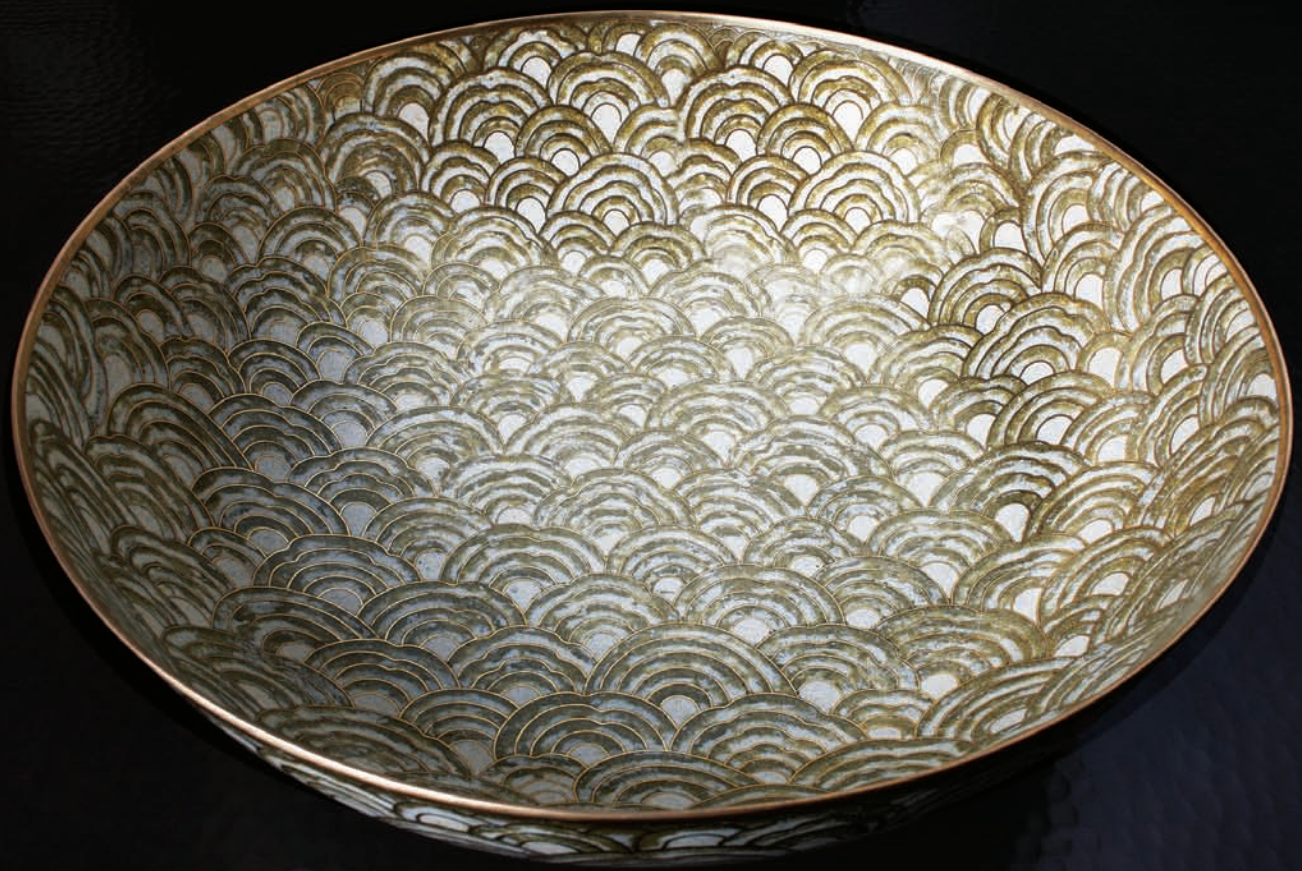
ForbesLife

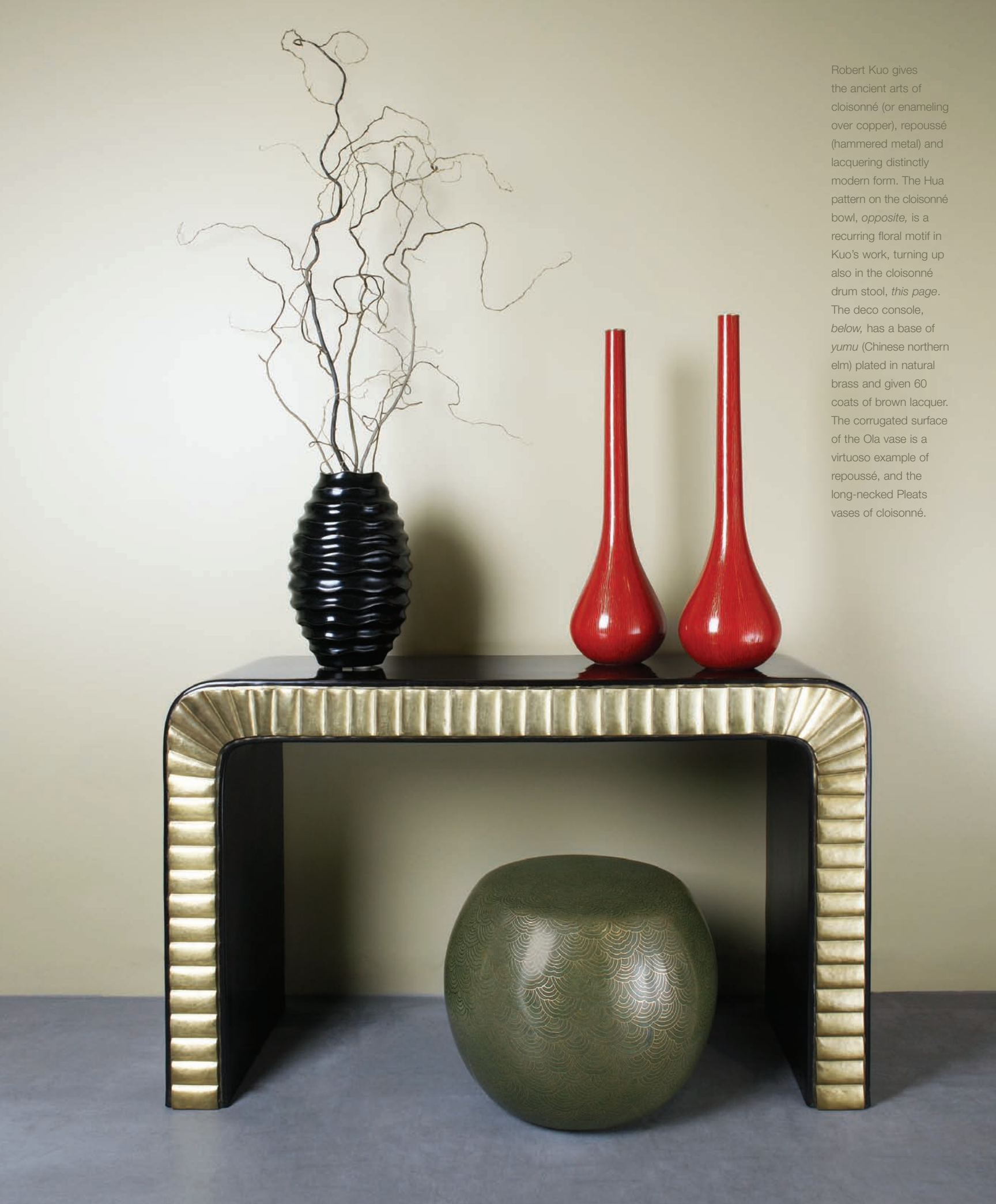
Status Kuo

ROBERT KUO IS A MASTER OF THE