

A question of process

From gold-leafed goatskin to shimmering shagreen, furniture maker Lamont focuses on traditional materials and developing processes to create strong, simple pieces

TEXT: ANNIE GOTTERSON PHOTOGRAPHY: COURTESY OF LAMONT



above from left The Mighty coffee table epitomises the company's 'simple forms in luxurious, exotic materials' aesthetic • The Verta sculptures, in Lamont's favourite material, bronze bottom The Branch round table in a petrified wood surface



WHO: Alexander Lamont

WHAT: Lamont, Bangkok

WORKS: Modern furniture and accessories made from luxurious materials that require a great deal of work to produce

How did you become a designer?

Without any formal design training. I think if I'd gone to design school I would have spent that time looking at modern materials and larger production processes. I see very few people from design school working with traditional materials. So my real training was my family's company, which was importing folk art handicrafts in Bangkok. Every weekend and on holidays, I was displaying, unpacking, stocktaking and actually handling all the goods. I think this was kind of an education in seeing. If you take different qualities of lacquer, for example, and you are touching them and moving them again and again, you get to really understand surfaces, and this focus on materials led to the development of this company.

How do you approach the design process?

Materials first. Then I think about expressing the material in a simple way. Because we mostly do tabletop accessories, like bowls and vases which have a very free design form, we're not as constricted as if we were doing a chair. We do very simple forms with interesting materials. I came across this approach after I was introduced to the

Art Deco designers of the 1920s and '30s — people like Jean-Michel Frank and Clemente Russov, the real masters, who after centuries of baroque and rococo, heavy gilding and heavy carving, suddenly made U-shaped tables that were very simple, but covered with luxurious materials. It was just a complete directional change in the idea of luxury. Clean lines and minimal design forms that were appealing because the materials were interesting, rich and imaginative.

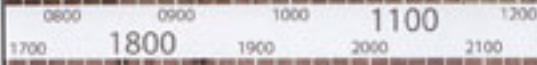
Do you have a favourite material to work with?

Bronze. Because we use quite a simple process, we're able to develop more and more patina variations. To do a finish which really looks interesting and rich was really difficult for a long time. Now we've got a process that's exactly how a Henry Moore sculpture or a fine art piece is finished. It's an expensive process: instead of just dipping the bronze in two acids, we use a patterning brush, which is a hard bristle, and you do a stiff link, pushing the acid into the bronze, then you heat it up so that it fuses with the copper inside. It's a long process, but by having this, all of our bronze is able to move to a much more interesting level.





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How many different materials do you work with?
 Our core materials are bronze, shagreen, parchment, straw and glass. We also do some ceramics and we make a lot of the surfaces that cover our pieces. So, for example, one surface is supposed to look like antique Japanese screen, so we silver leaf the canvas, then scrunch it up, then stretch it, and it looks very similar to an old Japanese screen. Or a surface that from a distance looks very much like a crumbling temple wall. Another one is made of straw that has been cut and soaked and ironed and put down piece by piece. We can make whatever we want really. We can find new materials or we can change old materials — for example, goatskin has traditionally been used in furniture, but was always used in ivory and tobacco tones. So we developed a process where you distress the skin using a circular wire brush, dye it, and then use ink to emphasise the distress. I'm much more interested that process be kept at high quality so our materials are of the highest quality.

You use a lot of traditional or original techniques in production; how did you come across these?

When I started the business I'd hardly heard of shagreen, which is our main material. We've been running for about 10 years, and it took until about a year and a half ago to finally iron out the production. Other traditional techniques can also

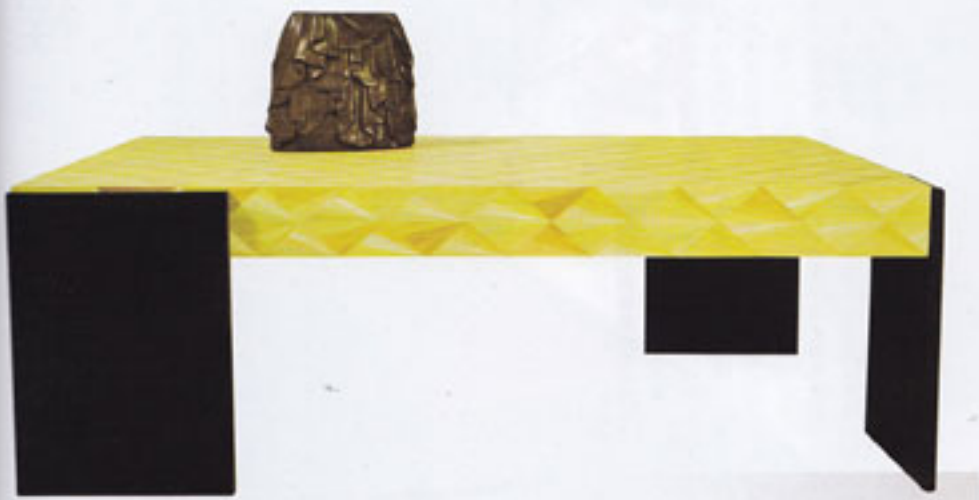
be hard. We use a lot of materials from China and we're currently developing porcelain, lacquer, crystal, cherry bark and silk. But because the processes for creating and using these materials were developed during the Communist period, it's difficult to find people who still know every step. These days everyone can make more money on the stock market.

Is this happening all over the world now? That when you're looking for traditional materials and techniques for developing them, there are fewer and fewer people who still possess the relevant knowledge and skills?

