



BEAST to Beauty

Mario Hernández aims to be an important player in the global luxury leathersgoods market, the first from Latin America.

ALL CREDITS: MARIO HERNÁNDEZ



Colombian entrepreneur Mario Hernández launched his own clothing and leathersgoods manufacturing company in the 1970s, but took a decision in 1997 to stop making good products for others and to put his own name on them. He steadily built up a chain of more than 100 stockists across the globe and has more than 60 own-brand stores. He now seeks global recognition as the Latin American luxury leathersgoods brand 'por excelencia' and to open stores all over the world.

After Latin America, the world

Self-made man Mario Hernández is determined that the brand of bags, small accessories, apparel and shoes that bears his name will become the best known luxury leathersgoods brand that Latin America has given the world so far. He founded the parent company, La Marroquinera (a name that means 'the leathersgoods maker') in the Colombian capital, Bogotá, in the 1970s, and now employs around 500 people, more than 300 of them in his own manufacturing plant. A brand he founded under his own name in the 1990s now produces between 10,000 and 12,000 items per month using, for the most part, imported finished leather. Much of this material, such as the bovine leather in pink, chocolate brown, gold and burnished earth tones and stamped with flocks of butterflies for a special collection called Mariposas after the insects, comes from Italy. "We buy high-quality hides," Mr Hernández says. "We have to be able to compete globally and that means we have to be able to offer products of a similar quality to those on offer from big-name brands. Part of the promise of our brand is that our customers know we will use the best materials on the market, because our first thought is to make a quality product. Not only that, the best-quality hides are the ones that are best for the environment."

Magic in the air

The butterflies in the Mariposas collection bring "a magic touch", the maker says, making the collection reminiscent of the magical realism of Colombia's recently departed great literary figure, Gabriel García Márquez. But Mario Hernández's work is firmly rooted in the real world (sales of the bags in the collection generate donations to rare butterfly preservation projects). He says he works hard, even describing this as his greatest fault, starting at six o'clock in the morning, eating lunch at his desk and sometimes only finishing at ten or eleven in the evening. When you call his company on the telephone, the first voice that you hear on the automated response system is his. He introduces himself and insists that if you are calling with a suggestion or a complaint, he would like to talk to you directly, and he gives his extension number.

He accuses himself of being weak at administration, but says he stays on top of design because if you don't have design, you don't have good products, which means you won't have sales, which



*Self-made man,
Mario Hernández.*

means you won't have a business. He speaks frequently to university students in Colombia and has told them hunger was his biggest motivation in becoming an entrepreneur. By this, he doesn't just mean hunger in the figurative sense. His family moved to the capital from the northern state of Santander in the early 1950s. When his father died, his mother had to let out rooms in their house and the Hernández family, four children in all and their mother, shared one room. "We ate tamales mostly," he says, referring to one of the country's most traditional and most basic foods. He left school at 14 to become a messenger boy. Later, he started to trade in clothes and, later still, in leathersgoods. He found he had a good sense for what customers would like and used his contacts to influence the design and manufacture of the goods,



With around 50 shops in Latin America and the Caribbean, Mario Hernández now feels ready to open up in carefully selected locations around the globe.

rather than just take what was on offer. This led to a bit of a rebellion against the insistence in Colombia in the 1980s that all leathers had to be “either black or coffee coloured”, as he recalls it. He changed that by bringing bright colours and creative finishes that the Colombian leather products market had not seen before. And from this, he built up, as he continues to do today, La Marroquinera and the Mario Hernández brand.

Imitation, the sincerest form of flattery

There are now 25 own-brand stores in Colombia, 13 in Venezuela, five in Mexico and others in the Caribbean and Central America, making more than 60 in all. Earlier this year, the company announced that its next own-brand store will be in Moscow, its first in Europe. The founder said on announcing this European development: “Ours are luxury products and we have to think carefully about where to open stores; we can’t just set up shop after shop. However, there are lots of millionaires in Russia and the country represents an amazing opportunity for us.” The company envisages being able to open the store before the summer. Its next overseas opening is likely to be in Miami, but not until, perhaps, the end of 2015.