ANCIENT ARTS OF CLOISONNÉ AND REPOUSSÉ.

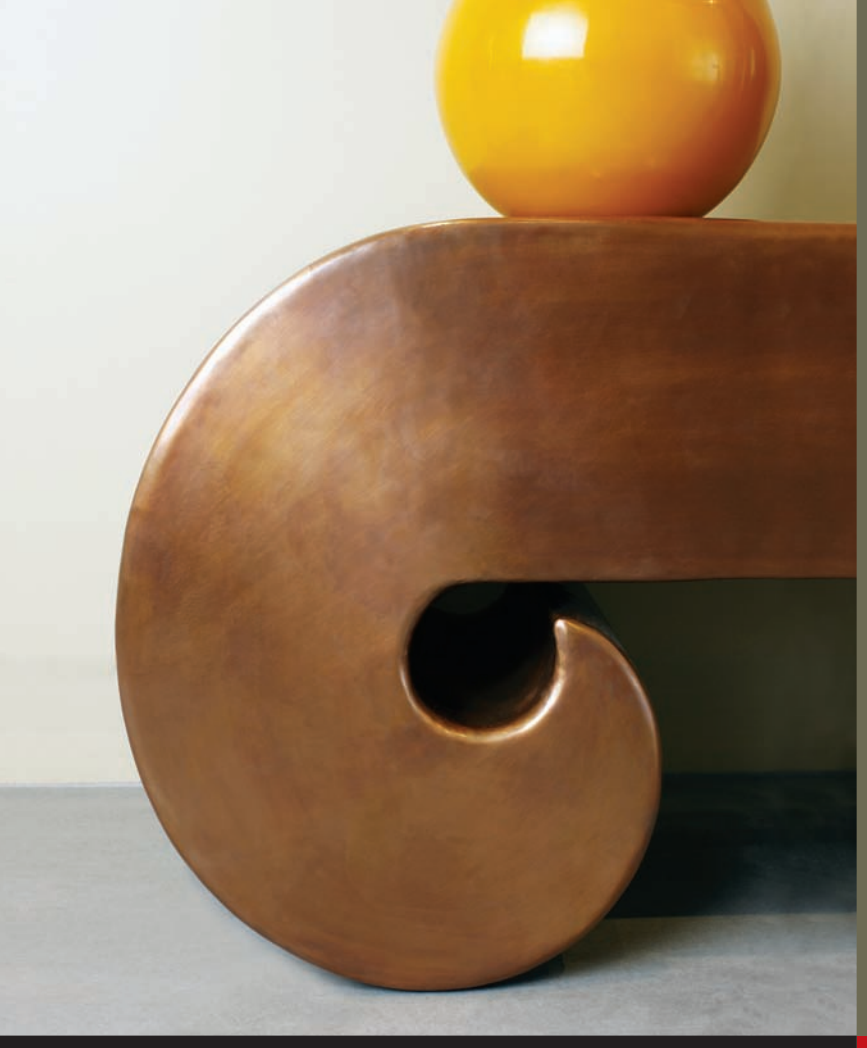
BY FINN-OLAF JONES • PHOTOGRAPHS BY MICHAEL STRATTON

