

Portrait

MICHAEL ARAM

Nature, redefined

BY SUSAN DICKENSON

A LITTLE OVER 20 YEARS AGO, a young New Yorker by the name of Michael Aram took a break from his life as an artist and student of fine arts—and made a visit to India that would change his life forever. Immediately taken with the local craftsmen, he took special interest in a particular metalcrafter's ability to process raw metal into simple objects and tools. Unable to communicate, Aram drew a shoohom design in the dirt and the craftsman created it for him.

Aram began watching and working with the craftsmen in New Delhi, sometimes making drawings in the dirt, sometimes on a sketchpad. He spent months hunting out artisans in the villages by listening for the beating of metal and learning to identify the smell of baked molasses used in the sand-casting process.

Learning the different metal processes, Aram applied his fine arts background to the decorative arts and made prototypes with whatever was at hand, sometimes just sticks and stones. After creating what would be his first collection of craft-based designs, Aram became the driving force behind a small cottage industry of Indian metalworkers.

Today, he divides his time between New York and New Delhi, where, in addition to his workshop, Aram has maintained a home for two decades. The shoohom craftsman now has a factory of his own and is the oldest artist/partner of Michael Aram Inc., which celebrates 20 years of business this year.

Over the years, Aram has become known for his creative interpretations of nature—foliage, blossoms, stones, vines and twigs cast or crafted from stainless steel, polished aluminum, enamel and other materials—in serving pieces, trivets, tabletop, accent furniture, lamps and decorative accessories.

He finds beauty in natural textures, forms and imperfections, such as the tattered, trampled leaf that inspired this season's Last Leaves collection. The leaf, found on the sidewalk in front of his New York store late last fall, exhibited "black and broken edges, burn marks from the sun and what seemed like myriad colors." Aram found great character in that and rendered a variety of "Last Leaves" bowls and baskets in polished aluminum and enamel coating, giving life to the unexpected colors and textures of the last days of fall which, he says, are "still so full of beauty and promise for me."

From India, Aram continues to build his collection of narrative, figurative and contemporary design—still handcrafted using traditional techniques—for galleries, specialty stores, private commissions and mass audiences.

Two years ago, Aram opened his first retail store—in a renovated 19th century carriage house in New York's Chelsea neighborhood. Architect James Harb collaborated on the project, of which Aram said, "We moved away from the pristine white spaces that characterize the stores that surround us and built a rich, dark, cave-like environment that's more in keeping with the alternative side of my work." A special signing event will take place in the store, at 136 West 18th St., on Dec. 3.

This summer Michael Aram Inc. formed an operational alliance with Jubka and Kim Seybert called The Guild, in a move designed



Designer Michael Aram is known for his creative interpretations of nature, rendered in metals and other materials.

to strengthen the brands and enhance the efficiencies of each with consolidated showrooms, advertising, systems and staff.

Most recently, Aram celebrated his company's 20th year with a special September event at Bloomingdale's flagship in New York, where he launched a special anniversary collection and unveiled his new space in the store.

In an interview this summer, Michael Aram Inc. CEO Sebastian Herald told Home Accents Today the company was up by double-digit percentages over its previous biggest year, and that it was focused on keeping the pipeline filled. "Newness is not our whole world—our best selling item is 10 years old. But we believe in keeping Michael's work flowing so that his vocabulary of design is always fresh."

Herald said the company is beginning to look at licensing opportunities, but wants to make sure it's with people who value the kind of designer Aram is. "He doesn't just sign off on anything," Herald said. "He designs it all." ■

7 QUESTIONS

What led to the launch of your company?

When I carried the things I made on that first trip back to New York, I showed them to people in the home industry. The response seems almost prophetic to me now. "If you can make it, we can sell it." I got back on a plane to India, and we did just that!

What is your role in the company?

I am involved in every aspect of the company, but am only responsible for design. I am blessed to have wonderful people in the organization who handle finance, operations and marketing. I brainstorm with Sebastian Herald, our CEO and Jose Cabatu, our EVP of finance and operations on important strategies. I also respect our individual strengths and roles. On a day-to-day basis, we keep each other abreast of our individual areas of concern. I approach business the same way I do a new design. It's about taking nothing and building something with creativity and problem-solving skills.

How have you seen the company/industry change over the years?

The industry continues to evolve in ways that are fascinating and which reflect technology, global economies and changing tastes. When I first came to India, I was sending telex messages with no phone and fax or laptop, and it was illegal for a foreigner to own a business here. Now we are in the process of building a 100% American-owned factory here and are installing an ERP system which will stitch together our information systems between India and our head office in the States. The biggest lesson I've learned in business is that it is critical to keep evolving in order not to become stagnant and redundant.

Who or what have been major influences/inspirations in your work and life?

My parents, and the way they live and orient themselves has been a major influence. In terms of artists, I would say Alexander Calder—his ability to bond metal and create joy in what appears to be such a spontaneous and effortless way has been a huge inspiration.

How do you like to relax and unwind?

I love junking. Flea markets around the world, garage sales, internet auction sites and antique shows all provide great entertainment for me and are a way that I unwind. I also love historic preservation and architecture, museums, travel, reading, music, and most recently, interacting with my sister's newborn twins.

Highlight of your career thus far:

Working on the "Michael Aram for Waterford" project at the Irish factory

Biggest challenge you face on a daily basis:

Getting to the gym.

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The Last Leaves bowls and baskets are crafted of polished aluminum with enamel coating



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Where did you grow up? Born in Providence, R.I., grew up in Westchester County, N.Y.

What did you want to be when you were growing up? Architect or artist

How did you earn your very first paycheck? Counting inventory at Barney’s as a high school student when my dad was general manager there

What are you reading right now? A book called Wabi Sabi which explains the Japanese philosophy and aesthetic

The three words that best describe me are: I would say I am very optimistic (read: Pollyanna), trusting (read: gullible) and adventurous (read: foolish!)

Your secret indulgence: watching Antiques Roadshow

I wish I knew how to: play piano

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