

Amberg's passion for leather remains undiminished

The economic downturn of 2008 hit the high-end accessories sector in their traditional markets, although increase in demand from the newly wealthy in Asia have put a healthier complexion on business results.

Some of the companies that have been firmly rooted in Europe or North America are falling over themselves now to establish a presence in Asia. Others have been happy to carry on making the products they have always made in the way they have always made them, believing firmly that the appeal of handmade items endures among a big

Few ambassadors for leather are as passionate about using the material in his products as luxury handmade leathersgoods designer Bill Amberg.

enough number of wealthy customers for them to make a living.

One of these is Bill Amberg, who describes his company as a specialist leather design and manufacturing company based in London. He started the business in 1984, "principally as a craftsman", and has now developed it into a company with three strands: a specialist

leather interiors business, a corporate product design business, and a brand business selling leather accessories at retail and online. "I started, like a lot of craftspeople, after leaving school with very little in terms of formal education, just with a passion for making things," he says. "I think that the opportunities that I was given, in terms of being able to turn



Bathroom wall.

ALL IMAGES: BILL AMBERG



Bedroom wall.

that into a business, are available to lots and lots of people.” He believes in passing on his knowledge of and enthusiasm for leather and for the products that designers can make from it. He talks about demystifying the path to business success for young designers, and about encouraging them to live the dream.

Pushing the message that it’s still worth producing handmade goods in expensive cities like London might have been easier before the 2008 financial crash. Mr Amberg simply says: “It would be a lie to say that the last two years have been easy for anybody because things haven’t been easy. But I suppose my big advantage in the way my business has been structured is that the corporate design side and the interiors side have been able to maintain their success. That’s predominantly due to the fact that there is a very high-end customer out there who is willing to pay for excellence regardless of the general state of the economy.”

Hands-on approach

If it’s true that consumers, in the face of difficulties such as the banking crisis that many in Europe and North America have recently had to live through “lock up their wallets temporarily” and retail becomes more difficult, an advantage of many of the interior design projects Bill Amberg takes on is that they can easily run for several years. He has carried out architectural projects in commercial and residential properties, with examples ranging from leather wall panels and headboards for beds to furniture and even leather handrails for staircases. “If you’re designing [the interior] of a yacht or a hotel or an aeroplane, those are two-, three-, four-year projects,” he explains. “They’re either going to pull the plug completely, which fortunately hasn’t happened to me, or they continue.”

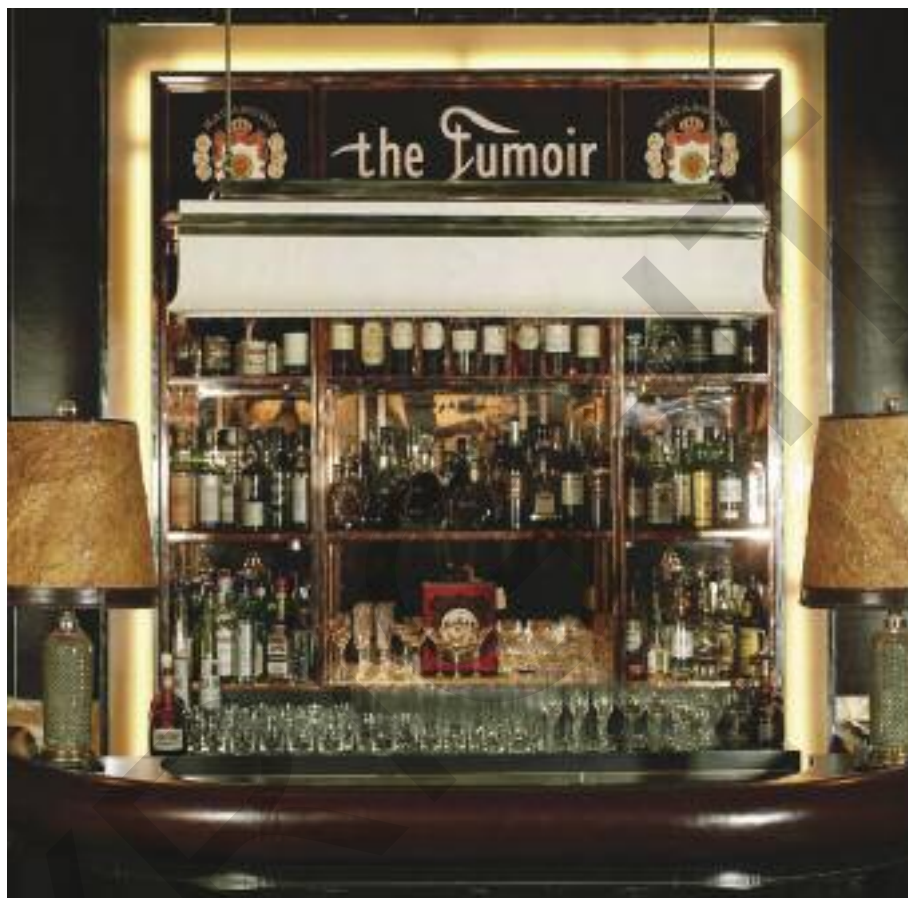
If you are moving away from throw-away, as large numbers of affluent consumers are (buying products that may not be the cheapest, but that they will be able to love