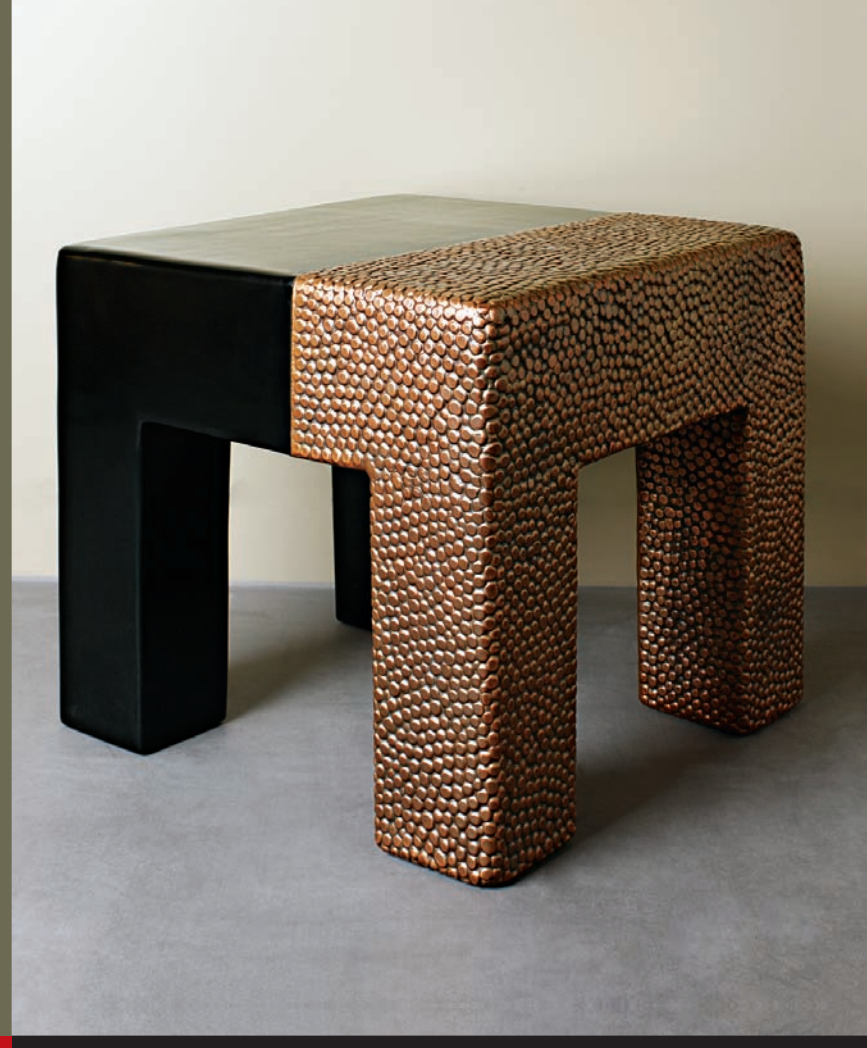


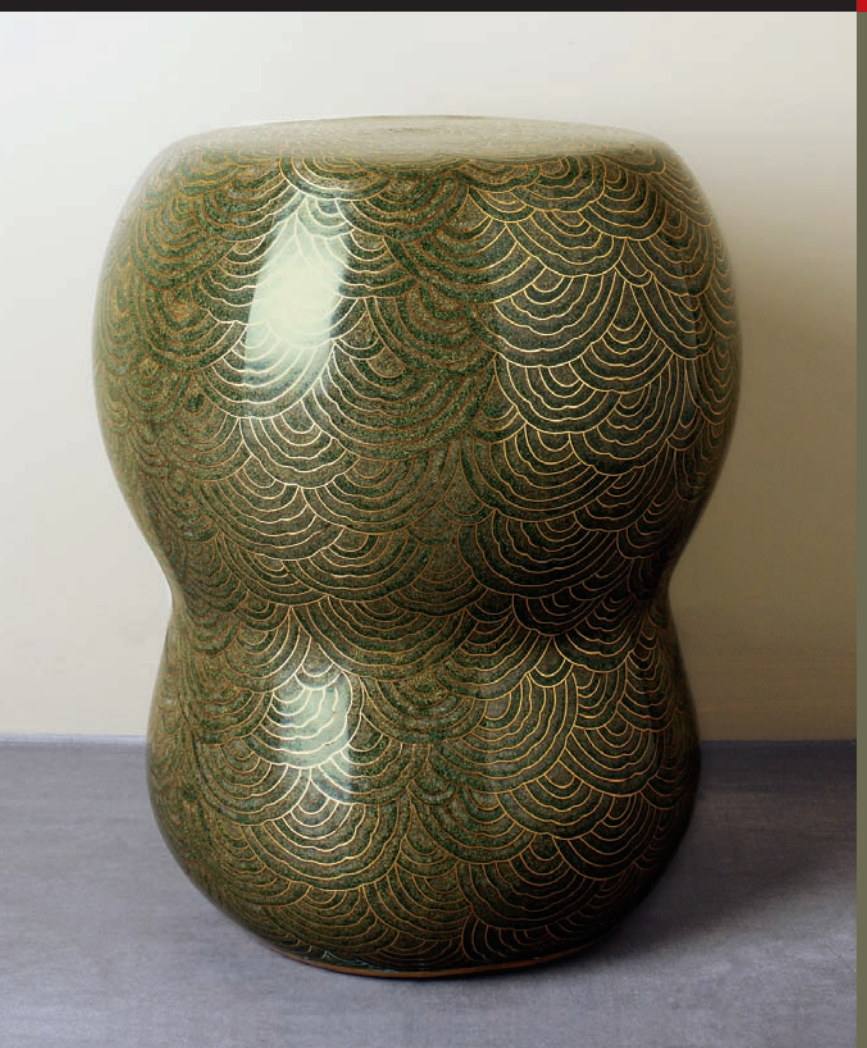
My grandmother, who made regular visits to China in the early decades of the 20th century, once brought back a collection of tiny cloisonné boxes to decorate her living room. They were precious little affairs with bands of colored enamel in flowery patterns between brass wires. No one ever touched them. They were created by cloisonné masters who fired layers of enamel at different temperatures to bring out certain colors, and I saw them as gorgeous and useless relics of a forgotten age, another ancient craft that had joined the glass case of history. Surely these complicated artisanal techniques and high aesthetic standards could not have survived China's transformation to a collectivist smokestack society.