Unusually, it was a case of counterfeiting that inspired his interest in the Russian market: counterfeit Mario Hernández goods, produced in China, were on sale there. “I thought this was a good thing,” the founder says. “It means the brand is good and that people like it. Obviously we got the lawyers onto it and the sales stopped, but it was a good sign because they only make fakes of good products. Louis Vuitton is the subject of

counterfeiting all the time. It doesn’t worry me; my products are products for connoisseurs, and if you are a connoisseur you want the genuine article.”

Technical skills required

The genuine article, in this case, includes hand-finishing. He makes no excuse for hiring artisan leathers experts from Spain and Italy and asking them to move to Colombia, not just to work on Mario Hernández products themselves, but also to pass their skills on to the brand’s workforce. He explains: “Artisans are not people who sit at home with one old machine and put together rudimentary products out of scraps. An artisan is someone who has a genuine feeling for the product he is making, just like someone making good cheese, good pasta or good wine.”

He believes strongly in helping people to learn valuable technical skills and it’s something he has taken beyond the walls of his own factory. He has set up a school in Bogotá for teaching a wide range of technical skills, with people paying afterwards in instalments for the help they have received in learning their trades so that they can earn a living while helping to fund courses for new applicants. “Everybody seems to want to be a doctor these days,” Mr Hernández laments. “We have lots of doctors. It’s the same with lawyers, we have any number of them. What we don’t have is technicians and that’s what the school is for, to help people learn these skills. We need technical people, people who can feel things.” Using his own workforce as an example, he says people come in as apprentices and become “maestros”, real artisans.

An annual design competition he runs for talented young



"Artisans are people with a genuine feeling for the quality products they make."

people in Colombia is now in its eighth edition. Participants must be Colombian students engaged in a design, art, architecture or music course anywhere in the world, or students from other countries who are resident in Colombia. After registering their interest and proving their eligibility, entrants have to submit photographs of a design entry they have constructed and documentation to explain how it fits into the two criteria laid down by Mario Hernández. This year, he wants the students to concentrate on the 2014 FIFA World Cup in Brazil and on 'The Magic of the Unicorn', the mythical beast that appears on his brand logo. The prize for the winner is an all-expenses-paid trip to Europe to attend a summer school at the Istituto Europeo di Design.

To offer people these chances to find work and to earn an honest living is another part of his commitment to corporate social responsibility and he is frank about his reasons: Colombia has a lot of poverty and he believes businesses have an important share of the responsibility for tackling it. To create employment is to help build up the country, and to pay taxes, to be honest and transparent is the very least anyone can expect of business figures, in his view. To act less than honestly would be to give a poor example to everyone, including your own employees; he says: "Why should your employees play fair with you if they see that you don't play fair?" And because more than 500 families are dependent on the success and sustainability of his business, he has put special measures in place for them too. For example, he is committed to helping his employees to own their own homes; those that have worked for

him for ten years or more already have this, and he has said the whole workforce will within five years. He has negotiated a deal with a financial services provider to make this possible.

Giant steps

Mario Hernández plays down his own importance, and says he only put his own name on the brand because marketing experts from Europe insisted it was the correct thing for a luxury company to do, but he is a major figure in his own company. When whisky company Johnnie Walker decided to include a Colombian advert in its 2010 WalkWith Giants series (which went around the world featuring business figures, musicians and sports stars), it picked Mario Hernández for the campaign. In 2012, he was named the Ernst & Young Colombian Entrepreneur of the Year and last year he received an invitation to present at New York Fashion Week.

He has ambitious targets for expanding his brand beyond Latin America and into the global market and believes that policies such as free trade agreements can help his and other Colombian businesses boost their export earnings. An agreement between his country and the US, for example, came into effect two years ago. "We have to be open to trade agreements and be ready for them," Mario Hernández says. "I have been in favour of opening up for a long time. If you remain closed and try to protect what you already have, what you end up doing is protecting inefficient companies. It's like still having your son at home after he has reached the age of 50 and still taking him breakfast in bed every day and then walking down the street with him to make sure he gets on the right bus." ☉



Butterflies on the Mariposas collection add a touch of magic.