

A black and white close-up portrait of Elizabeth Taylor, looking directly at the camera with a neutral expression. Her dark hair is styled in a classic, straight manner. The lighting is soft, highlighting her facial features.

# CHRISTIE'S

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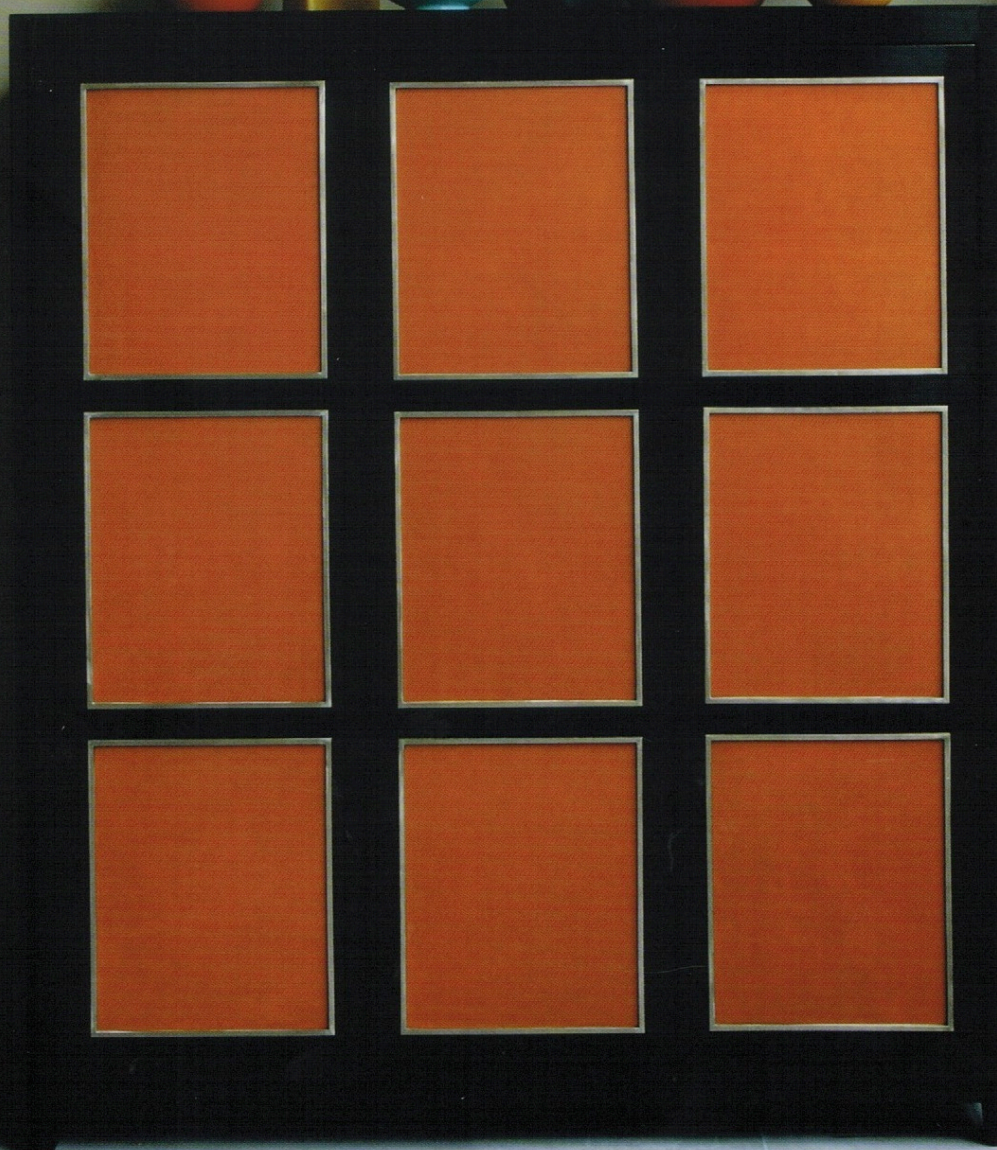




