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Nasir Kassamali

For over 40 years, Nasir Kassamali has been the leading importer, distributor and disseminator of European design in the United States. He symbolises an innovative vision of the art of design. In 1974, he and his wife Nargis set up a showroom in Miami to present the leading cutting edge European lighting brands to the American market. Luminaire very swiftly became the benchmark for good design in America, and its creators became its main spokespeople through the conferences, seminars, exhibitions and educational courses they organised on the premises. Now there are 4 multibrand showrooms – or rather design research centres, as the two enlightened entrepreneurs prefer to call them – covering more than 6,000 square metres: the Coral Gables flagship in Miami designed by Mateu Architects in 1984 and The Lab, in the city's Design District, created in 2002 as a working centre for experimentation and research; the other two were opened in Chicago and Los Angeles in 1989 and 2018, respectively. They are spaces in which design magnifies and melds with other disciplines, art first and foremost. The architectural value of the offices and showrooms has also been recognised with a number of prizes and awards, aside from the personal recognitions, such as the election of Nasir and Nargis as Florida Design Legends by the Wolfsonian-FIU in 2007, and the receipt of the ICE Business and Culture Award for the promotion of Italian design in America. A member of prestigious international bodies, Nasir Kassamali has also sat on the advisory councils of the AIGA and the FIU School of Architecture and Design, and the board of the Wolfsonian-FIU, as well as many international juries, including that of the German designreport award, held for over ten years as part of SaloneSatellite.

You're one of the leading figures on the American design scene, a symbol of good design. When did you discover this passion?

My father was a unique personality with great interest in travel, discovering the world and with impeccable taste. Like him, I was born in Mombasa, Kenya and in 1946 he travelled to the US and Canada, the first person from our community to do so. In those days, travelling even to Europe was an adventure. Travel outside of Kenya was very restricted. After every trip he would bring us books on different subjects. For me it was always a book on architecture or a magazine that he would pick up at the airport in London. He quickly realized my passion and encouraged it. He would take me with him when I was barely 8 or 9 to job sites and I would hear him speaking to the architects and from a young age I could read plans. When I was 14, he brought me a book on the Bauhaus and that totally changed my life. I was fascinated by the thought process and that was the beginning of my journey to discover that good design affects lives like it did mine. I was convinced from that age that I wanted to discover more about design and at age 73, I am still discovering.

Nasir Kassamali is to Luminaire what Leonardo is to the Mona Lisa. Tell us about the highest points in your long and prolific career.

You flatter me so much. I am one of the luckiest persons alive today. I am living the dream that was created for me when I was very young. My wife has been with me for the last 50 years and as many of you know she has survived cancer 5 times. Today we live with a mantra that everyday should be celebrated as if it was one's last day, so we have shared many milestones together. An important highlight is the "Love series" we created 15 years ago to raise awareness for cancer research. Our Design friends from all over the world have participated whole heartedly and we have been able to donate over \$ 1,000,000 University of Miami Sylvester Comprehensive Cancer Center for research Throughout my career, I have had the distinct honor to work with the founders of some of the best companies in the Design World. They treated us as friends and partners and not just dealers. I have also met and have as friends some of the most talented architect and designers in the world that I have had the pleasure to work with. Of course, opening our first shop in 1974 and making it work was extremely fulfilling. Then the Flagship showroom in 1984 that was designed and built for us. I could say that dream of church where people would come to experience good design was finally realized. In 1989, we opened the Chicago showroom. 2000, a state-of-the-art distribution center design and built for us in Miami that acts as the nerve center for all of our activities. 2006, "Lab" in Miami's Design District and finally a beautiful showroom in Los Angeles in end 2018. Every lecture and exhibition are a highlight for me because it raises awareness in people about Good design affects and improves lives. Serving on the Architectural and design boards of both our universities in Miami, to be able to influence students has been part of our mission to drive a holistic approach to Design and Design education. To see young designers at Marva's SaloneSatellite and helping some of them achieve new heights in their young career gives me immense pleasure.

Design, for you, is not just business and passion, it also plays an educational role. Even in your very first showroom, you organised conferences, seminars, forums that were open not just to your staff. So, democratic design?

When we came to the US in 1973, I was troubled that there was a marked difference in how one could acquire good design. There were areas in major cities (Design Centres) where the public was not allowed entry unless you were accompanied by a decorator. The prices were quoted only to the Decorator. We could not understand this and so when we opened Luminaire in March of 1974, the prices were visible to all. Since we imported everything we sold, the pricing was very reasonable. So many decorators told us that since we did not give them hefty discounts we would not survive. Our first shop where we sold only lighting from Scandinavia was on 50 sq. meters and we had to survive. So, began the quest of educating one customer at a time and this has not changed in the last 46 years.

