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Designer and Artist

A guide to commissioning bespoke design and artworks

Working with a designer or artist to create a bespoke item often requires a leap of faith. How will you know in advance that they can turn your somewhat intangible needs into concrete real world solutions that you will be happy with? Navigating this relationship can be tricky, so this guide should help you to ask the right questions to find the right person to work with and to get the most out of the working relationship. The focus will be on three dimensional items such as furniture, sculpture and decorative lighting, however some of the points will also be applicable to two dimensional fields such as graphic design or fine art.



Bespoke commission for *Sidewinder* and *Aguaviva*

A match in style and quality

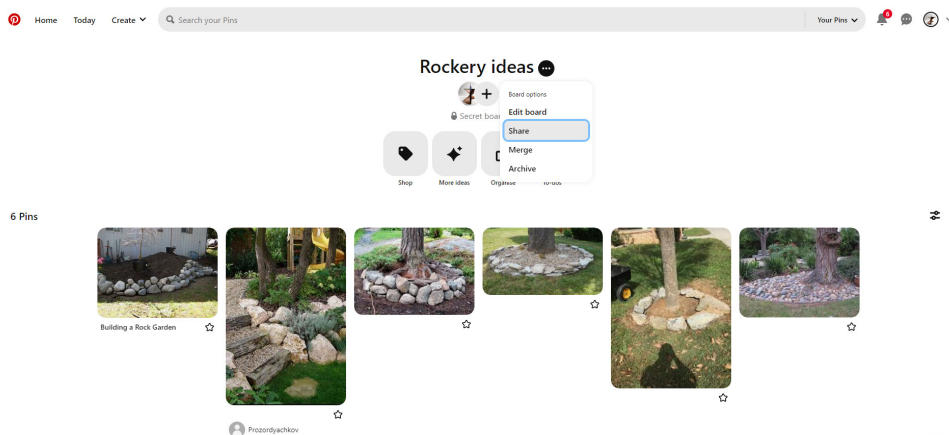
In order to work out whether the designer / artist you are considering is right for your project, you will firstly need to have a sense of their style and skill set. They should have a website that shows their past projects and this should include detail shots so that you can see that the level of quality that they work to. Whilst a good designer or artist can often produce work in a range of styles, if their portfolio demonstrates a style that you like, this will be a very useful starting point. I would always recommend seeing their work in the flesh - this could be in the form of a sample or better still a display piece they have.

A good listener and communicator

It is equally as important to get a feel for their ability to listen to your needs. In your initial discussions, whether remotely or in person, the questions they ask and their replies will give you a greater insight as to whether they will be able to take on board what you want and produce results you are happy with. Whilst they may be an expert in their field, communicating without an overuse of jargon will ensure that you feel that you are both on the same page. If asking them to clarify in simple terms creates friction, they might not be the right person for you. Perhaps you don't know how to articulate what you like but the creative should ask you the right questions to make their work easier in coming up with the appropriate solutions. You don't need to have a PHD in Art history to know that you like (by way of example), simplicity, brightness, curved surfaces or working with certain materials.

Be prepared

If the person you are considering working with is to create the best possible solution, they will need as much input from you as possible. Seeing the environment where the finished piece will be placed will give them plenty of clues in terms of your existing taste, however they may well need more visual references to fill in some of the blanks. The areas to consider are form, size, materials, texture, finish, detailing, functionality and decoration (if appropriate). There may even be a narrative that you would like to be referenced in the piece as well. If you are considering bespoke work in the first place, it is unlikely that the internet will offer you a ready-made illustration which ticks all of the above boxes. It is also worth noting that that most creatives will not be prepared to copy ad verbatim the intellectual property of another person. However if you can source a series of images online that demonstrate certain aspects you do (and don't) like, then the designer's job will be considerably easier. For example many of my clients find Pinterest to be a useful tool to do this. You can save images to a folder with some simple notes - 'I love the curves on the side panel, don't like the sharp detailing, the colour lifts my spirit.' This can then be shared and it opens up the conversation further so the creative may start to understand what it is you like and better still why.



Storing and sharing ideas on a Pinterest board for my own garden project

Clarify the process

Before any work begins you should understand how the commissioning process will actually work. Ordinarily the work will be split into two phases – design and production. Find out how they separate the processes, and at what point you will need to pay them. Perhaps they can demonstrate how previous projects have come together by means of images of the pre-production visualisations, some work in progress photos as well as the finished piece. Sometimes one design proposal may suffice for a simple project however usually you should be given two or three options to choose from.