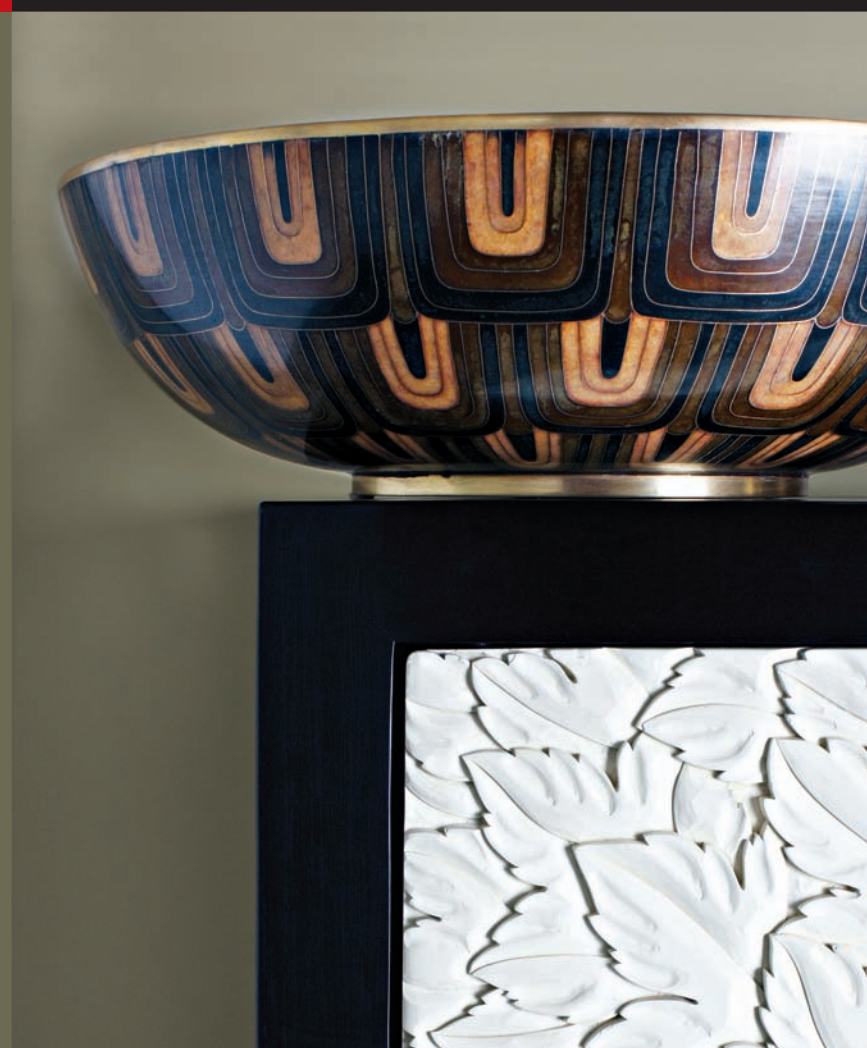


Robert Kuo gives the ancient arts of cloisonné (or enameling over copper), repoussé (hammered metal) and lacquering distinctly modern form. The Hua pattern on the cloisonné bowl, *opposite,* is a recurring floral motif in Kuo's work, turning up also in the cloisonné drum stool, *this page*. The deco console, *below,* has a base of *yumu* (Chinese northern elm) plated in natural brass and given 60 coats of brown lacquer. The corrugated surface of the Ola vase is a virtuoso example of repoussé, and the long-necked Pleats vases of cloisonné.









Or so I thought until I stepped into Robert Kuo's airy, modern gallery in Los Angeles' design district along Melrose Avenue. Here, cloisonné and other fading Chinese art forms have been brazenly brought back to life to create fantastically crafted lamps, tables, chairs and even whimsical items such as giant lacquered apples and copper snails. It's as if the colorful visions of an Asian Dr. Seuss were rendered to life by a modern Fabergé.

Like Fabergé, the man behind these creations is a master of many crafts. Robert Kuo, 62, made his name taking classic designs from his Chinese homeland, mixing them with generous portions of Art Deco, Art Nouveau and pure whimsy, and baking everything together, literally, with almost-forgotten lacquering, metal- and woodworking techniques. And though his works bear the soul of five millennia of craftsmanship, everything looks sleek, sculptural, contemporary and, yes, even fun.

Joyful to the eye though all these colorful modern shapes and textures might be, it's hard not to have your breath taken away as you focus in on the intricate copper cloisonné web ingrained in the sky-blue enamel of a teardrop vase, or the sealike depth and luminosity of a curvy red lacquer table gleaming as glamorously as a runway model's lipstick. And despite the seemingly jocular nature of, say, a lacquer-and-copper sheep that doubles as a chair, Kuo's creations are insanely labor-intensive.

"It's like fine wine," explained Kuo, working alongside two dozen artisans he's trained in his cavernous studio in South Los Angeles. "In order to really appreciate the nuances of these designs, you have to understand how they were made." An elegant, compact man with matching haircut, Kuo's perpetually twinkling eyes are heavily lined from a lifetime of squinting at the micro patterns of his designs. His hands, in contrast, are perfectly manicured and deliberate in their spare gestures, suggesting that this is the guy to have around should you ever need a bomb defused.

Kuo's background is as exotic as his creations. He is the son of Catholic Chinese parents who fled with him to Taiwan from Beijing ahead of Mao's troops in 1948, when he was two. "My father was a painter who had a cloisonné factory in Taipei," he said. "As his son, I was expected to follow in this tradition. But, as you can see, I had other ideas."

"Other ideas" included moving to Los Angeles in 1973, where Kuo opened a cloisonné studio in Beverly Hills and began experimenting with new uses and techniques for this fading art. "L.A. gave me the freedom to create," Kuo said. "You have the space and the light, and I was able to expand what I wanted to do. It felt very liberating to push the envelope with these ancient, labor-intensive techniques." In L.A., Kuo abandoned cloisonné's traditional flowery designs and precious forms in favor of fun applications useful for his new American clientele. Before long, prominent interior designers and collectors were snapping up his cloisonné lamps, tables and chairs.

