

# Australian Furniture Designer Rachel Donath on Defying Convention and Viewing Objects as Art

Noted for her sculptural silhouettes and old-world-inspired designs, the Melbourne-based designer is blazing a new trail in Australia and beyond

As the daughter of a professor father and a lawyer mother, Rachel Donath grew up steeped in academia. “I was often surrounded by serious adults, very invested in their careers and the pursuit of knowledge. I didn’t really connect with this side of things and found more alignment with the creatives in my extended family,” recalls the Melbourne-based furniture designer. One person with whom she found particular resonance was her grandmother, an avid collector of pottery, art and textiles. “She was very resourceful, forever reupholstering sofas in new fabrics and sewing handmade toys and dresses for us as kids. When we’d go over to her place, she’d prepare pottery, craft and painting activities for us. There was always an element of learning behind everything, lots of chatter about the history of crafts and materials, and stories and references to ‘bigger picture’ ideas. In this way, the academic and creative sides of my family merged and I was always taught to think deeply and to create with intention,” adds Donath.

Yet a career in design wasn’t immediately on the cards. Following a gap year in Canada, she returned to Australia to study occupational therapy at university, dropping out after a week upon deeming herself a terrible fit. She ultimately found her calling in marketing, although by her own admission, “I’m not made for studying, I much prefer using my hands and getting things done.” Life ahead would involve a ten-year account management stint at News Corp, followed by a tryst with entrepreneurship in the way of her own marketing consultancy (which gave her greater flexibility as a young mother).

Her watershed came during COVID. “Being stuck at home for long periods of time, I had the time to reflect on what I really wanted to do with my life. I have always loved interiors, art and furniture, and decided to fuse these passions into a business,” explains Donath, who sowed the seeds for her venture by sourcing vintage and antique furniture to sell to interior designers, architects and stylists. Her past experience of interacting with small and medium business owners afforded her the business expertise she needed to support her craft practice.

Today, Donath’s signature is distinctly her own. “I honestly couldn’t tell you much about furniture trends. I am very much heart-led in that I follow what I love and what I am drawn to. I am an advocate for individual style and self-expression through fashion, interiors, furniture and art,” she avers. By the same token, she views objects through the lens of art, sculpture in particular, and enjoys creating unexpected pairings and imaginative material mixes. “I love an interesting home, where the eye is drawn to fascinating pieces, each with its own story. I stay away from cookie-cutter designs, instead opting for ones that exhibit a sculptural integrity.”

Amongst Donath's most significant collections is PHOENIX, launched in 2022. Deeply symbolic, the collection—whose crown jewel is a stacked marble console—stands for perseverance, stamina, regeneration and reinvention, qualities that the designer holds in high regard. FORME, unveiled in February 2023, similarly reimagines quotidian objects—namely, headboards, stools, lamps, tables and mirror frames—in sculptural, all-season silhouettes. The idea behind FORME, Donath notes, was to create timeless modern heirlooms, while maintaining small-batch, sustainable production and engaging skilled artisans around the globe.

The success of the back-to-back collections serves as welcome validation for Donath. “When I first started out, I was completely new to the world of interiors with no prior experience or training, and while I loved what I was doing, there was a tinge of doubt as to whether others would respond to my collections and see what I saw in these special pieces,” she remembers. Her hesitations were quelled within a week of launching her business online (she had 200 followers on Instagram at the time), when a well-known interior designer reached out to source pieces for her upcoming projects. “The first invoice I ever prepared in this business was for her. Typing out her name on invoice #001 was a defining moment for me,” adds Donath. Many high-profile designers would soon follow, giving Donath's creations pride of place in some of the most iconic and breathtaking interiors in Australia and beyond.

Her new collection, ART SERIES, launching on August 25th, is testament to her unconventional design bent. Crafted in Italian stone and produced in small batches, the collection includes artisan-made vases, candleholders, trinket bowls, sculptures and trays that echo the wonders of nature. “Each piece draws on the beauty and philosophy of the outdoors to find resonance with, and reflect on, the human experience through timeless, creative expression,” says Donath. ART SERIES takes a leaf from her previous collections, reimagining conventional objects in beautiful, otherworldly forms.

Donath maintains that her inspiration comes from old-world design. “I'm not sure I can name a specific designer who has influenced me; I tend to take elements from old architecture, from nature, from old tiles and paving and patterns. I put as much value in nondescript flea market finds as I do in big-name novelties. I am very much drawn to shapely pieces with interesting detail that I have not seen before or have not seen paired or grouped in a specific way before. I seek out the unconventional and the interesting,” shares the designer.

Now three years in, Donath is witnessing a gradual shift in her customer base. “My clients are predominantly interior designers, sourcing for their clients' homes. But as the business grows, we are reaching the individual too. The common denominator in my customer base is a boldness to defy convention, a timeless approach to styling, and an appreciation for design that pushes beyond ‘what everyone else is doing’,” she says. For the designer, who has many more innovative collections in the offing, this might just be the beginning.