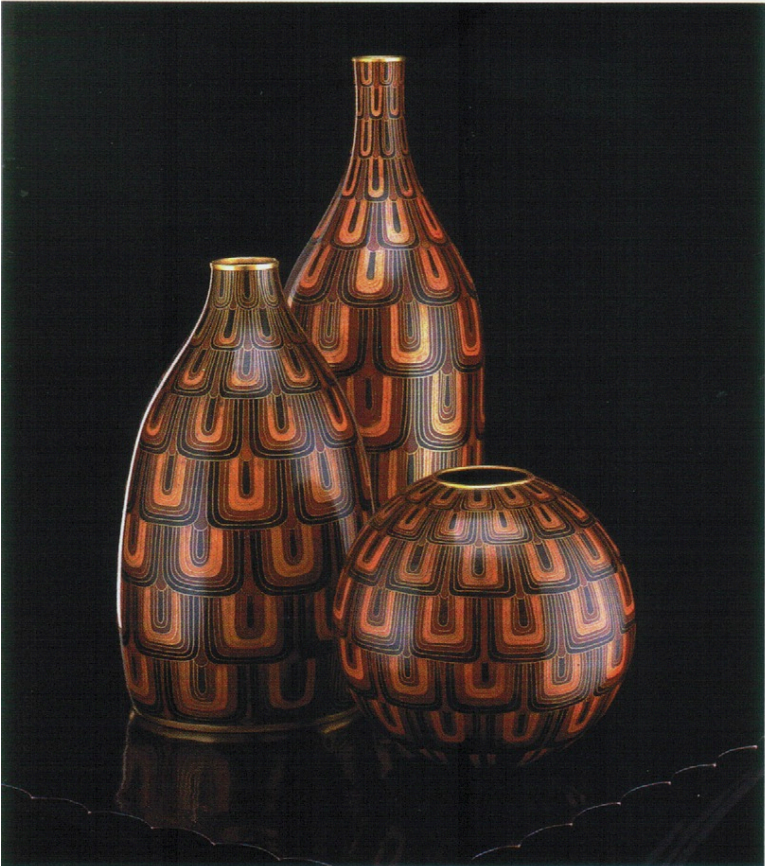
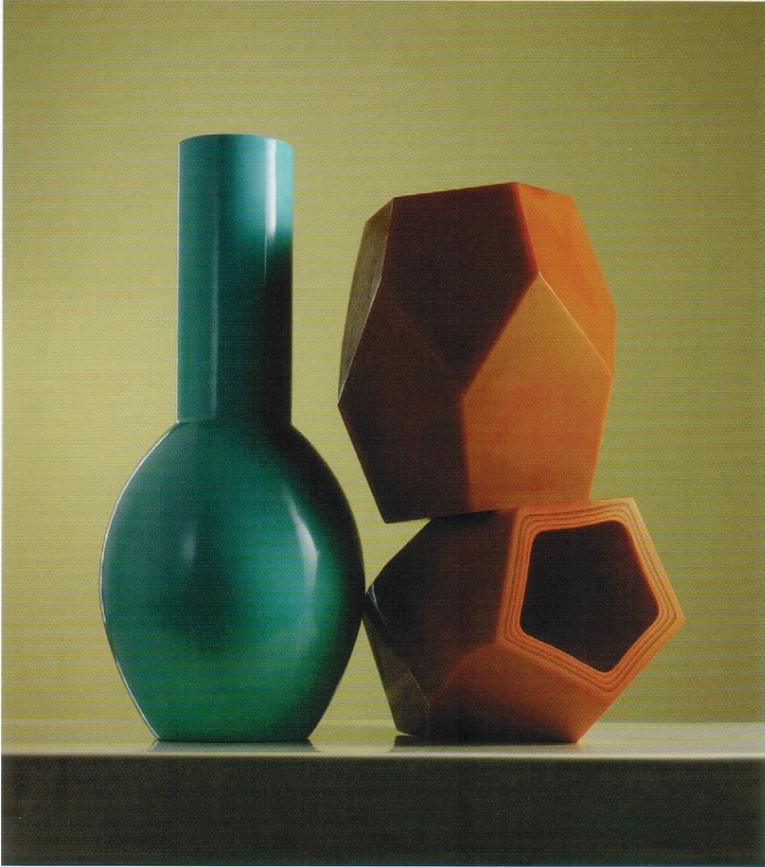
# Robert Kuo

