



# The FURNITURE Maker

Behind one of the most recognizable furniture brands and one of the largest furniture manufacturers in South East Asia, Theodore Alexander, lies a history as eclectic as the fixtures themselves. With its designs which are mostly inspired by 18th and 19th century European antiques, its wide range of products and innovative use of materials, the brand is recognized worldwide for its distinctive style and superior quality.

The man behind Theodore Alexander furniture is the congenial Paul Maitland-Smith who with his grey beard, khaki pants and white shirt bears more resemblance to the captain of a ship than a captain of industry. Laughing easily and heartily, he tells me how it all started almost 60 years ago.

Born and raised in London, his fascination with the antique business began at an early age. His maternal grandfather, Alexander, and his great uncle, Theodore, were in the antique business and his paternal grandfather was a cabinetmaker. "As a child I was crazy about antiques," he reminisces. Being fine antique dealers, "[my grandfather and uncle] taught me an awful lot about furniture styles and periods." From the tender age of 11 onwards, he'd go over to his grandfather's every weekend to help with the

We met with Paul Maitland-Smith of renowned Alexander Theodore Furniture in a setting which could not be more

appropriate: surrounded by the beautiful furniture that he has so lovingly produced for the past 55 years.





restoration of antiques, and at 15 started assisting his great uncle in his London antique shop. "Theodore and Alexander taught me virtually everything I know," he says.

Initially his parents had academic ambitions for him, packing the young Maitland-Smith off to the highly respected University College in London. "I was hopeless in school," he confides, and at 15 begged his father to allow him to quit. His father only acquiesced after the headmaster told him, "the sooner the boy leaves and gets on with what he's been doing here, which is buying and selling, the better". After which another roll of laughter ensues - "At 16 I opened my first shop".

Things moved quickly from there. Initially setting up several shops and reproduction manufacturing facilities in the UK to develop his own line, he decided in 1973 that it was time to seek greener pastures. He surveyed different countries and ultimately settled in South Korea. "At the time it was the best place for quality carving and furniture making. The level of craftsmanship was very high," Maitland-Smith explains. In subsequent years he branched out into the Asia-Pacific region establishing plants in the Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand and Hong Kong.

Today Theodore Alexander is one of the largest manufacturers of furniture in South East Asia, with a total of 7,000 employees worldwide. Production facilities are now principally based in southern Vietnam, and cover an astounding one million square feet. The company is one of the leading makers of fine reproductions of 18th and 19th century furniture, upholstery and accessories with a range of 7,500 products that encompass all styles and designs. Each piece is handcrafted using traditional techniques, and fashioned from high quality materials such as acacia wood, teak and mahogany. Due to environmental concerns, Theodore Alexander uses only wood harvested from plantations.

The inspiration for these pieces comes from a variety of sources, with the majority of designs influenced from the 17th, 18th and 19th

"you don't sell a lot of furniture to a minimalist"







*Greenhouse on Waterfall Bay, Phuket*

century European antiques, along with Art Deco and even a few contemporary concepts. The eclectic mix of Theodore Alexander furniture fits into a wide range of interiors. "People nowadays tend to mix and match, creating their own individualistic style," Maitland-Smith says. One single piece, such as a Louis XV writing desk or a carved 18th century mirror, might set off a minimalist décor quite handsomely.

Although one of the current trends appears to be

minimalism, he jokingly admits that "you don't sell a lot of furniture to a minimalist."

Particularly successful is the Althorp "Living History" collection. This was developed following a licensing agreement with the historic Althorp Estate, the ancestral home of Charles, the Ninth Earl of Spencer and brother to Diana, Princess of Wales. Althorp's 114-room country manor dates from 1508 and has been home to the Spencer family for nearly 500 years.

The house and history of the Spencer family have supplied Theodore Alexander with a wealth of design inspiration, and the quintessentially English collection features over 300 fine reproductions of antique pieces. Many of the original pieces in Charles Spencer's collection of

heirlooms are worth millions of dollars, with none of them for sale. Theodore Alexander has been able to bring these valuable pieces to the public in a more modern style and useable form. While some are exact replicas, others have been redesigned to suit modern times. Like the creation - on popular demand - of an 'antique' coffee table, a piece of furniture which actually didn't exist until the late 19th

century.

Thailand is one of the very few

countries where Theodore Alexander sells its magnificent collections retail, whereas in the US and Japan Theodore Alexander is only a wholesale vendor. The Bangkok store is a "bit of a secret", tucked away on the second floor of the All Seasons Place on Wireless Road. But the aficionados of the world-renowned furniture brand have no problem finding their way to the showroom.

Although the globetrotting Maitland-Smith has lived all over Asia, his favorite country continues to be Thailand, claiming "Phuket is the perfect place to live, I wouldn't know anywhere else better". His estate 'Greenhouse', on the Western coast of the island, is in Waterfall Bay, a sprawling private 26-rai residential estate fronting the ocean with wooded hills behind. When completed, the estate will house

"My grandfather Alexander and great uncle Theodore taught me virtually everything I know"





seven homes, one of which will be for his eldest son Graham, Deputy Chairman of the company, and his Thai wife and their young daughter.

Maitland-Smith's personal taste reflects his British heritage. The home holds many European antiques from as early as the 13th century. "Even though I don't attend church, my real love is for early religious sculpture." He is also quite fond of his "collection of 17th century French walnut furniture, as well as paintings, portraits and seascapes from many different periods". He adds that he's "a little bit whimsical in taste now".

This industry legend, who has been on the verge of retiring several times in the past few years, says his true passion remains the design side of the business - visiting museums ("I subscribe to almost every antique auction worldwide"), scoping out unique furniture, and deciding how to manufacture the pieces. "I read an article the other day that if you retire you might as well get your box ready... that's really one of the main things that put me back to work. And besides, I do love it and live for it."

*Showroom Theodore Alexander  
All Seasons Place, M Thai Tower, Unit 1, 2F  
Wireless Road ('Thanon Vithayu')  
Lumpini, Patumwan, Bangkok  
Tel: 02 685 3611  
Fax: 02 685 3612  
Email: thai@theodorealexander.com  
Website: www.theodorealexander.com*

"I subscribe to almost every antique auction worldwide"