and keep for years, and maybe even pass on), Bill Amberg believes that products made from leather will hold a particular appeal. “Leather is such a tactile material,” he says. “And to get the best out of it, it has to be handled. We don’t deal in plasticated materials, and the types of leather we are using can’t really be cut by machine, they have to be cut by hand. The picking of the material has to be done by eye. If you are making car upholstery or the seats in an auditorium, you can knock them out by machine. But if you are making something that has to understand the nuance of the material, you have to do that by hand.”

This is not to say that Bill Amberg bags do not come from factories, they do. But all the models are developed “and developed, and developed and remade” by a team of craftspeople in the company’s workshop in London. When the leathergoods brand knows exactly how it wants each bag to look, the prototype can go to the factory of an outsource manufacturing partner to be copied.



Wall panels.



The Fumoir bar.

He says: "The development of any product for us, the original idea, the prototyping, the getting it moving is about pure, old-fashioned craftsmanship. But I think that the oddity about the leather industry in general is that it's an incredibly hands-on business anyway. It's not automated. Even with furniture, you can't just put it onto a computer and then turn it out. Even when I say I send my bags to the factory, they just do exactly what we do in our workshop; they just do it with more people. It's still about putting a single skin on the table and looking at it and judging where the best places to lay the patterns are and taking it forward from there into a product."

He passes this work to more than one factory and is proud of the long-standing relationships he has with these partners. He has been working with one of them for 18 years now. "We know we can work together," he says. "But it takes a long time to make that jump. It's a series of steps you go from really, truly believing

that the only person who can make something beautiful is you, to taking on a few employees and thinking you can pass that on to them. And then, suddenly, you find that there is somebody out there in a small manufacturing unit who shares the same feelings as you."

His commitment to making leather-goods in England, with its higher labour costs than could be found elsewhere, remains strong. The sourcing of the materials, where they have come from, what they are, the distance the product travels to reach a shop shelf are all themes that discerning consumers (he describes them as independently minded, travelled individuals who are tuned in to sustainability) pick up on now, he says. They ask questions about this, whereas perhaps as recently as two years ago they did not. He adds: "They like the fact that we can say it's all made in England, that it's made with vegetable-tanned leather and has no chrome in it. They like the fact that it's going to burnish

and patinate. Two or three years ago, they weren't that interested. We were still making things in the same way, but it was less of an important story."

He points out the importance of reaching out to these consumers on the internet now and says these can be "golden times" for the manufacturers of good products. It may have taken a ten-year slog for these manufacturers to bring their skill levels up and develop fantastic products, but the internet now presents them with an excellent opportunity to bring their work to the widest possible audience. They can film their products, photograph them from every angle, talk about them in detail and give every aspect of the story behind them.

Online or off, there is a consensus among companies in the luxury segment that consumers who appreciate and are enthusiastic about handmade products with a strong sustainability story are a growing minority. ☉