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THE CASE FOR **craft**

Sam Kasten, COVER's Guest Editor for this issue, has worked as a handweaver for over forty years during which time he has built a worldwide reputation for his skill, ingenuity and acumen. Yet appreciation of the unique skills of and products made by artisans are constantly threatened by the machinations of the market – here a group of interior designers, architects and artisans chosen by him explain why craft is important



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I have been in the residential interior design business for over 25 years. When I began in New York in the early 1980s, I fondly remember the enormous number of crafts people who I had the pleasure of working with, from furniture makers to carpet weavers. Craft was very much alive and well and it was the custom approach with the artisans that helped create distinctive environments for clients.

This of course came at great cost to the client and time spent by the designer, though all parties felt that the way to achieve 'uniqueness' and quality was to engage with people to make things that had never been made before. To this day, I adhere to this philosophy in our work.

In the past twenty years or so the business has changed dramatically. There has been a substantial increase in the quantity of products

available to the design community, fuelled by a robust economy and a global playing field where labour is tapped into to create furnishings with a particular look or underlying idea. This was not necessarily a bad thing. As choice increased dramatically, access to good design became a worldwide phenomenon, no longer just available to a super privileged and elite clientele. Design seemed to be everywhere and available on unprecedented levels. Drawing from history, other cultures, new materials and the residential marketplace, there was an opening up and expansion of design to a wider audience. The dark side to this is banality. A great design idea is watered down and begins to show up all over the place; the world begins to look the same. Anything can be had at competitive prices, as long as we forget the carbon footprint and other environmental and socioeconomic issues in the importation of goods from developing countries.



Which leads me back to the craftsman and why it remains so important for professionals and clients who have the means to have anything, to continue to support craft in our culture. We are blessed to be able to work with an incredible clientele, many of whom are interested in and supportive of the craft that goes into their homes. Most of what we do is custom, from furnishings we design and produce, to fabrics that we have printed and/or woven, to carpets that are handmade. As designers we express our vision in a truly individual fashion on behalf of the client, who receives a finished product that is truly theirs. And talented people who have skill sets to offer this collective process are supported in what they do, which from my perspective is ultimately the creation of art.

One could say that, given the world I work in, I hold an elitist view in this regard. Perhaps so, but great art has always existed as a result of patronage from privileged classes. Things that we know to be iconic and historically relevant came to be as a result of patronage. I believe that this philosophy is as relevant today as it has been through the ages, and I have a great number of clients who feel the same way. For many years I have the pleasure of working with Sam Kasten, who has been a wonderful addition to the collective of artisans making beautiful and enduring things for our projects. What Sam does is on some level insane. Working with weavers painstakingly and tediously to hand weave materials for use in a home. This is not happening overseas but here



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01-03 Bespoke fabrics commissioned by Douglas Durkin Design for a private residence on the Californian coast. All fabrics were designed and woven by Sam Kasten inspired by the colours and textures of the surrounding landscape



in America. The costs of operating a business like this are extraordinary, and Sam's pricing can speak to that! But for the creation of a unique artisanal-quality fabric, there is no one that is better.

Anyone can weave fabric, but it takes an artist to interpret nature and modern architecture the way Sam does. A few years ago, we received an important commission for a modernist residence on a breathtaking property on the northern California coast, and we engaged Sam to create an entire collection of materials he had never produced before.

Incredible textures and colours, all stemming from the site, and using as inspiration the rocks along the coastline, the grasses and other flora on the property, even the tree bark and Spanish moss from local trees. We wanted a highly textural, innovative range of material to contrast with the stark modernism of the architecture, while also holding up to the extraordinary weight of the property and location. A three year development and production process ensued, involving multiple test runs by Sam and his incredible team, and many trips for us to the East Coast. The results were amazing.

We also turn to Sam for the natural fabrics we just cannot find in the marketplace: from Japanese silk ribbon with linen, to modernist grasscloth, to custom cashmere fabric in colours, form and scale where nothing else could quite do. Sam has been the only designer and artisan in my career who understands the weaving process as well as the designers' point of view. Magical results in all cases.

Craft is important. Simply put, as human beings we make things. In all qualities and aspects of life, humanity strives for the best and most perfect realisation of a skill set. Regardless of mass production and the never ending hunger of the world marketplace, there simply has to be a revered place for those who choose the oath of art and making things as opposed to just the path of commerce.

I feel it is my duty to support craft in my work. Fortunately, when presented in this light, there are those wonderful clients who see and understand the value in what we are doing. Cost aside, beauty doesn't come cheap.