

# THE BIG GEST SHOW IN TOWN

A showcase of the country's top creative talent, the biannual BIG+BIH fair is solidifying Thailand's reputation as a design hub in the ASEAN region.

Words by Ellen Boonstra, photos by Nick McGrath.

**A**s Southeast Asia's largest design show for gifts, homeware and textiles, the 36th Bangkok International Gifts and Bangkok International Houseware Fair attracted 542 exhibitors and international buyers from 80 different countries, with Japan, China, USA, Taiwan and Malaysia strongly represented throughout.

The two public days of the October event were record breaking, with almost 48,000 visitors recorded. And although final figures have yet to be released, the latest BIG +BIH fair is estimated to have generated a sales value of 900 million baht (US\$29 million) when including the three trade days.

Jirabool Vittayasing, managing director of gifts company Dash International and a member of the organising committee explains that the show - held every six months by the Department of International Trade Promotion (DITP) in col-

laboration with seven industry associations - was fixed to start on the 19th of the month. This coincided with trade fairs in Hong Kong and China, enticing international buyers to make a short stopover in Thailand first.

"In terms of design, it's by far the best in ASEAN," he adds, explaining

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that the quality of products is consistently high, with unique design character displayed through home-grown brands, modern handicrafts and innovative products.

A shining example is exhibitor Twosister Limited Partnership. The family-run business from Chiang Mai has produced wood carvings, accessories and cushion covers for more than ten years.

Handbags are made using a combination of leather and materials sourced from hill tribes in northern Thailand and Laos.

Owner Metanee Traipipitsirawat explains that the bags have been given a makeover by toning down the "souvenir-ish" look and incorporating subtle elements of hill tribe fabrics, giving them a contemporary feel in order to appeal to more sophisticated clientele.

Across the hall, a booth called 'Top of OTOP' showcased the vast, untapped potential of products made by local villages. Under the Thai government's 'One Tambon (sub-district), One Product' programme, an estimated 23,000 small communities are making products. Chantira Jimreivat Vivatrat, a senior official within DITP, explains that OTOP is still a niche market as products - mostly home décor items - are not machine-made and cannot be ordered





in large quantities, with only around four percent suitable for overseas sales.

A selection of premium OTOP products were exhibited at the booth and the Voice of Asia hotel concept showroom, which catered - in collaboration with designers from Japan - to buyers looking for striking pieces for hotels, resorts or residences.

The undisputed highlights of BIG+BIH were the exhibitions that focused on the Designer of the Year, the DEmark design awards and ECO+Innovation.

For furniture designer Decha Archjananun and product designer

Ploypan Theerachai from design studio Thinkk, recipients of 2013 Furniture Designer of the Year Award as well as an Elle Decoration magazine Young Talent award, the BIG+BIH fair has proven a valuable platform to gain commissions from Thai and European customers.

"It is a very good opportunity for us to meet people who want to buy our works or factories who want to hire us for designing," says Ploypan Theerachai.

Japan, also featured prominently at the fair - both as exhibitors and shoppers. Organised by the Japan External Trade Organization (JETRO), 51 Japanese SMEs -



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double that of last year - promoted fashion accessories, kitchenware and other lifestyle products at the Japan House pavilion.

"Thailand holds great potential for Japan in terms of services, tourism and products," notes Manabu Shimoyashiro, who is in charge of the ASEAN Caravan project - a JETRO initiative that facilitates business matchmaking between Japanese and Thai entrepreneurs.

As Thailand strides towards the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), many ASEAN nations have also initiated lifestyle product fairs. After Thailand, Indonesia and Singapore are top countries for

crowd-drawing exhibitions. DITP aims to establish collaborations within ASEAN in order to draw on the strengths of each member. "Singapore and Malaysia are good commercial hubs. Goods can be manufactured in Vietnam, while labour costs in Laos and Cambodia are lower. Thailand can act as the trading post and exhibition centre," says Vittayasing.

Public days are also popular among local residents who flock to BITEC in search of great buys. One local commented that it provides a great opportunity to find "a variety of export-quality products under one roof."

**SHOW FACTS**

**NAME:** Bangkok International Gifts and Bangkok International Houseware Fair (BIG+BIH).

**NEXT SHOW DATES:** April 19-23.

**FREQUENCY:** Twice a year in April and November.

**VENUE:** Bangkok International Trade and Exhibition Centre.

**ORGANISERS:** Office of Fashion and Lifestyle Business Development, DITP.

**EXHIBITS:** Artificial flowers/plants; home textile and fabric decorative items; household products; toys and games; stationary; and green and eco-friendly products.

**NUMBER OF EXHIBITORS:** 542 companies.

**WEBSITE:** www.bigandbhi.com www.ditp.go.th