IMPERIAL CRAFTSMAN OF THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY  
*by Kay Saatchi*











*Pieces go beyond the traditional range of black and red, to innovative creams and yellows. Looking closely one can see the handmade quality and depth of the luminous surface.*

I meet with Robert Kuo in his sun-drenched, contemporary showroom on Melrose Avenue just across from LA's iconic Pacific Design Center. Arriving from China less than twelve hours ago, he is brimming with enthusiasm and energy on returning from his Beijing-based workshops that carry on the ancient imperial traditions of cloisonné, repoussé, lacquer and Peking glass.

Robert proceeds to walk me back through his life's work, that is renowned for reviving and modernising the very finest of Chinese traditional skills and producing elegant 20th-century design/artworks.

Born into an artistic family in Beijing in 1947, Kuo moved to Taiwan in his infancy just before the Chinese Revolution in which the Communists led by Chairman Mao claimed control of the mainland. His father was an art professor and watercolourist and early on in Kuo's childhood he set up a cloisonné workshop as a hobby. From his early years, Robert trained as an apprentice in cloisonné, mastering the demanding skills necessary. Cloisonné is a technique of applying enamel into patterned cells or 'cloisons' made of intricate wire patterns soldered onto a metal base – a very difficult and time-consuming process requiring great skill. Cloisonné originated in the Byzantine Empire reaching China in the 12th century, spread by the refugees from the fall of Constantinople. Kuo soon turned away from making 'copies' of traditional pieces to introduce new and larger patterns: 'melting'

the cloisonné, creating a freer form, new colours and a new visual language. He studied the works at the National Palace Museum in Taipei, where Chiang Kai-shek had stored many of the priceless works of art and antiquities from the mainland to save them from their destruction during the Cultural Revolution.

His curiosity and search for freedom of expression compelled him to obtain the necessary paperwork to travel to the USA in 1971, visiting San Francisco, Los Angeles and New York. He returned to Los Angeles two years later on a 'honeymoon visa' with his new wife to start his new creative life away from the insular Chinese traditions of his young adulthood. He flourished due to his valuable skills, hard work and determination.

He had a vision to return to China. In 1981 he obtained – with difficulty – a visa to go to China to search for his family and roots. This was a dangerous journey for him, but also for any family he should unearth on the mainland. He amuses me with a story about his flight on Air China. Feeling nervous, he accepted an offer of a glass of wine to calm his nerves. The stewardess offered him red, white or rosé wine. He ordered rosé as it sounded exotic, only to have his glass half filled with red then topped up with white wine. Voila... Chinese rosé. Upon arriving, he sought the authorities' help, and was able to reunite with his uncle. They travelled around China to search for artisans' workshops from Beijing to Xi'an. He freely



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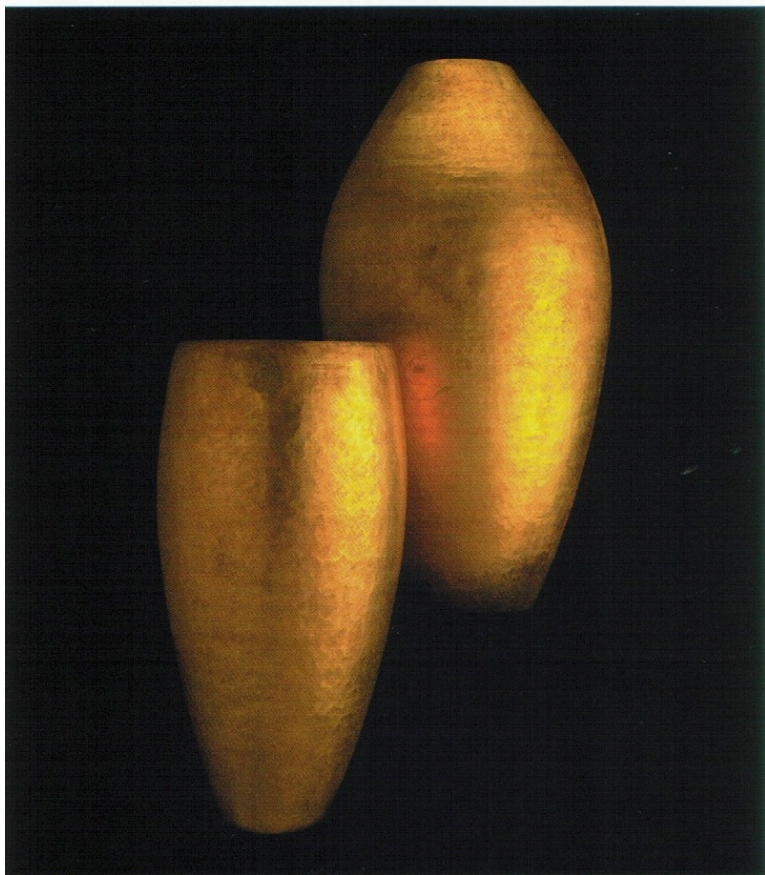
roamed the state rooms and private chambers of the imperial family's Forbidden City. I too went to see the Forbidden City early in 1983 and we chuckle at the thought that we would have been able to nick many precious antiquities if we had been so inclined. Having such an intimate audience with these masterpieces and the environment in which they were produced, Kuo came back to Los Angeles full of new ideas and a renewed passion for his art.

