

LOS ANGELES CONFIDENTIAL

HOLLYWOOD & DIVINE

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PORTRAITS *of the* ARTISANS

Larger-than-life, luxury-loving Los Angeles isn't just the consummate consumer any longer. As befits its 21st-century stature as an international hub nonpareil, LA is fast producing its own brand of artisanal, creative chic. Homegrown "haute" for export. Take that, Paris.

BY FINN-OLAF JONES

PHOTOGRAPHY BY BRIGITTE SIRE

"It was a cultural wilderness when I first arrived," recalls Robert Kuo, who immigrated to Los Angeles in 1973 from China as a young man to start a design business based on the ancient Chinese craft of cloisonné.

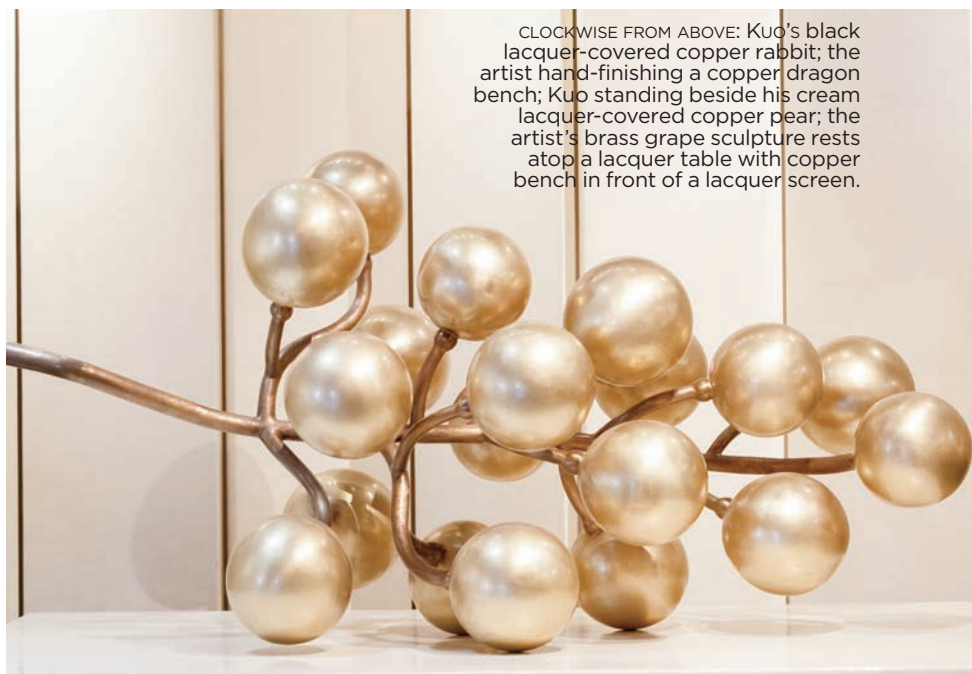
Los Angeles has come a long way since then. As the city traded its status-by-tarot-card vibe of the '60s for a status-by-credit-card materialism of the '70s, it amped up both the creation and consumption of luxury products—as witnessed by the rise of the "Golden Triangle" shopping mecca centered in Beverly Hills, which was originally developed by the Rodeo Land and Water Company. A melting pot for so many ethnicities, with their diverse trades and crafts, LA epitomizes humanity's sum knowledge of creativity and skill. "I opened my studio here because I can access designers, vendors, and materials unlike anywhere else in the world," says former New Yorker Julia Teachey Lemle, whose jewelry line, Julieri, graces high-end boutiques from Bel-Air to Bahrain.

The city's unique gift for producing high-end products has also been spurred by its high-tech and aerospace industries. Interestingly, Moraga Vineyards in Bel-Air uses air filters created for Skylab and a state-of-the-art monitoring system enabling its winemaker to micro-adjust Moraga's fermentation tanks from any Internet connection in the world. Not coincidentally, Tom Jones, who created Moraga, was once the CEO of Northrop Grumman.

It also helps that LA's natives are often the best and most well-heeled consumers of its artisanal products; where there's wealth, there's the desire for the trappings of wealth. And there's always been a gold rush of one kind or another going on here. There were even vineyards planted on the banks of the LA River, in what would become Downtown, to lubricate early settlers whose pockets were lined with silver mined from the Sierras.

Now that LA has become a true global hub, it is nourishing the kind of talent and sense of luxury worthy of international renown. After all, this has become a city based not only on the consumption, but rather the production of culture. As author, luxury-brand consultant, and broadcaster Bronwyn Cosgrave commented when Saint Laurent moved its atelier from Paris to Los Angeles last year: Hollywood is the new catwalk.

