

Prestige



Walk up an outdoor and you'll probably find an array of different leather cases to hold your camera. But if you're a fan of the brand, you'll know that the cases you choose to use are from Maison Takuya. Finding the right case for the product though is a little tricky.

"The label Maison Takuya is always somewhere but it's intentionally discreet, as we are selling a product as opposed to brand image. For us, what is most important is how well a product is made and the amount of dedication given to every single piece. On every item, the logo is there and although you cannot see it at first sight, you can recognise the brand by other items like the blue leather horse head used in hand-stitch every item, or design choices that make the brand unmistakable."

"Quality, it's the conceptual backbone of luxury that has been quietly slipping in the corner of production," Francois explains. "Before I started Maison Takuya, I realized that the quality of what luxury brands were doing was declining. In Europe, there was less attention being given to manufacturing and more and more to image. I always believed that ultimately, whatever the appeal advertising can build, consumers would still crave for real quality materials and craftsmanship."

Francois decided to give precious leather the respect it deserved. Led by the hands of expert, hand-stitch leather koks and feels impeccable. "I wanted to combine modern design with ultimate craftsmanship, and it simply could not be done in Europe any more due to the high cost of labour. I have always been amazed by the choice of brands to capitalise on the 'made in France' or 'made in Italy' labels, as they do not mean anything any longer. A badly made industrial product does not gain any appeal just because it is made in France. Today, the countries that can produce real luxury are no longer in Europe but in Asia, and this is why I believe in a DNA combination between western art direction and eastern manufacturing. He was born Maison Takuya."

For Francois, the world really is his oyster. "I source the best skins from the highest quality tanneries all over the world. Cow skins from Germany, ostrich skins from South Africa, crocodile skins directly supplied by Hermès Guité Process, the subsidiary that Hermès bought back to ensure to supply. Each skin is then put through a rigorous testing process."

While Francois designs each product, the actual manufacturing is done exclusively by Maison Takuya's own manufacturing facilities. "I brought in Japanese and French craftsmen, among the best in the world, to train that staff how to make precision state-of-the-art leather items." In fact, Takuya was the outcome of one of the Japanese craftsmen brought in to train the Thai staff. Concededly, Takuya is a surname associated with the 'Samurai' skin in Japanese. "I was amazed by the meaning of this name and also very respectful of the spontaneous wish of these craftsmen to have their 'know-how' stored in as a nice ornament for the brand."

A year and half later Francois launched the brand to positive reviews. Korea, Japan, Singapore, as well as the US, welcomed the sleek leather iPad jackets, superbly crafted and lightweight ones. Today, after being two years in the business, Maison Takuya is stocked in nearly all the major retailers. "Last year, we sold up to 30,000 products which is a lot for a debutante. The next step, of course, is to scale up the brand. We just opened a workshop in Chiang Mai under the supervision of a former Hermès workshop executive, and this unit which already employs 70 is targeted for 300 by the end of 2012."

Though products are available at the most prestigious stockists worldwide like Bergdorf Goodman, Saks Fifth Avenue, Bloomingdale's, United Arrows and the





Smoking by Dior Homme, Porsche Design titanium sunglasses, Thai silk shirt designed by Francois Russo, Lanvin silk tie, Berluti boxcalf shoes

Apple shops, Francois refuses to open up a boutique just yet. "All in due time," he smiles. "Success is making the right move at the right moment, and the moment for the shop can wait." Every time he does feel the need for a shop, he's reminded of a conversation he once had with one of his friends, a famous fashion designer: "She told me that she was miserable because she had to feed her lions. No reference to her new pets, but to her boutiques, always hungry for rent, staff and maintenance... not a nice way to get eaten up!" he laughs.

Francois' keen business sense can only be credited to his parents' persistence. "My parents were absolutely stuck on this idea of sending me to a prestigious business school, which was terribly unappealing to me. As I really dislike conflict, I quickly surrendered." But after graduation, Francois switched direction immediately to work in art. From big brands like Cartier, L'Oreal, or the prestigious Havas Advertising group, where he coordinated consultancy and creative activities for various luxury brands.

He then set up his own image agency, and finally joined forces in 2003 with another dear friend, French designer Andrée Putman. They came up together with numerous design projects, among them the Guerlain flagship store on Paris Champs-Élysées, hotels in Asia

and Europe, the global image concept for Helena Rubinstein, collections for Christofle, Poltrona Frau or Reflex and private houses worldwide, to name a few. His ability to capture and embody the style of his customers into design projects is what makes Francois so desirable to his own contemporaries. His friend the late Jacques Helleu, artistic director for watches and perfume at Chanel for over 40 years and designer of the J12 watch, regularly turned to him for design ideas and named him advisor for the Chanel perfume division. The Helleu Chair, designed by Francois as an homage to Jacques, was launched by the Italian luxury furniture firm in 2007 to worldwide acclaim.

Francois has dabbled in many artistic mediums, be it jewellery, interiors and even photography, so what is his real inspiration? "I believe Keats, the English poet, says it best: 'A thing of beauty is a joy forever'. I really believe it. Whatever the materials, rich or poor, I appreciate details and clean lines. When I design a product, I like to ask myself, how will it add joy? Will it age well?" It's clear that when Francois designs a product, he pours his heart and soul into it. His workroom, or 'play room' as he calls it, is lined with different fine leathers, concepts and bags.

He thanks his Thai staff for giving form to his ideas. "I hate the stupid attitude claiming Thailand is associated with poor quality products. I would just like to point out that 30 years ago Japan had the same reputation. Things change fast, luckily." The assertive Frenchman believes that Thailand could be the next hub for complex creations.

"Recently, one of the most famous French leather makers joined us as an advisor to train our staff on very complex techniques. After just half a day, he told me he was amazed at how quickly Thai craftsmen can learn. How their hands can be spontaneously so skilled. So you see, I don't have any doubts that Thailand is a place of very high potential. Success of Thai luxury brands is only about art direction, brand management, and of course proper staff training."

Asked what challenges he faces as an expat, Francois exclaims, "I really don't see myself as an expat! My secret hope is that someday Thailand will feel satisfied with what I do here and ask me to become Thai!" He doesn't feel either that he had to adapt his European ways too much. "Since I've come to Bangkok, I've realised that I'm happy, which I've never really been before. Before this I was always stressed. Somehow I was never relaxed. I had wonderful friends, but never felt at peace. It is a great gift this country has given me. And finally, this is all about love, as great projects always are, aren't they?"



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2011 eyewear, Calvin Klein polo shirt, Marni jacket