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Collaboration shows fine art of tools of the trade

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Going to the nth degree: Colen Clenton, with the \$59,400 display cabinet, says handmade tools are 'a dying skill'. Picture: James Croucher

In commercial reality, as the “Made in China” label increasingly becomes the norm, Colen Clenton and Terry Gordon are rarities.

For 25 years these self-taught tool makers have turned out handcrafted wood and brass shaves, planes, awls, vices, adjustable squares, markers and gauges for world-renowned furniture makers and collectors from their respective workshops in Congewai, in the Hunter Valley, and Alstonville, in northeast NSW.

British maker, author and internationally recognised teacher David Charlesworth is one longtime customer. “I believe we are in a golden age of fine tools, made by passionately committed artisans such as Terry and Colen,” says Mr Charlesworth from his workshop in Devon, England.

“In my line of work, where precision and excellence are essential, these tools not only help make my work easier but are works of art in themselves.”

Gordon and Clenton, both 53, recount a childhood love of working with their hands. “I was about six when Dad took me to this mate ... who made boats out of red cedar,” says Gordon. “Today every time I smell red cedar that scene comes back. I reckon that’s where my love of wood started.”

Clenton says there is a historical vein to their work. “We make them the way tools have traditionally been made for hundreds of years. All by hand.

“This sort of tool making, where we go to the nth degree to make them work properly and perfectly, is a dying skill. Thousands of cheap tools come out of China and other mass-production countries but end up sitting on someone’s shelf or in landfill.”

Their latest project, Collaboration One, is a set of 73 tools — 50 of Gordon’s planes and 23 of Clenton’s gauges and squares — all meticulously fashioned from brass and ebony cut from a single tree.

Housed in a display cabinet of Tasmanian sassafras with black heart inlay created by maker Phoebe Everill, it is on display at Sturt Australian Craft & Design Centre, Mittagong, NSW with a price tag of \$59,400. “This is the first time this has been done

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in Australia; a cabinet, and a full set of both these makers' tools made from the one tree, says Everill, the president of Studio Woodworkers Australia, who runs a furniture-making school in Drummond, 100km northwest of Melbourne.

“Like the exquisite tools, the cabinet is hand-shaped, hand-finished and has taken hundreds of hours of painstaking work.”

Rare features such as the moving fillister plane, the first ever made by Gordon, and a small awl, the first of its type made by Clenton, will make this piece attractive to international collectors, museums and makers, says Everill.

Paradoxically, as tool makers of their ilk become scarcer, furniture school classes are filling up. The Fine Furniture Design & Technology course at Sturt is full for a third successive year next year. “In every profession there are people who passionately love working with wood on the side, and who tell us they would love to make a career change,” says Clenton.