They've always been disappearing. Thailand, for example, had a very high quality lacquer industry, and as soon as thousands of people wanted to buy the lacquer they started using polychrome methods.

What usually happens is that traditional people doing a nice job simply reproduce things from the 19th or early 20th centuries. But the market wants new designs, so someone sets up a factory where they spray on polychrome and you write on it in glitter paint or something — and the traditional company just sort of fades away.

Then, when the cost of raw materials goes shooting up, as it's done over the last three or four years, nobody buys it. So the workers go somewhere else and, quite often, once they go out, they lose the skills and the interest and it's gone forever.



above from top The Slice coffee table • The Hammered Bowls have been one of the collection's most popular pieces



top lines left With an inlay made of gold leaf and shell, the pod candle holders • **Boxes made of shagreen**, one of the company's signature materials **bottom** This base of this inhale lamp is done in the straw surface material, where each strand is laid down individually

只問過程

從精緻的金葉花紋羊皮到閃閃發亮的羔革，傢具設計師 Alexander Lamont 對傳統物料情有獨鍾，創作出一件件簡單卻震撼的作品

攝：ANNE GOTTSSON 攝：ELAMONT 攝

WHO: Alexander Lamont
WHERE: 美國
WORKS: 現代傢具及室內飾品，全部採用奢華物料以繁複的工序製作而成

你是如何成為設計師的？

我未接受任何正式設計訓練。如果找進了設計學院，大部份時間都要花在研習現代物料及大規模的生產過程。設計學院出身的人很少採用傳統物料。我的真正訓練來自家放事業。我家在曼哈頓從事民族手工藝品的進口業務。每逢週末或假期，我便到那裡幫手陳列貨品、折包裝、盤點及處理所有貨物。這算是一種視覺審美的培養。舉例說不同質料的亮澤、反覆觸摸及抹去它們，才會真正了解表面是甚麼一回事，因為我們重視物料，從而推動了公司的發展。

你的設計思路是怎樣的？

物料先行。然後我會想如何簡單地表現物料的特性。我們做得多是桌面上的裝飾，像碗及花瓶的設計一般都很自由，因此我們要面對的限制不大，比不上製作一張椅子。我們的設計很簡單，用的是有趣的物料。我這設計手法啟蒙自上世紀二三十年代的裝飾派藝術設計師，如 Jean Michel Frank 及 Charles E. Kussou 等真正名家。他們多年來緊守巴洛克式及洛可可式風格，用上大量花巧的鍍金及雕鏤裝飾；有時候會突然來一個簡單的馬蹄鐵形狀桌子，再用華麗的物料飾面。其實這只是奢華概念的逆轉演繹罷了。俐落簡約的形態本身已夠吸引，因為所配用的物料豐富有趣，而且充滿想像力。

你有否特別喜歡使用某些物料？

由於我們只作簡單處理，因此可以在銅色上加以變化。長久以來，做出光亮又有層次感的拋光非常困難。如今，我們的加工程序跟 Henry Moore 製作的雕塑或一般純藝術作品的不同。這項工序所費不菲：一般做法是將銅板泡進兩種酸液而已，我們卻是利用模形刷子，毛頭短而硬的刷子，將酸液大力塗於銅板表面，並加熱讓它滲透銅中。這道工序需時甚久，但經此處理的銅，會呈現出更多趣味。

你會用到多少種不同的物料？

我們常用的物料主要有銅、羔革、羊皮紙、稻草及玻璃。我們還會用白瓷，由多種表面層的覆蓋。舉例說，一件產品需要造成古典日式屏蔕模樣，我們先在帆布表面畫上銀葉花紋，再將它塗成拉紋，便能營造理想的效果。布料經處理後，從遠處看像像幾塊破碎的碎片外圍。另一個表面，則是用對準了的稻草，泡浸製平後逐片逐片貼合而成。我們可以精心所欲做出任何表面質態。既可以用新的物料，又或用舊物料加工。例如，山羊皮是製作傢具的傳統物料，但通常不是象牙白便是深棕色。於是我們研究新方法，以酸劑旋轉式打磨羊皮，讓染它，再用顏料突顯染過的部分。我最有興趣鑽研更好的生產程序，因此我們物料的高質也是第一要的。

你在生產過程中運用很多傳統或原創技術，你如何想出這些方法？

我創立公司時，從未聽聞過羔革，如今羔革是我們的主要物料。公司成立至今約十年時間，但直至半年前才整理出全套生產程序。要整理其他傳統技術的工序也不容易。我們採用大量來自中國的物料，包括目前正開發的白瓷、高漆、水晶、桃木及絲綢。不過它們的製造及使用程序大多見於共產黨時代，如今要找一個仍然熟悉當中每個工序步驟的人，非常困難。皆因時至今日，人人都寧願炒股票賺大錢。

世界各地都出現這種情況嗎？當你尋找各種傳統物料及技術，希望加以開發的時候，卻發現世上擁有相關技術及知識的人才實少見了？這些巧手工匠日復日的逐漸消失。好像泰國，雖然擁有優秀的高漆工業，但當成千上萬的人們都來買這些亮漆的時候，他們便開始採用影印技術大量生產。

手藝精湛的工匠們於是不求創新，只會複製十九及二十世紀初期的作品。可是，市場需要新設計，於是便有人開工廠生產彩噴的工藝品，再讓人們用肉粉塗漆自行在上頭寫寫畫畫，傳統的公司亦因此漸漸式微。

然後，當原料價格日漸上升，像過去三四年一樣，無人再願意付款購買。屆時，工匠不得不轉行，而一旦離開老本行，他們的技術及興趣就會隨之喪失，一去不返。E