Kuo, *below,* stands against a 14-foot-tall copper repoussé wall in his New York City showroom. *Opposite, clockwise from top left:* Peking glass gourd vase atop a copper repoussé scroll bench; a stool in pebble-patterned copper repoussé and black lacquer; a cloisonné, gold-plated fish-scale bowl atop a leaf-pattern armoire with hand-carved, cream lacquer doors and a Hua cloisonné gourd stool.

A big breakthrough came when the Smithsonian Institution acquired his Goldfish bowl for its permanent collection. True to Kuo's whimsical nature, the "goldfish" in question were actually bright cloisonné designs floating against a sea of black enamel. The bowl was considered museum-worthy not just for its original design but for its technical achievements, especially in regards to its unusually vibrant colors. Red is especially troubling for cloisonné masters: It's the pigment with the most heat-sensitive gold in it and can be unpredictable when fired up. Yet in Kuo's hands, the reds in the fishes' fins glow hypernaturally,

A selection of Peking glass vases, each from its own small, unique batch, sit atop the scroll bench, *below.* *From left to right:* gourd vase in yellow; snuff bottle in dark *mila*; bottle vase in tourmaline; toad-skin gourd vase in turquoise; tall faceted vase in *mila*; Hu vase in Bai jade; Jupe vase in coral; eight-faceted jar-let in raspberry.

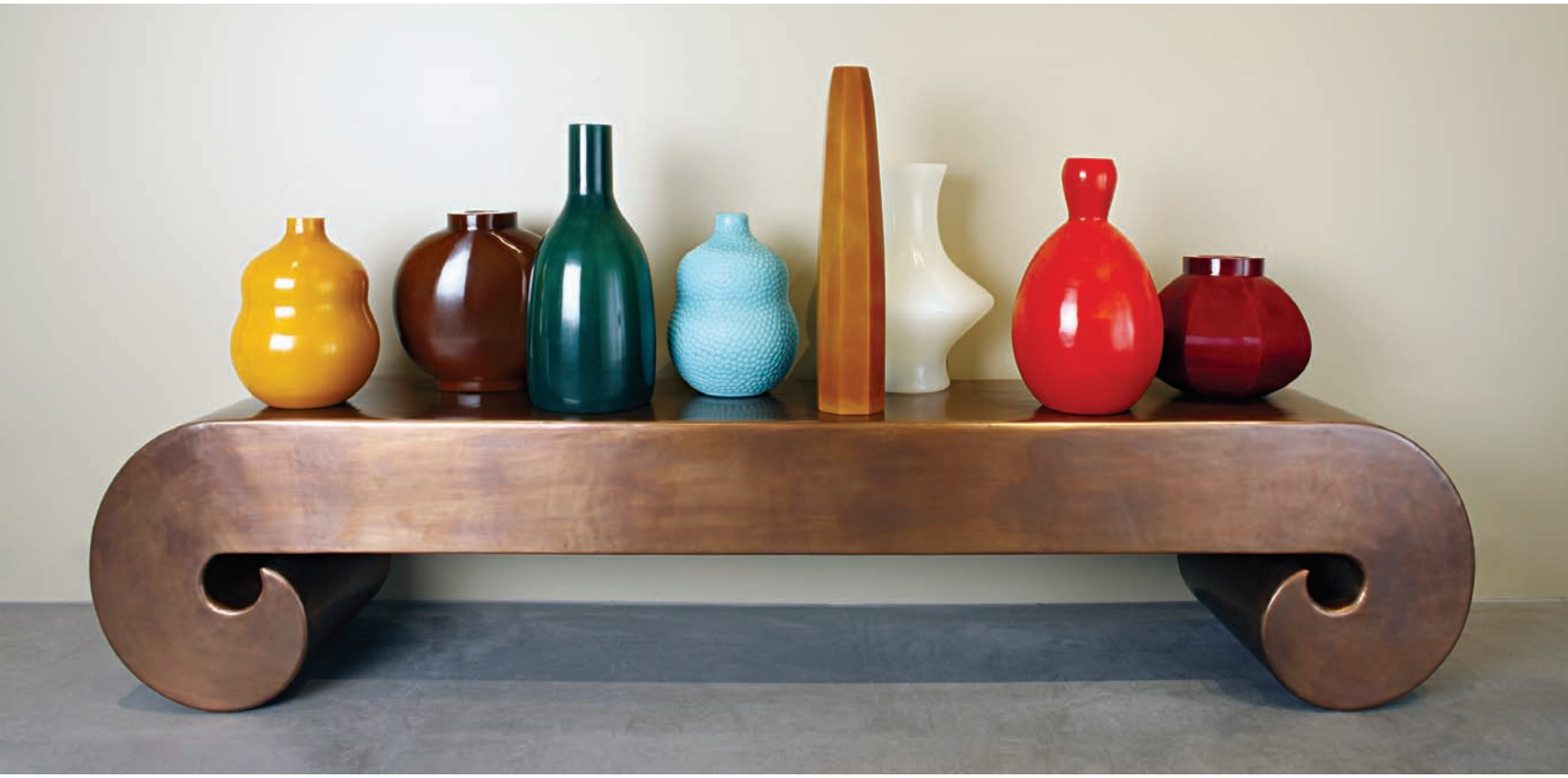
as if Pixar or Monet had had a hand in improving nature's version. A version of the bowl currently sells for $18,000 in Kuo's shops—though many other notable works, such as his lacquer jars and copper vases, sell for less than $2,000.

