

## IN PURSUIT OF LOST ARTS

**ALEXANDER LAMONT**

For Alexander Lamont, founder of LAMONT, a leading contemporary design company, design is secondary to the quality of the materials and production methods of the elegant accessories that grace many top hotels around the world **TEXT: TRIN NAPATSAKORN**

Visiting LAMONT's extraordinary design studio in Gaysorn was a revelation. It was akin to walking into a museum exhibition chock full of prototypes and samples from all over the world. Then again, it reflects Alexander Lamont's adventurous childhood growing up in Africa, India and England, surrounded by the endless streams of exotic arts, antiques and crafts imported by his family's successful business.

His affinity for Thailand though, is perhaps karmic attraction. On his first trip to Thailand at the age of 10, Alexander recounts, "I sensed a deep connection or a huge affection for everything that I saw, smelt and tasted. I just felt that I wanted to live here and not go back to England. My brother and mum didn't understand why I didn't want to see any sights. I spent my time visiting factories and antique shops with my dad. It was just my magical trip."

His fascination deepened by studying Thai and Anthropology at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London, which included an exchange programme at Chulalongkorn University. Upon graduation, he founded carpeting, arts and antiques businesses in Turkey and Hong Kong, but he eventually made his way to Bangkok.

Establishing LAMONT in 1999, Alexander's knowledge of traditional European and Asian crafts fuelled an eclectic range of products from organic pieces to Art Deco inspired designs by artists such as Line Vautrin, Ellen Grey and Clement Rousseau, and Jean-Michel Frank in particular, who were participants in the birth of Modernism, and are "as modern as any modern designer today." Admiration aside, Alexander is emphatic about not making reproductions.

"I try to make furniture that is uncompromising in terms of the material. We're product designers focused on a small group of materials because they cannot get made elsewhere. That for me is worth doing." Bronze, shagreen (stingray skin) and straw marquetry are LAMONT signature materials. Delicate sheets of dried shagreen required years of experimentation and experience to make an evolving series of tables and cabinets, while the rare shimmering beauty of straw marquetry furniture, is only produced at LAMONT and another French company. "We use traditional methods to prepare and lay out the patterns of hand-harvested rye straw imported from France." The raw material costs alone "outweighs its labour costs, even though it takes three weeks to make one coffee table top." To expand into additional production

lines for lacquerware and unique metal finishings such as acid patterning, the metal equivalent of batik prevalent during the Art Deco period has recently been accommodated, by more than doubling existing factory and studio space near Chatuchak Market.

When Alexander designs something, the first task is "to think of how to use the material in a design that expresses it. Materials have a sense of honesty. The development of one's taste and one's eye is more important, I think, than very original design."

Nonetheless, LAMONT's iconic hammered blackened bronze bowls with brilliant gold-leaf interiors proved too attractive, and has been copied. Nevertheless, Alexander has come to terms with this reality, and he realises that "the strength of the company is in moving towards quality all the time. And that it's been my eyes that have brought us to where we are." Nonetheless, spurred by customer demand for innovative custom designs, Alexander hopes that "in five to ten years, our house designs will have surpassed our craft and become something really strong, interesting and unique."

As the interview winds down, it seems that his life may turn full circle. Married to an English lawyer, the couple's two young daughters "idealise life in the English countryside where I grew up, the last place where I'd want to be. That's their golden dream. But I hope they find their own appreciation for having grown up in Bangkok."

During the conversation, Alexander mentions wistfully that "in chasing my dreams, I have made the magic disappear." By keeping traditional skills alive in fresh ways ensures that these crafts which evoke a bygone era will remain in demand. ■

### EDUCATING BUYERS

Be wary when purchasing pricey designer furnishings which may be mass produced. "People today look more at brands. You need good quality to get a good name. But once you have a name, many designers give up on production quality because buyers cannot tell, and they don't argue with designer gods. For us, each order is custom-made."

"People need to be educated about the intrinsic value of the materials rather than just price comparisons against other materials. For instance, we use bronze because it's best. When we tried replacing straw with cheaper bamboo marquetry, the results are very unsatisfying. So I guess I'm a perfectionist."