Design is a language, not a style. Can you tell us more?

Ever since my young days in Mombasa, I self-taught myself that Design was not an object but an all-encompassing philosophy on a way to live. In February 1987, we invited Massimo Vignelli to give a lecture on Design in Miami. It was fascinating to hear his point of view. We also had an exhibition of his and Lella's work in the Coral Gables Flagship showroom. From that day till he passed away, we enjoyed a unique relationship that I will always treasure. He was the one many years ago who shared with me that "Styles come and go. Design is not a style. It is a language". And since then I always include this my conversations.

Art and design: what constitute the former and what constitutes the latter? Assonance and dissonance. In other words, what is the relationship between these two realities, now irrefutably closely linked?

Design is not Art. Design is a compromise. One reduces until a good designer knows when to stop. Art is a unique bond between the artist and his medium. They start with a blank slate and add to it until they know exactly when to stop. However, I am the first one to admit that there is a blurring of the line between art and design now. With explosion of art fairs like Art Basel, good designers have been commissioned to do art pieces on a limited-edition basis and this has brought the two-discipline close together. But the rules that define Design still stand. However, Design is also pluralized now.

Who is Nasir Kassamali when he's not at his Luminaire stores, which you yourself have described as playgrounds for the soul? Do you go on playing elsewhere too?

My life is centred around Design thinking and I explore other worlds using the same consciousness and try to broaden its reach to see if it can affect all the senses too. My wife Nargis and I love travelling and we go to the far reaches of the world to explore cultures that are foreign to us and absorb their way of thinking into ours to understand and appreciate them better. Every year we choose a new city to visit. Last October for her 70th birthday we went to Naoshima, and Teshima in Japan to explore the work of Tadao Ando who we first met in 1997 in Osaka. Experiencing his spaces are meditative and gives me immense pleasure to be able to feel the spaces. I love music and assemble it in my mind as the artist composed it. I am really interested in AI (Artificial Intelligence) and its future influence on our lives. I am fascinated by robotics and how they have helped in creating fascination in our industry especially.

What do Italy, Milan and the Salone del Mobile represent for you?

My wife and I first came to Europe from Kenya in 1970. We landed in Copenhagen and it was there that I conceived the idea of a concept store that would eventually be Luminaire. I was able to experience first-hand the work of Great masters whose work I had only seen in pictures. We then travelled to London, Paris and then to Milan. We were students but were fascinated by the culture, the food and the talent of the people and its heritage. There also for the first time I was able to see the work of Magistretti, Scarpa and others. For many years we choose a part of Italy we have not visited or explored yet. Some are trapped in time and that is fantastic to experience. Milan is also a city where we have the most friends and have known some of them for more than 35 years. Prior to selling any Italian products, we imported furniture, lighting and accessories from Scandinavia. My first Salone was in September of 1977. That year I bought from Eugenio Perazza (Magis) and from a company called Thalia & Co. The product was Petalo seating by D'Urbino De Pas Lomazzi. All the major Design brands were committed to importers in NY that had showrooms in major cities. None of them wanted to sell to us. I went to the fair every year from then on and added lines in furniture and lighting from secondary design brands. In 1984, we built our flagship store in Coral Gables. That gave us credence and things started to change. The first (committed) Design brand to sell to us also was Zanotta. By 1987, our formula was well recognized, and we represented almost all the best design brands in furniture, lighting and accessories from Italy, Holland, Germany and Scandinavia. This helped democratise Design distribution with other Dealers in the rest of US joining the movement till today. The old fair grounds limited the size of the stands and also had less attendees. It was manageable. Things changed when it was moved to Rho. The larger display spaces allowed more inspiration for the design of the stands.

An unfulfilled dream? Hope for the future? A message for the world?

This pandemic has taught us so much. We were living with excess and all of a sudden, we were put behind imaginary bars with our loved ones. Everyday we looked at our homes and questioned the things we had accumulated in our lives. Were they important? Was our home a shelter from the elements or was it a sanctuary for the soul. As days went by, we disposed to make our home more "essential". We realized that this excess in luxury was partly driven to be exposed as being well off. Yet, there was no one to show this off too. Design thinking is extremely powerful and teaches us to question everything we see and touch. Because of this pause, we feel liberated and are able to breathe well in this new uncluttered culture of the "essential home". I hope the new normal is going to enhance all of our senses, so we can "live" again with humility.

Top image: Photo by Kris Tamburello



#DESIGN, #NASIR KASSAMALI, #LUMINAIRE