In the '80s, Kuo expanded his expertise to repoussé, the ancient technique of hammering and shaping metal into decorative forms—the Statue of Liberty is a large example—and lacquering, which involves putting thin coats of concoctions made from tree sap on the forms. The exact recipes are often closely guarded family secrets that are passed from generation to generation by Chinese lacquer masters. Lacquering is particularly time-consuming because Kuo's pieces often require at least 60 layers, each layer needing two to three days to cure, to get the exact sheen he seeks.

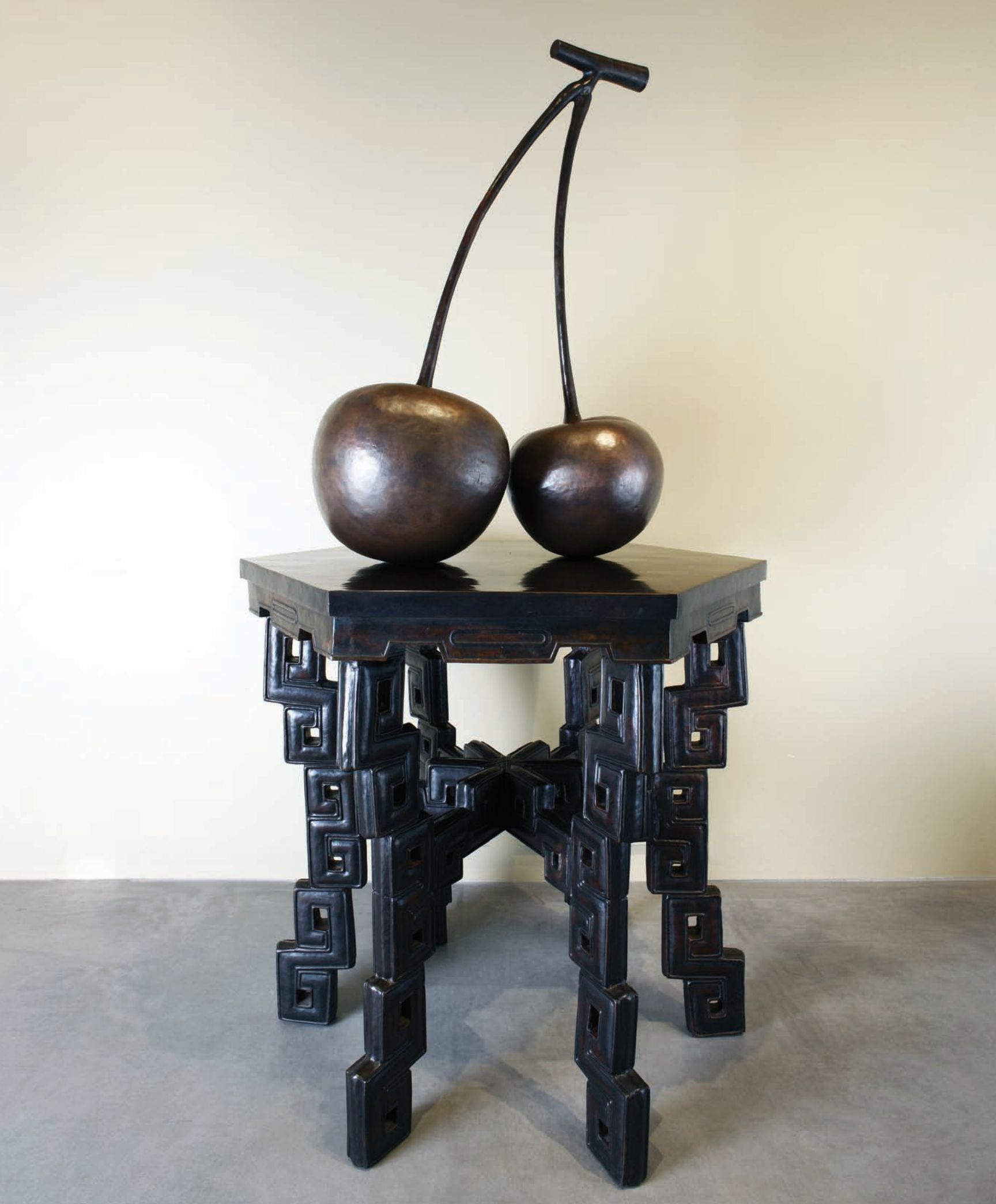
As demand for his work grew—prominent hotels and the furniture maker Kohler Interiors commissioned several large-scale pieces and furniture lines—Kuo turned to his old homeland for the expertise he needed.