In 1984 he built his modern showroom which remains 'home' to his innovative work. Working in creative partnership with other designers, and with his own techniques evolving, he created a whole new visual vocabulary. Influenced by his knowledge of Art Deco and Art Nouveau and his love of the 'minimal' hand-workmanship of artists such as Josef Hoffman of the Wiener Werkstatte, he further expanded his vision. Advancing forward from his experiments with cloisonné, he chose to concentrate on basic metal shapes and developed his skill in repoussé, the traditional art of hand-hammering relief onto sheet metal which dates back to the Han Dynasty (206BC-AD220). Kuo found inspiration from the traditional Han shapes but often enlarged and simplified their form. The relief gives the objects a glowing and intricate surface in the light. He also experimented with the finishes: antique copper or blackened copper, silver plate and 24k gold. He soon started to experiment with lacquer. The technique of

lacquer dates back to the Shang Dynasty, circa 1600-1100BC. Lacquer is a transparent sap from a tree called *rhus verniciflua*, which is refined and strained to remove impurities by an ancient process. It is then applied by a laborious procedure of thin repeated coats that must dry between applications in high humidity. Lacquer is a dangerous material when wet so must be applied with the utmost care and precision. Kuo's lacquer pieces are influenced by the cinnabar techniques used in the Song Dynasty: over 60 layers of lacquer applied over a metal base, then decorated while still slightly wet by carving designs into the prepared lacquer. His pieces go beyond the traditional colour range of black and red, to his innovative creams and yellows, often combined with exposed repoussé work. Looking closely one can see the handmade quality and depth of the luminous surface.

Peking glass is a high-quality art glass best known to westerners from the snuff bottles produced in the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911). This ancient technique uses layer upon layer of glass formed around a hollow centre by blowing, then sending the final layered glass to jade carvers for shaping, carving and polishing. Kuo has expanded the tradition by creating unique shapes and new colours. To the traditional colours of 'baijade' or white jade, chicken fat yellow and 'transparent' wine red, Kuo has added the jewel colours of amber, turquoise and agate through trial and error. His art glass does not have the traditional imagery used on





snuff bottles: the dragon for mating and harmony, the fish for bounty, the lotus for continuity and the peaches for long life. The glass simply speaks through the voice of remembered form and vibrant colour.

On his frequent travels back to China, Kuo collects antiquities for inspiration which he displays alongside his creations. His work is in museum collections such as the Natural History Museum in Taipei, Smithsonian Sackler Gallery and the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco. His work resonates with Asian collectors who can easily read the history and pedigree of his work, plus discerning designers.

Kuo delights in the fact that his workshops are keeping alive the ancient traditions of China while expanding these techniques into the 21st century. He is proud that the workshops are now entering their second generations and is honoured to be called 'Older Brother of Their Father': the Chinese title of respect given to him by his extended family of artisans. Kuo's masterpieces give the 'Made in China' label a completely new meaning.

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