

MAN



The Traveler, a new chair designed by Burks for Roche Bobois, is available in a European version (above, below) and an American version (left).

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of the



Stephen Burks works directly with artisans around the globe to create unique, high-end goods.

World







NEW YORK DESIGNER STEPHEN Burks has made a mockery of that popular pejorative reference to basketweaving as a remedial art. And it's not just baskets he's elevated. Since 2005, when Burks was invited by Aid to Artisans and "design with conscience" label Artecnicca to visit South Africa, he has been conducting an ongoing series of collaborations with artisans from Cebu to Senegal, Cape Town to Cuzco. At times working in rooms the size of workbenches, seated on hard-packed earth, shaded by tarps from the tropical sun, Burks has been helping craftspeople produce everything from furniture and lighting to baskets and fashion accessories, in a practical synthesis of hand and industrial making.

Since that first trip, Burks has made a colorful career partnering with artisans around the world. He has worked in ceramics, macramé, crochet, and topa wood in Peru (funded in part by the U.S. government, offering locals an alternative to farming cocaine); mentored on product development in Colombia; created work for the Nature Conservancy based on insights gleaned in a visit with aboriginal Australians; and worked with the Clinton Global Initiative in post-earthquake Haiti.



ABOVE AND RIGHT: Burks discovered basketweaving through a Senegalese vendor selling those wares on the streets of New York. He subsequently went to the vendor's hometown of Thiès to learn the craft, primarily practiced by women.

TOP RIGHT: Works from the 2011 exhibition "Stephen Burks: Man Made" at the Studio Museum in Harlem, based on his experiences in Senegal.

Burks applies what he learns from these and other artisans in his Manhattan studio, Readymade Projects, to objects he designs for European luxury brands; among them are Moroso and Calligaris (which have origins in artisanal practices), and jeweler Harry Winston, for which he recently designed an alabaster jewelry box, carved in a basketweave pattern. "Using [artisanal] techniques to add value and build brand positioning in the market is what it's all about," he says. "These are ways we can use design to extend craft traditions into the future."

It was a commission for luxe fashion house Missoni in 2003 that first brought craft to Burks' design practice, and his Missoni Patchwork vases, the first handmade objects produced in his studio, earned the designer his own fashion label, Missoni Patchwork Design Stephen Burks. (Today, a line of his wax-printed clothes is sold by New York retailer Opening Ceremony.) High-end brands tap Burks because he creates a unique, contemporary hybrid of crafted and commercial products. To do so, he takes traditional materials, forms, and techniques, and transforms or finds new



expression for them. He continues to explore both artisan and industrial production: His new Anwar LED pieces for Spanish lighting company Parachilna are handmade, while elsewhere, for French furniture company Roche Bobois, he has been experimenting with new ways to weave leather cord over a steel chair frame.

Born in Chicago in 1969, Burks studied architecture at the Illinois Institute of Technology and product design at IIT's Institute of Design, with graduate work in architecture at Columbia University.

With his generous, gap-toothed smile, boyish features, and lanky frame, Burks comes off as simultaneously laid-back and earnest, an idealist as much as a realist. Similarly, his work in developing countries is equal parts idealistic and pragmatic. Burks collaborates with artisans because he has a product idea that he needs help executing, the artisans have a technique that lacks a product expression, or both. For the artisans, the work can help drive local economic development; working with Burks shows them the possibilities of a wider market, and helps them develop their design skills and understanding of trends so that they can aim their products

ABOVE: Burks' New York studio, Readymade Projects, is a hub for prototyping and experimentation.

RIGHT: *We Are All One*, a site-specific installation at the World Festival of Black Arts and Cultures in Senegal in 2010. Burks took photos documenting visitors encountering the work.

BELOW: The single basket lamp and triple basket lamp, both made in collaboration with Senegalese artisans.



"Man Made" photo: Daniel Håkansson / Lamps photo: Patricia Parinejad / All other photos: Courtesy of Stephen Burks

toward that wider market. And when Burks leaves developing areas, he generally leaves behind a local organization that will continue to support small-business development.

Cape Town-based Willard Musarurwa was a street vendor, making wire souvenirs for tourists. Then, through a local design institute, he met Burks and together they created TaTu wire outdoor furniture, which Artecnicla launched in

2007. Musarurwa was able to start his own business, Feeling African, move into a studio, and hire nine people to continue developing his furniture. This kind of collaboration, with Burks marking up prototypes with a pen, going back and forth with artisans as they work out a detail or concept, can establish a feedback loop of skills and ideas that can not only bring international attention to a brand but also promote



LEFT: Burks at work with staff of French company Roche Bobois on the Traveler chair.