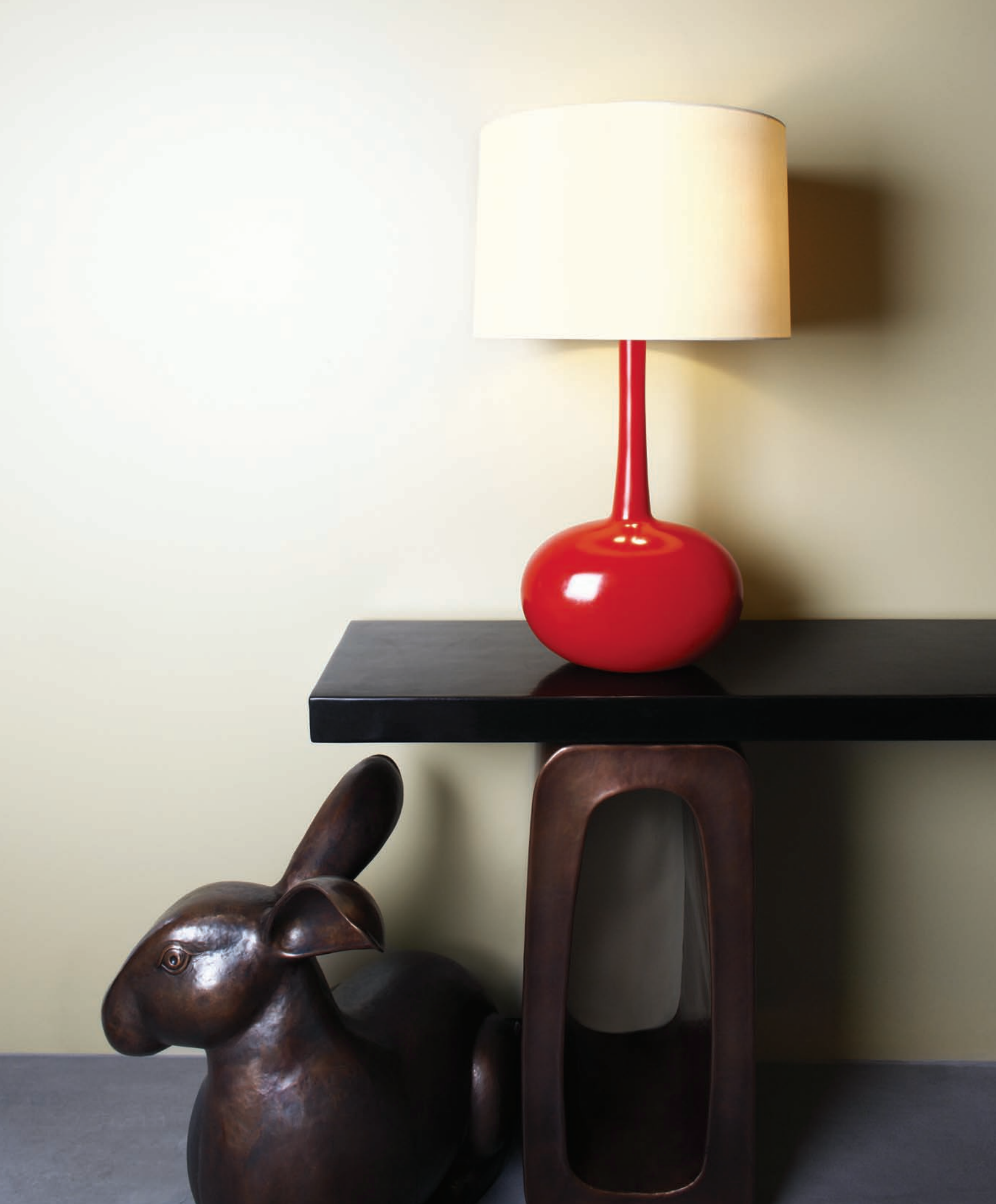
In 1981, Kuo returned to China in search of places where traditional Chinese crafts had managed to survive the Cultural Revolution. As it turned out, classic lacquering, metal- and woodworking techniques were still being practiced sporadically in the countryside by families who had been working these crafts for generations. "They were encouraged to continue their trades even when they were forced into communes," Kuo remembered. "Traditional Chinese crafts were still a big source of foreign currency for the government." So families that had kept faith with their generational trade secrets even during the repressive decades of Mao's Cultural Revolution found themselves working with Kuo creating fine furniture for the West's richest capitalists.

Now, Kuo's works are in constant motion around the country lanes of northern China because their individual elements are manufactured piecemeal. "There are a few small artisan villages around Beijing," said Kuo. "It's a lot like northern Italy." A piece of furniture will have its wooden components fitted together in one village before its elements are transported to another to get lacquered and yet another village for metalwork. "Some of the villages are so isolated that during the SARS scare, they were quarantined," said Kuo. "My pieces had to be put down outside the village boundary, and the people from the studio would come out and pick [them] up after the delivery people had left." Kuo now spends roughly four months a year in China to make sure everything runs smoothly on this complex assembly line.



Opposite: Both the cherries sculpture and the hexagonal table are entirely copper repoussé—neither is supported by a metal or wood frame.





The last step in the process happens in a large studio space in South Los Angeles where two dozen mostly Latin American craftsmen, trained by Kuo, assemble and apply finishing to the copper and wood pieces. It's an odd sight, Latinos working centuries-old Asian techniques while grooving to Spanish techno blaring from boom boxes set around the concrete floors. Kuo's wife and two daughters also work with him in Los Angeles managing the family's expanding business.

