



MAKERS







ART OF THE SPHERE

THE CRAFT OF GLOBE-MAKING,
AS PRACTICED AT PETER BELLERBY'S
COMPANY, IS ENJOYING A COMEBACK.

story + photos Justin Ratcliffe



A watercolorist creates the darker 'wash' around the coastline of Australia and Tasmania.

Opening spread: Peter Bellerby set up his London-based company when he was unable to find a quality globe as a birthday present for his father.

IN A SHRINKING WORLD

of GPS navigation and Google Earth, an old-fashioned globe still has the power to delight. As a boy, I had a plastic one by my bedside that lit up. I remember thinking how squashed Europe looked compared with Africa or North America. Lying in bed at night, I liked to gaze up at the ceiling illuminated by the globe's yellow deserts, green jungles and blue oceans.

"A globe is the world in miniature and was the first way of seeing the planet in 3-D," says Peter Bellerby, founder of London-based Bellerby & Co, one of just a handful of artisan globe-makers still practicing their craft. "Nothing else can reproduce that feeling of holding the world in your hands."

What's believed to be the oldest extant terrestrial globe dates from 1492, made by German merchant and cartographer Martin Behaim. Completed just before Christopher Columbus sailed to the New World, the globe has a big blank where the American continent should be.

The golden period of discovery that followed Columbus' voyage included an upsurge in map- and globe-making. While maps and charts were the tools of explorers and navigators, globes were fashion items for the wealthy. It wasn't until the early 19th century that they became familiar objects in schools and homes.

Bellerby & Co, a decidedly modern company founded in 2008, is housed in a ramshackle workshop behind a nondescript door in a North London mews, the British name for a row of former stables or carriage houses. I found myself on its doorstep after admiring one of its bespoke globes aboard *Stella di Mare*, a 130-foot (39.67-meter) CBI Navi motorcruiser with interior design by Umberto Fossati. A commissioned Bellerby circular wall map also hangs in the yacht's salon.

The atmosphere inside the workshop, full to the brim with globes of various colors and sizes, is one of Zenlike focus and calm. Seated close to the windows to make the most of the natural light, water colorists patiently paint coastlines and continental borders. Other artists use a scalpel to cut out the lozenge-shaped strips of paper map called gores, which are then wetted and delicately stretched before being glued onto the spheres. In another part of the building, joiners make wood cabinets to house the finished globes. A couple of computers and a large-format digital printer are the only signs of modern technology.

Art of the Sphere



The horizon band, printed and painted on paper, is applied to the wood table that supports the globe.

Facing, top: Adding the calotte that comprise the two poles. **Bottom:** A celestial globe depicting various constellations.





Top row, left to right: Personalized illustrations requested by clients; Isis Linguanotto, Bellerby's head painter; Musical scales, another customization; The globes spin on engraved brass meridians made by a specialist subcontractor. **Facing, bottom:** The unassuming interior of Bellerby & Co resembles an artist's studio.

"The basic process has changed little in hundreds of years," Bellerby says. "The main difference is that the spheres are now made of resin or fiberglass instead of papier-mâché and plaster of Paris. The printed maps are morphed using computer software [Bellerby employs two full-time cartographers for the purpose] into the gore shapes. Everything else is done by hand."

With no background in retail or manufacturing, Bellerby set up his company after failing to find a quality globe as an 80th birthday gift for his naval architect father. "I mean, how difficult can it be to make a ball and put a map on it?"

Very difficult, as it turned out. His first globe took many more months and much more money than he ever imagined possible. Every stage of the creation process seemed to throw up obstacles, from finding a manufacturer able to produce a perfect mold for the sphere and a foundry to make the brass meridian that holds it in place to the tricky process of goring the map to the globe without wrinkles and balancing the ball so it comes smoothly to rest after spinning.

His father eventually received the third globe Bellerby produced, after Bellerby sold the first to recoup some of his losses (it currently resides in Brisbane, Australia). The second was rejected after he accidentally—and inextricably—dropped a pencil inside the sphere.

Today, the company receives commissions for handcrafted

globes from all over the world, and in 2018 received a Queen's Award for Enterprise.

"Having learned the hard way, training my staff takes about a year," Bellerby says. "You have to be a perfectionist, and some find the work just too fiddly, but most arrive here from completely different walks of life and immediately feel at home."

An example is his head painter, Isis Linguanotto, a fashion designer and illustrator from Brazil who went to London to study photography and joined Bellerby & Co in 2013.

"It's a unique job in a tranquil environment," she says. "It might seem repetitive, but every globe is different, and I liken it to reading a favorite book over and over. Even after six years, I still find myself noticing new places and Googling their names."

The sea is painted before the gores are cut to ensure uniformity across the joins, but the continents and countries are painted directly onto the globe. A perennial danger is excess paint dribbling down the sides toward a pole, in which case the globe has to be scrapped.

Each artist tends to start and finish in a different place. Linguanotto, for example, likes to begin with New Zealand and move on to Asia before going across to Europe and Africa, South and North America, and then finishing up in Antarctica.

"Canada is the worst," she says. "It's full of islands and inlets, bays



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The Bellerby globe aboard the CBI Navi *Stella di Mare*. There is also a specially commissioned circular wall map in the main salon.

and lakes. You certainly develop feelings for different countries depending on how hard they are to paint.”

Nearly all of Bellerby’s clients request personalized additions, such as illustrations of their dogs and cats or cars and motorbikes, past and present. One globe being readied for shipping to a musician featured bars of music and the keys of a piano. Another showed the effects of global warming with a heat map of the world in yellow, orange and red.

“Perhaps the most challenging commission was for a German industrialist,” Bellerby says. “His daughter wanted to present him with a globe illustrating scenes from everywhere he’d ever been on holiday or on business between 1949 and 2017. Fortunately, we were working with the Churchill, our biggest globe.”

Once a globe’s painting is complete, the end pieces known as calotte—effectively, the north and south poles—are attached, and

the globe is scrupulously checked for even minute defects. Each globe is then treated with a coat of matte resin or glossy varnish, attached to its meridian and base, and packed in a tailor-made case for delivery around the world.

Not surprisingly, the handcrafted services of Bellerby & Co don’t come cheap. The smallest desk globe, the size of a soccer ball and revolving on three ball bearings in a wooden base, is the only model not built to order.

“It’s difficult to put a price on something so unique and personal,” Bellerby says. “We find it quite hard to part with the big globes that may take months to make. I suppose it’s a bit how an artist or a sculptor feels when they sell a work of art.” ◇

For more information: bellerbyandco.com