

interiors



**ARTISTRY, CRAFTSMANSHIP
AND GRACE:
ROBERT KUO**

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Starting in high school, I helped my parents do their cloisonné work, every step of the process," says Robert Kuo of his childhood on Taiwan. "First a design is etched in wire onto a copper base, then a glass-powder enamel for each different color is filled in, each of which melts at a different temperature and needs firing every time. The consistency is like wet sand, and in the kiln it melts and contracts to become contained within the metal wires. I was mesmerized by the process the very first time."



My dad collects techniques," explains Karen Kuo of her father's eponymous decorative furnishings and functional art business, which is celebrating its thirtieth anniversary this year. "He appreciates them and then adapts them to make them his own." Artistry runs deep in the Kuo family: Robert's father, Ming Chiao Kuo, was a calligraphy artist who was sponsored by the Roman Catholic church to travel throughout Europe learning techniques. "Cloisonné usually has very tight, intricate traditional designs," notes Robert, "but my father translated the technique he learned in Germany into a more open, abstract design and created a new color palette." Karen points out the technical challenges of this change. "The smaller the 'cell' of a design, the easier it holds the design when the glass enamel melts in firing," she says. "So the larger, more contemporary designs were inherently more difficult to master." Among the fans of Kuo cloisonné was Madame Chiang Kai-shek, who bought it for diplomatic gifts.

In 1973, after studying the work of Josef Hoffmann and traveling through Europe and the United States, Robert Kuo moved to Los Angeles. "I considered New York and Chicago

and San Francisco but decided my wife would like the weather best in L.A.," he jokes. He eventually opened his own showroom in West Hollywood in 1984. "At first the designers didn't understand cloisonné," Robert remembers. "But Nixon visiting China and the opening of China to trade helped spread the interest in and understanding of Chinese arts." Among the early fans of Robert Kuo were Michael Taylor, Geoffrey Beene and John McGuire, founder of the California-based furniture company that is now part of the Kohler family. "Back in 1984 John would buy our pieces to accessorize his furniture," Robert recalls, "and he was a huge influence for us to expand beyond decorative accessories. McGuire approached us about doing a lighting collection in 1997, and we ended up doing something drastically different from anything else available at the time." Karen adds, "My dad knew that designers were turning his vessels into lamps, but he had to figure out how to manufacture them. He went into a Pier 1 and bought a lamp and literally took it apart himself!" Gradually, encouraged by interior designers' taste for the more matte pieces, Robert started to "un-enamel" his surfaces. As Karen puts it, "This un-enameling was the start of his interest in repoussé."



I'm always looking for traditional craftsmen when I travel to China, to see how I will adapt their techniques and change them for what we do," says Robert. "It takes about five years to really learn a technique and then figure out how to make it your own." Today everything is finished in the company's Los Angeles studio. "I've been training people here for over twenty years. Now we have fifteen artists, and some are even better than the Chinese!"

In Beijing the Kuos have three studios that do repoussé, a technique that involves hammering malleable metal such as copper from the reverse side to create a low-relief decorative surface. A small piece like a vase takes on average of three to four months to complete. There are also workshops for glass, crystal and furniture in addition to two lacquer studios. A lacquer piece takes about one year to complete. "You can't speed up the technique," notes Robert. Simplicity and ease isn't the Kuo preferred path. "Our Peking glass palette was derived from the colors of semiprecious stones, and we had to make new formulas in order to get the colors so intense," says Karen. "And to achieve that very matte, almost honed finish, we use a carver designed to cut jade."



Much like their designs, which increasingly combine techniques, the Kuos' relationships with designers are intertwined. "Bill Sofield is a great client of ours and was one of the first designers who really pushed my dad in a different direction," says Karen. "Rather than just purchase pieces, he asked us to manipulate the techniques to accommodate the design." Collaborations now include one with Ann Sacks, which started in 2000 and includes ceramic tiles ("We love how they are able to produce the trueness of what we do in a totally different medium," says Karen), and a textile collection with S. Harris.

The Kuos aren't ones to shy away from their own challenges, either. In 2007 they opened a showroom in New York and wanted to install a 14-foot copper repoussé wall. "The architect didn't know what we were getting into, then the contractor started to get nervous," Karen remembers. "The sheet metal to support the wall needed its own container and had to go



through the Panama Canal! The floors had to be reinforced, because it weighs about two thousand pounds. But thankfully in the end it didn't have to go through the wall of windows that had just been hung." Now clients come in and are inspired to order their own repoussé walls.

The Kuos want the New York showroom to display the whimsy of what they do, too, and it is filled with surprises like larger-than-life-size iterations of Mother Nature's creations, from penguins and snails to pears and bunches of grapes. "My dad doesn't look at trends," says Karen. "He's always studying books, the past, the natural world and food. On his way to Beijing, he stopped by the farmers market in L.A. and picked up two peppers because he liked their shape. He brought them with him to the artists to enlarge and reproduce." The inspiration might be simple, but the Robert Kuo artistry is anything but. ■

robertkuo.com