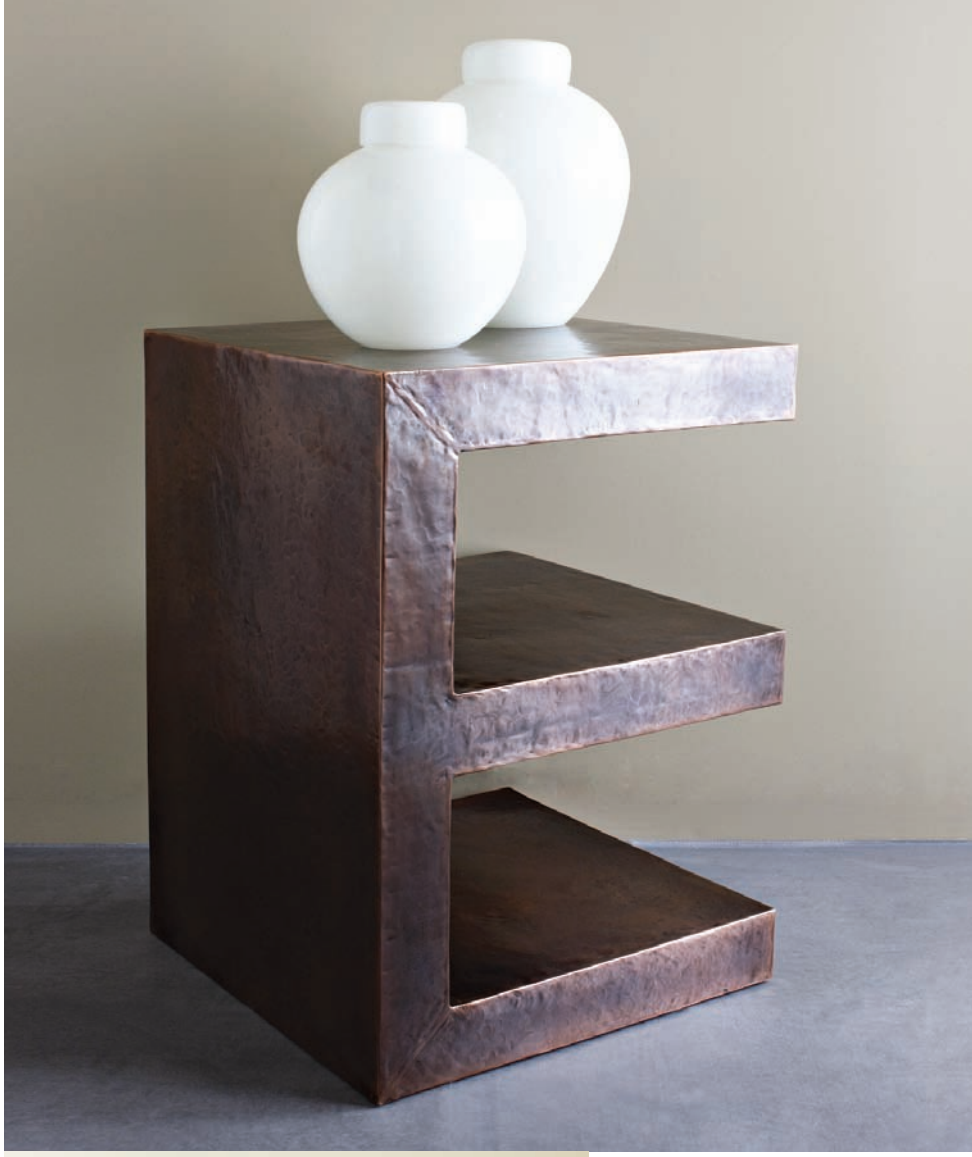
Around the studio, pieces from the Han (206 B.C.–A.D. 220) and Ming (1368–1644) dynasties stand side by side with Kuo's creations, waiting to be displayed in his stores for sale. The clean, simple lines and glazed statuary of these old masterworks seem to blend in seamlessly with Kuo's wares. "I like the simple lines of Ming furniture," said Kuo. "My work fills these lines in with a sculptural vision."

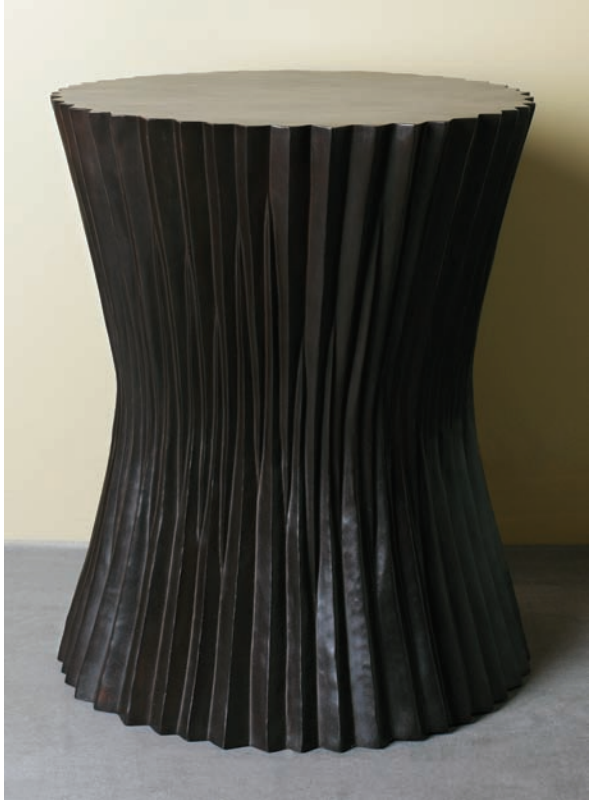
An eight-foot-high wardrobe in the window of his West Hollywood showroom dramatically illustrates how he fills these lines. Built from reclaimed aged Chinese elm wood and assembled according to traditional joining methods in which neither screws nor nails are used, these elegant black boxes look much like the wardrobes one sees in the imperial palaces of Beijing's Forbidden City. But Kuo has added tall copper repoussé doors with a textured feather pattern that glows against the black finish and gives the massive construction the airy appearance of a gossamer curtain.

Kuo has also begun to apply his modern vision to another ancient Chinese medium: Beijing glass. Carefully blown in overlapping layers, Beijing glass has a thick, sculptural quality ideal for making snuff bottles and other dainty items. But true to form, Kuo has blown up the medium to create larger objects, sculpting foot-tall blobs into vases and bowls that resemble sea-polished stones, now cast up onto the promising shores of Los Angeles and Manhattan, where Kuo opened a second store earlier this year.

If Kuo's newest East Coast shoppers expect to get their custom-made orders back to them in a New York minute, they're going to need to learn the Asian virtue of patience. Donald Trump sometimes delivers whole skyscrapers quicker than Kuo will deliver a commission. But at least Kuo's customers can be assured that they'll get something for the ages, both physically and aesthetically. "I want everything I make to look just as good now as it will in a hundred years," said Robert Kuo with a little smile. "As if Nature created them." ■

Robert Kuo, 8686 Melrose Ave., Los Angeles, (310) 855-1555; 303 Spring St., New York, (212) 229-0550. www.robertkuo.com.





The "O" console, *opposite,* has a copper repoussé base over wood with 60 coats of black lacquer. The rabbit is copper repoussé as well, and the cocoon lamp red lacquer with a silk pongee shade. *This page:* The whimsical "E" table, *above,* is copper repoussé over wood. Standing on top is a pair of Peking glass ginger jars, each of which is handblown, carved then polished. The Starburst drum stool, *left,* is copper repoussé with an antique finish.