BELOW: The Anwar LED lighting collection, designed for Spanish startup Parachilna in 2014. Anwar is the Arabic word for "luminous" and the name of Burks' son.



craft and industrial design in tandem. (While TaTu furniture is no longer available from Artecnic, Burks plans to commercially distribute Musarurwa's work through his own company.)

Burks' collaborative mindset and method sustains him as a designer, too: A polyphony of voices saturates the designer's work, from perfume bottles to colorful packing tape, rope chairs, home textiles, and even a couch with upholstery pleated by kilt-makers in Scotland. For Burks, the problem with today's conventional industrial processes is that they keep designers and, therefore, innovation at a distance. "The closer designers can get to the process of making," he says, "the more we can understand and create unique results."

Work predicated on such hands-on proximity to the artisanal process – product development that happens while making the product – has demonstrably broadened his own knowledge, skills, and creativity. When ATA and Artecnic invited Burks to Cape Town, his work for luxury brands had been feeling superficial for some time. He describes his first trip to South Africa as a "design boot camp"; he worked directly with several artisan groups for a couple of weeks, using mostly recycled materials, from wax and mosaic glass tile to plastic bags, wire, and tin cans – material otherwise headed for the landfill. "I found their immediacy of making fascinating," says the designer. He developed the recycled glass and silicone bowls and vases on that trip that would be picked up by Cappellini Love, along with the first prototype of the TaTu table series.

That first visit to Africa also left Burks struck by the design world's lack of diversity – "not just in the faces of the designers, the companies, and



Weaving experts in the Philippines work collaboratively to build the Burks-designed Ahnda lounge chair, designed for Dedon in 2014.

the consumers, but also in the forms, materials, and references in the products," he explains. "I saw the work with the artisans as a collaboration that gave a unique voice to the products I began making, a voice that was less interested in the end result and more interested in the story of getting there."

It was his 2011 "Stephen Burks: Man Made" exhibition, the Studio Museum in Harlem's first industrial design show, that



ABOVE: Burks' Missoni Patchwork vases, released in 2004, were his first foray into handmade objects.



ABOVE: This ottoman, part of the 2012 Dala collection for Dedon, comes with a strap to make it easy to carry or drag.



The Ahnda chair showcases what Burks calls "transparent upholstery."



In early 2014, *Dwell* magazine exhibited work by Burks during Milan Design Week. The show featured a mix of Senegal-based works and other design collaborations.

epitomized and broadcast Burks' rare fusion of craftsmanship and contemporary design: The basic unit of the show – baskets constructed from spiraled Senegalese sweetgrass, stitched together with colorful strands of recycled plastic – stemmed from a chance meeting in New York with a basket vendor from Thiès, a city near Dakar, Senegal. Burks and his assistant learned the weaving method on a visit to Thiès, where the women sat on the ground, legs stretched out in front of them, to work. Back in Burks' studio, the baskets were augmented with a mirror or a light bulb; were used to fabricate new objects, such as a beanbag chair, employing the same sewing technique but with different materials such as nylon technical climbing rope; and were used as molds to shape secondary materials.

Burks was not just sampling a sensibility, but innovating techniques and materials,

folding them into his design practice. Whether it's African basketweaving or Peruvian papier-mâché, he doesn't let sentimentality about a craft tradition or a blind loyalty to its "Africanness" or "Peruvianness" limit him.

The artisans often lack the formal vocabulary learned in design school, which, Burks says, can sometimes make hashing out an idea more of a challenge, but the wealth of knowledge they possess about their material and craft is immeasurable. "We try to learn as much as we can before we go, but often are surprised by the reality," he says, "and that's the fun part. The best projects are those that leave space for the imagination of the artisans. They're creative people like me, who spend hours and hours manually solving problems on the fly."

Working on outdoor furniture brand Dedon's new Dala and Ahnda collections, the designer arrived in the

Philippines with only general sketches and no idea how the final weave would be developed over the multiple intersecting parts of the chair – but within days artisans had resolved most of the details. "It still takes nearly a week to weave one chair, but this is where the luxury truly lies – in the authenticity of the hand," Burks explains. "Brands like Hermès leverage and celebrate this kind of appreciation for making every day, so why can't artisans in the Philippines?"

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Burks has a line of wax-printed clothes available through New York retailer Opening Ceremony.



Burks with artisan Willard Musarurwa, who introduced Burks to the technique behind the wire TaTu furniture (below).

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