

At the still point of the turning world. Peter Bellerby at work in his London studio.



PHOTOS: JULIAN LOVE, CLARISSE D'ARCIEMOLES

# The man who made the world

THE WORLD IS YOUR OYSTER AS ONE MAN AND HIS TEAM OF SKILLED ARTISANS REINVENT THE LOST ART - AND SCIENCE - OF GLOBE-MAKING

WORDS GRAHAM SCOTT

After wandering round the North London workshops and listening to Peter Bellerby it really is like you're in another world. The delicate strips of immaculately printed paper hanging everywhere, the focused silence, the clear commitment to something so perfect, so everlasting, so harmonious – it's like going back in time. Mr Bellerby himself should have a heroic moustache, thumbs in an expansive waistcoat and a stovepipe hat on the workbench. Instead he's in drainpipe trousers and Converse All Stars.

It's no surprise that four Bellerby & Co globes adorned the set of *Hugo*, Martin Scorsese's timeless film set in a Paris train station of the 1930s. Since then they've adorned the houses, yachts and hideaways of what Peter calls 'an interesting clientèle' around the world.

At first glance Peter Bellerby is an unlikely custodian of craft secrets which he had to rediscover, since they were lost to the world. He used to manage a bowling alley in London, a retro place that was very cool and attracted indie bands. He used to throw out Amy Winehouse while working silly hours and raking in silly money. Burning out, he took some months off, travelled a lot and decided to make a globe for his father for his 80th birthday, and one



for himself. Peter had time and money on his hands and figured it would take a month or two and cost a few thousand pounds. It took 18 months and cost £150,000.

"I had an Aston Martin DB6 when I started the project", Peter says succinctly. "I didn't by the end. I figured I'd just built the two most expensive globes in history so I thought, 'this just has to be a company'."

It turned out that making globes was rather harder than simply pasting some paper maps on a glorified version of a bowling ball. The creation of a perfect, hand-made globe is something that hasn't been seen for centuries. Cartographer-artists like Willem Blaeu made some astonishing globes in 17th-century Amsterdam, but the skills have largely been lost. As Peter says: "The fun thing is there wasn't anyone out there to ask."

Peter Bellerby had to work the skills out, often by trial and error along with what he calls 'eureka and fluky moments'. That took two years. How do you do it exactly? He's not telling, but this is roughly what you do. First, you have to make a perfect sphere, which is surprisingly difficult. The larger ones are fabricated from fibre-reinforced plaster of Paris, while the smaller sizes are made of fibreglass-resin composite by yacht builders on the south coast of England, in



Scenes from the Bellerby workshops: gores, far left, await application. This picture: hand-tinting with watercolour.

PHOTOS GARETH PON, BELLERBY & CO

moulds created using Formula 1 technology. They are flawlessly circular – in the way, of course, that the actual planet isn't.

But that is the easy part. Now you have to apply strips of paper which are like very elongated triangles to the globe. They're called gores and go down on strong glue when the paper is wet. How wet? Too wet and it expands and then contracts too much. Not wet enough is no good either. It has to be perfect, and then perfectly applied, taking into account shrinkage.

Some of the big globes have up to 48 gores. Imagine getting to 47 and realising there isn't quite enough space for the last one. This is art and mathematics and endless measurements as a gap or overlap of literally one millimetre is considered utterly unacceptable.

"We're constantly measuring as we go", explains Peter. "We concentrate so hard, so focused, it's completely silent when we're adding the paper. I'm not that patient but I've had to learn patience. You have to slow down, you're moving your hands really slowly, like in mime. It can take hours just to add one section."

The paper that goes down is the map of



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the world that they've printed out on huge printers (which can cope with detail down to less than 2pt text) and then cut up into the sections. When they're on the globe they're hand tinted with watercolours. Then varnish and resin layers go on. It's a long process. The world is your oyster as far as personalisation goes – perhaps a line for a world tour you've done, or illustrations in various countries you've visited. If you want the biggest globe they do, the 50-inch (127cm) Churchill, then you'll have to wait nine months for the build. You can forget Peter making the world in six days then having a day off.

Of course, this doesn't come particularly cheap. The smallest globe, which you can buy from Bellerby online or at their only outlet, Harrods, costs £1,000, while the biggest will be around £59,000.

For that you get something very special indeed. It would be astonishing if a Bellerby & Co globe didn't outlive its creators and its owners and go on to become a valuable heirloom down the decades and possibly centuries. Peter is committed to making perfect worlds.

"It would be nice if our globes were viewed well, historically. We certainly go to great lengths to make them really well, to over-engineer them so they really will last centuries. And we go to equally great lengths to make them beautiful. There is no point in one without the other."

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