Here are four local talents whose unique products are synonymous with luxury far, far beyond the LA River.



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Kuo's black lacquer-covered copper rabbit; the artist hand-finishing a copper dragon bench; Kuo standing beside his cream lacquer-covered copper pear; the artist's brass grape sculpture rests atop a lacquer table with copper bench in front of a lacquer screen.



Objets of beauty: Robert Kuo's Melrose Avenue showroom is a virtual stage set of the designer/artist's fantastical creations.

ROBERT KUO transfigures exquisite *ancien régime* Chinese techniques into modern-day masterpieces.

Robert Kuo has one of those calm, patient demeanors more befitting of a psychiatrist than a creator of luxury goods. But behind his eyes, lined from the squinting required by his work for more than half a century, is the eternal observer, designer, and, perhaps most notably, translator of forms, cultures, and ancient genres into fanciful contemporary furniture or “livable art,” as he calls it.

Kuo, 68, made his name taking classic designs from his Chinese homeland, mixing them with generous portions of Art Deco, Art Nouveau, and whimsy, and creating furnishings and decorations that have been seen everywhere, from the décor of *The Four Seasons* to the pages of *Architectural Digest*.

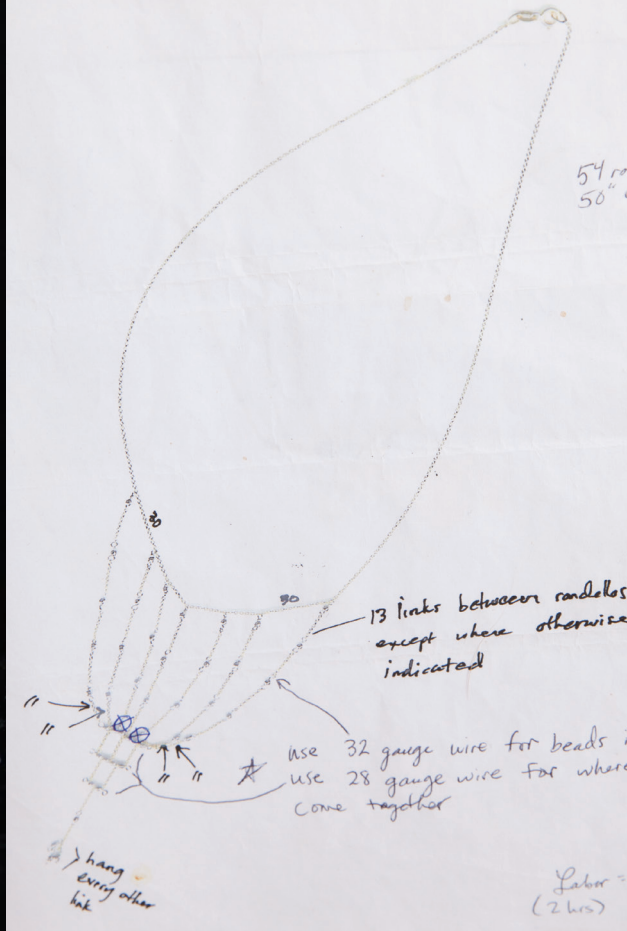
On a recent Saturday, grown-ups and kids were pausing before Kuo's Melrose Avenue showroom's giant display windows as fantastical lipstick-red Chinese bureaus and sculptural tables seemed to corral a virtual zoo of giant copper frogs, snails, and animals amid oversized lacquered fruits and vegetables. It was as if the colorful visions of an Asian Dr. Seuss had been brought to life by a modern Fabergé—and with prices to match.

Despite the humorous nature of, say, a lacquer and copper frog that doubles as a chair, Kuo's creations are labor-intensive to a medieval standard while his level of perfectionism is second to none. After spending a little time amid Kuo's immaculate, built-for-the-centuries furniture, it'll be awhile before anyone would want to visit his or her local IKEA store again without proper medication.

The son of Catholic Chinese parents who fled to Taiwan from Beijing ahead of Mao's troops, Kuo's background is as fanciful as his creations. His father owned a cloisonné studio (cloisonné being an ancient Byzantine enameling-on-metal technique of applying layers of glazing between copper wire designs and then firing everything at different temperatures to get the right colors out) and Kuo was expected to follow in his footsteps. “But, as you can see,” Kuo smiles, “I had other ideas.”