Design process and fee

Most people will charge a design fee which ensures that you only pay for the production process once you are happy with their proposal whilst also indicating your commitment to the designer/artist. Their initial representations of the finished piece may not tick every box, but 99 times out of 100 their amendments will. Fees can vary depending on two factors; firstly whether you are looking for a completely new concept or something based on an existing idea. The former will require more time in research and idea generation. The second factor is what visualisations/representations are required to illustrate their ideas. Rectilinear pieces can sometimes be shown with a very simple 2D drawing, whilst more complex concepts may require a 3 dimensional representation, computer render or scale model (maquette). Even within the field of 3D computer visualisations, there is a huge difference between a simplified render of the form and a photorealistic version, superimposed into the final setting. When I am asked to create a form of seating I will usually create a simplified full scale mock up so that that the client can check that the piece is comfortable to sit on.



3D computer render of Genie in Ash

If you feel confident in your ability to interpret 2 dimensional technical drawings, then this approach may well suffice, however when more complex forms are involved I would always recommend seeing a 3 dimensional representation of some type. Whilst photorealistic representations are beautiful to look at, it is important to bear in mind, particularly when working with wood, that they will be approximations of the surfaces. Grain figuring and coloration, vary from tree to tree whilst patinas on metals will vary depending on local climatic conditions and how they are applied, so this should give you a sense of what to expect rather than a cast iron blueprint of the final surface.

Be inquisitive about customisation

On various occasions, potential clients have shown concern that they might offend me by suggesting changes to an existing design of mine. For example converting a shelf concept into a mirror or changing the narrative for a sculpture. These are discussions that I relish as they open up new possibilities that I may not have conceived on my own. This conversation could be the start of a very creative collaboration, but equally it may come to nothing for a whole host of reasons however the person you work with should be approachable enough to be able to start this dialogue.



A mirror was designed especially to accompany an Onda Strat shelf commission (left)

Alterations to the design offer

Ideally the creative will provide you with at least two or three suggestions to fulfil your brief, however they may not hit the nail exactly on the head first time. Don't be afraid to highlight what you do and don't like so that they can make changes and come back to you with modifications that do meet the mark. Whilst nobody will enjoy working with someone who constantly moves the goalposts, they should equally be flexible and be prepared to make some changes. In an ideal world your initial conversations should have informed the creative enough so that their suggestions are pretty close to what you want.

Estimates and Quotes

The words estimate and quote are sometimes confused – an estimate should be provided for projects where the parameters are loose and are therefore there to offer an approximate guide price. A quote is usually based on a much tighter understanding of what the project involves. Before you commit to the design phase, the designer /artist should provide you with a ball park figure to start with. This will depend on the complexity of what you are looking for but the creative should be able to show you some previous projects and their prices so that you have an understanding of what to expect. For example, curved surfaces are often much more expensive to make than flat ones so this may in turn may cause you to rethink the project and adapt the brief accordingly. If you are happy to proceed then at the end of the first phase of the design process the initial visualisations should come with a much tighter quote. There are times when the specifications of the project will change from the initial offering and the artist may well have to revise this quote accordingly. This should be a two way discussion so that you are kept abreast of any pricing changes depending on the modifications you request. In addition the quote should outline how long their offer is available for. For example, fluctuating material and energy costs will often mean that the quote is only valid for a limited period and you should be made aware of this.

Lead time and payment terms

If you have a deadline to work to then it is important that this is made clear from the off. Bespoke and particularly handcrafted work can be laborious, and if the designer or artist is particularly busy it may be a question of weeks if not months before your project will be completed. It is customary to expect to pay approximately 50% in advance and 50% on completion. Many artists will keep you abreast of progress and offer the possibility to pay a studio visit so that you can feel more assured about the project. For clients who are interested in how the piece develops I send them photos and short video clips so that they have a sense of the process.

Final thoughts

Having something made especially for you should be a very rewarding experience both along the journey and receiving the finished piece. Be sure to do your due diligence and listen to your gut instinct when selecting the person for your project. Ideally your brief will be something that they are excited and inspired by, but this isn't always possible. However if you feel that they are steering the project in a direction that you don't want to go, make sure to flag this up early. They may well be experts in their own field and have possibly worked with some big names, however you are the expert when it comes to knowing what you like.

If you are considering commissioning a bespoke piece of contemporary furniture, sculpture, wall art or decorative lighting then please feel free to get in touch to discuss your needs.