

luxury briefing

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Out OF AFRICA

Bespoke furniture collected by interior designer Louis Henri, a master of sophisticated luxury, not omitting a touch of humour, makes witty references to the animals and birds of his South African childhood

Whenever Louis Henri Buhrmann completes an apartment, villa or palace for one of his clients, most of the furniture, all the lighting, soft furnishings, even the door handles, are custom made to his own designs.

“Creating from scratch means that function and finish will perfectly suit the space,” says Louis. “If I just picked something from a collection, it would compromise the look I wanted to achieve.” The upholstery is made in Britain, while all the hardwood pieces are hand made by Buhrmann’s master cabinetmaker brother, Balthasar, at his Johannesburg workshop, Studio Crafted Furniture. Louis confirms: “We’re on the same wavelength; whatever I think of is always made exactly as I want.”

Louis Henri Buhrmann was born in South Africa, where he comes from an engineering background – both his father and grandfather were engineers, and he grew up surrounded by the tools of the trade. Louis and Balthasar studied engineering and woodwork at school, and at home there were wood-turning and metalworking machines in the garage. Louis and Balthasar would spend their time building things, and hatching plans to work together when they grew up. After a degree course in Interior Architecture at the University of Johannesburg, Louis moved to London in 2002 and spent the next six years acquiring professional experience in merchandising and

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interior design: first with Andrew Martin, followed by property developer Northacre, who were responsible for meticulous restoration of eight early 19th century terraces in Kensington and Chelsea.

Louis established his own interior design practice in 2007, and takes on no more than three projects a year, which allows for total immersion in each scheme. Projects include an apartment of Art Deco and Belle Epoque splendour in the Avenue Montaigne, Paris, a shimmering pied a terre for lavish entertaining in Mount Street, Mayfair, a villa in Cap d'Antibes, on the Cote d'Azur, a presidential suite in Dubai and a palace in Saudi Arabia.

The furniture, lighting and rug collection grew out of the design challenges of such projects as these, from which one or two pieces, which Louis considers to have universal appeal, will finally be selected, after months, if not years of development and re-design. Nothing is mass produced, some pieces will be one-offs or limited edition. Many will be made to order, others can be customised exactly to a client's particular tastes.

"I'm inspired by French Art Deco, especially the genius of Ruhlman and Arbus, Edwardian styling, and cutting edge modernism," says Buhrmann. "But I also want my designs to put a smile on your face." His style is an unmistakable blend of elegance, craftsmanship and sophistication, but not without his own layer of wit, described by one design writer as 'mischievous cool.'

Many of his works are imbued with a quirky playfulness that belies the serious craftsmanship involved in their creation. Each item has a distinctive character, an evolution of a classic shape, often an undertone of humour.

Some pieces make a light hearted reference to the wild life of his African childhood, the shapes of animals or birds, such as the Pelican floor lamp looking majestic on its own, or as a pair, multi-legged Spider pouf, animalistic Pedestal table in solid walnut with a marble base, and the Herd of Tables. The crimson velvet Caped Wing Chair, would be perfect for the latest

James Bond villain: dramatic, comfortable, with a sinister edge.

The De Villiers lamp, inspired by stalagmites and stalactites from the caves at the Cradle of Humankind near Johannesburg, is made from hand turned walnut columns, and a polished black granite base. It was originally designed for an apartment in Knightsbridge, completed in 2008, and the first piece that Louis and Balthasar manufactured together. Over the next three years Balthasar made prototypes, both furniture and lighting, for Louis in his spare time, before they set up a workshop together, and officially launched their first collection two years ago.

The most eccentric, even surreal, of Louis' designs is the Shongololo bench, a straight steal from the wildlife of South Africa. In Africa, millipedes and centipedes are affectionately referred to as 'shongololos,' from the Zulu word ukushonga meaning to 'roll up.' With 56 hand turned legs and acrylic foot detail, the bench truly looks alive. The frame is manufactured using a special process of moulding thin layers of walnut sheets into a custom made frame. The bench is upholstered in London, using eelskin panels, ornamented with small silver studs.

He has a gift for practical, yet glamorous design solutions: the shade of the De Villiers lamp, constructed from three elements, will protect the viewer from glare at any angle, with no loss of light. Transparent acrylic legs give Cocktailble has a sense of lightness and fun. The Linden desk a nod to the 18th century with its delicate beech inlay and bone handles, nevertheless includes ample storage for stationery.

Buhrmann observes: "Playing with materials, inlays and finishes gives not only the furniture, but the whole project, more depth."