively producing Pitt-designed, Pollaro-made custom furniture.

Today, 90 percent of Pollaro's work is original in design; about 10 percent is in the Ruhlmann style. More than 50 percent of the work is chairmaking. Pollaro fits each chair to the exact size and comfort level required by the client, adjusting dimensions, angles and firmness to create the most comfortable chair that money can buy. Working exclusively for the



DEMILUNE TABLE. *Museum-quality side table in the style of Ruhlmann. Genuine Macassar ebony (Diospyros*

celebica) base with narra top and tier in sunburst-matched pattern. Nickel sabots. Hand-polished finish.



AIRLINE CHAIR. *Reproduction of an original chair designed by Karl Emanuel Martin (KEM) Weber, circa*

1934, and commissioned by Walt Disney Studios in California.



**STEINWAY FIBONACCI
PIANO 7.** *Macassar ebony and
bronze with inlaid synthetic
ivory. 600,000th Limited
Edition Steinway & Sons
Fibonacci Piano*



richest people and doing the finest work within the last century, Frank truly is living the dream of currently being the finest furniture maker on the globe.

On the Personal Side

I met Frank at Anderson Ranch in the late 1980s. He had just started his business and was looking for new techniques to incorporate into his fine furniture. At the time my business was already 10 years old with more than 30 employees, so we each had similar interests. Like Frank, my company focused on custom cabinets, fine furniture, architectural millwork and stair components. I knew firsthand the hardships he would have to get through. Though Frank was a young kid from Jersey, I could tell he had talent beyond talent and the confidence to use it.

Frank was just 28 years old when he taught his first class at MASW. He was good friends with Frank Klausz, so they decided to come and teach during the same week. I called them Frank Sr. and Frank Jr. Frank Sr. taught a cabinetmaking class, and Frank Jr. taught a veneering class. It's a tradition at the school on Tuesday evening to have a dinner followed by a slide

presentation spotlighting the work of the visiting instructors. Frank Sr., being the elder, wanted to go second, which made Frank Jr. the warm-up act. I think the world of Frank Sr., but at 28 years old Frank Jr. had a slide presentation that would have made him the main act against any woodworker in America, and he had the confidence to go with it.

In high school, Frank's shop teacher was William Welch. Frank gave him the nickname "The Chief." The Chief became a lifelong friend of Frank and when he retired from teaching spent most of his days hanging out in Frank's shop. It became a tradition that when Frank would teach at MASW the Chief



CABANEL WRITING DESK.
Museum-quality reproduction of an original Ruhlmann design, circa 1919. Amboyna burl with more than 1,000 hand-cut antique ivory inlays,

*handles and sabots. Eight-piece shagreen (*Dasyatis bleekeri*) stingray skin writing surface with inlaid ivory stringing. Hand-polished finish.*

would come along. I once asked the Chief why he took such a liking to Frank. He told me that Frank was a trouble maker, especially in his class. Somehow Frank found favor in the Chief's eyes and it wasn't long before they developed a respect for each other. The Chief went on to say that he loved Frank like a son and was so proud of how Frank turned out, from a young obnoxious and sometimes ornery kid to a successful businessman. Frank, the Chief and I were together teaching on Sept. 11, 2001, which was a day we all bonded even closer together. The Chief, who was Frank's teacher, mentor and life-long friend, passed away in June of 2009.

Frank went through some tough years when he first started in business. I believe at times he took on teaching jobs at MASW to get away from the stress of his business and possibly to make a little extra money to help cover his payroll for that week. We would often talk about how difficult it was to start and then successfully run a cabinet/furniture business, especially when your employees make more than the owner. Frank was always aggressive in the way he ran his business, sometimes without realizing the costs. As he grew in business savvy, experience and wisdom, his business model also grew and matured. In the mid 1990s he self-published "The Business Manual" as a way to guide upstart woodworking businesses through the minefield that lay ahead. Though Frank is a world-class woodworker, he has moved away from the making and exclusively into the marketing, and there is none better.

I call Frank often to see how he is doing and nearly all my conversations go the same way. "Hey Frank, it's Marc, how's it going?"



LONG RUN TABLE. *Bubinga.*

And in a typical Frank reply, “Man it’s crazy, just crazy. I’m in a limo in England on my way to have lunch with Prince Charles ...” The next time I call it’s the same sort of thing. “Hey Frank, it’s Marc, how’s it going?” And his response is similar. “Man it’s crazy, just crazy. I’m boarding a plane to go spend a few days with Brad (Pitt) at his Chateau Miraval in the South of France ...”

I got an email from Frank back in 2011, two years before he settled down and started a family. It was a farewell to his little buddy, Sal the Yorkshire Terror. Sal was 10 and died from complications due to surgery. I could tell Frank’s keyboard was wet while he was typing. He went on to say that Sal spent his life by his side every day and that he would take Sal to visits with clients around the world. Sal often was used as a prop in Pollaro furniture photos. (What better than an adorable little Yorkie?) Frank would often refer to Sal as a true company man. If you knew the relationship that he had with little Sal you knew how hard it was for him to let him go. A few years previously, Frank had actually cancelled one of his workshops at MASW because Sal was scheduled to have surgery. As the owner of five Yorkies throughout my adult life, I knew exactly what he felt and agreed that we needed to rearrange his workshop.

Today, Frank shows no sign of slowing down; on the contrary, he is gaining steam. His showroom displays his stunning furniture along with veneer and prized wooden slabs from



BAR WITH STOOLS. *Macassar ebony. An Art Deco-inspired Macassar ebony bar with a nickel foot rail and Michelangelo marble top.*

around the world. His shop is full of hand tools, benches made by Frank Klausz and state-of-the-art machinery. He has grown from a cocky young Jersey kid to a sophisticated businessman with charisma, charm and the confidence to go with it.

Frank Pollaro

BIRTH

Born January 17, 1967, Livingston, N.J.

EDUCATION

Bloomfield High School, N.J., 1985
Interior Design, Philadelphia Art Institute,
1986

FAMILY

Married Jennifer (Dubose) Pollaro, 2013;
children: Frank and Eleanora

HOBBIES

Collecting wine

CRAFTSMANSHIP STATEMENT

“Our work begins with nature. We start with the finest and rarest woods and grain patterns and we combine these spectacular woods with extreme attention to detail in design, construction and finishing. We welcome the most complex projects which combine woods, metals and other materials to create comfortable pieces of functional art.”

WEBSITE

www.pollaro.com

HANDED

Right-handed

WHO INSPIRES YOU

Jacques-Émile Ruhlmann.