Other ideas included moving to Los Angeles in 1973, where Kuo opened a cloisonné studio in Beverly Hills and began experimenting with new uses and techniques for this fading art. “I chose LA because it has no boundaries,” Kuo says. Here, he abandoned cloisonné's traditional

FROM LEFT: Designer Julia Teachey Lemle's Martha Graham glittering rings (\$7,699 each) and diamond engagement rings; a sketch of a Saltarello necklace (\$1,749); a selection of Julieri bracelets (\$1,229–\$7,499).



chinoiserie for a more graphic, geometric design for his new American clientele, including one early adherent: Neiman Marcus. Another turning point came when one of his pieces, Goldfish Bowl, which depicted multicolored goldfish against a black background, ended up in the permanent collection of the Smithsonian's Arthur M. Sackler Gallery.

Despite the \$35,000 price tag for one of his repoussé (another ancient technique where designs are hand-hammered onto sheet metal) copper bathtubs or the long time it can take to finish a commission, the demand for Kuo's products has been so large that he has opened a second gallery in Manhattan.

Many of the artisan's works are forged piece-meal in small villages around Beijing and in a large atelier in LA, where a crack team of mostly Latino artisans labors at techniques perfected half a planet and five millennia away. And they also have to keep up with Kuo's constant experimentation and expansion into yet new genres. "I [recently designed] ceramic tiles based on Song Dynasty designs for Ann Sacks," says Kuo. "It's the first time I've done tiles. But I never stop learning." *robertkuo.com*

JULIA TEACHEY LEMLE is seducing celebs—and the international set—with her bewitchingly hip bijoux.

"LA was my Provence," says Julia Teachey Lemle about moving to LA in 1997 from New York to

start her jewelry design business, Julieri. "When those painters went out to the countryside of Southern France, they experienced all that color, light, and inspiration, and started a new style of painting."

Teachey Lemle, who was escaping a "dreary corporate job," was looking for a place to actualize her long-standing visions of "wash and wear" jewelry: delicate items that would accentuate a woman's body and which you could comfortably wear "while working out or waltzing." The designer, 45, brushes her long, blonde hair away from perpetually mischievous eyes, her classically hip bracelets—fine rivulets of black diamonds, knotted leather, and yellow gold—lightly jangle on her arm. "People in LA wear a lot of amazing colors; it's not just black, red, and white like elsewhere," she adds. "It opened up my eyes to the possibilities of colored stones and contrasting metals."

One of her signature looks, seen glittering off the luminous necks and arms of Anne Hathaway, Alanis Morissette, and Jennifer Lawrence, is her 3mm white-gold nuggets, which sparkle like diamonds against rose gold. An especially witty manifestation of this look is her Disco necklace, which features a flecked white-gold pendant suggestive of a mirror ball dangling from a yellow-gold chain.

Working out of a shag-rugged, windowless industrial loft space across from The Salvation Army in Santa Monica, Teachey Lemle, her team of nine designers, and her studio manager, Molly Soeng, who is also "the best piece maker on the planet," brainstorm and play around with ideas.

"I'm a conduit to some kind of creative order... a muse," says Teachey Lemle. "A piece will pop into my head at inopportune times, like when I'm driving or on an airplane, and I put it on paper."

Her first break came when Elyse Walker, the Pacific Palisades überfashion boutique, purchased a big order. "They kept on reordering, but they had a hard time keeping my jewelry in stock," recalls Teachey Lemle. Soon, stars living on the Westside, including Cheryl Hines (of *Curb Your Enthusiasm* fame) were photographed wearing Teachey Lemle's distinctive designs, and her business took off.

A rough spot during the 2008 recession proved to be transcendental. "I had to lay people off," remembers Teachey Lemle. "It had been really tough, and one day I just lied on the floor in the fetal position, crying. Suddenly, this customer called from France saying how upset she was that she'd lost her favorite piece of jewelry she'd bought from one of the boutiques that carried me in Paris, and had spent all this time searching for me, and how beautiful she felt wearing the piece—it was like some angel was voicing why I'd gotten into this business in the first place." Julieri recovered, and Teachey Lemle eventually managed to hire back her family of designers and support staff. Sales are now soaring well into the seven figures.

Her pieces, ranging from \$300 necklaces to \$20,000-plus engagement rings, which are available through her website, are also featured in such shopping oases as Fred Segal, Dallas's Stanley Korshak, Harvey Nichols, and, perhaps the ultimate tribute to her creative vision, New York's Museum of Arts and Design.