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## UNDER THE LEATHER

Designer Francois Russo on his  
Thailand-based luxury goods line

## 10 COVER STORY

**M**aison Takuya — the name gives nothing away as to the brand's origins, nor do the products, a range of leather bags, wallets and phone and gadget cases found in iStudio outlets and high-end shops around the world. The designs come in strong colours layered on minimalist patterns, with little in the way of buckles, labels or embellishments but a strong focus on the quality of the leather used and a highly refined hand craftsmanship.

They look like they've come out of a European fashion house and indeed the man behind the brand, Francois Russo, is French. However, the high-end gear he designs is produced here in Thailand.

Speaking to *Brunch* at his Bangkok home, Russo rejects the idea that a luxury brand made in Thailand might carry a stigma.

"People are not blind, they can see what they buy. If the edge of their bag is peeling off because it's just a layer of paint, if the stitching unravels, they can see that."

He says that expert craftsmanship is no longer largely the domain of European brands.

"The 'Made in France' or 'Made in Italy' label was consistent with a time when it meant something actually better. Now it's just a label; it doesn't mean anything. The production of the big brands is totally industrial."

**PARIS ROOTS**

Russo's look is every bit as distinctive as his products — pudding bowl haircut, black leather jacket and sunglasses that change daily — and it was his love of leather, precision and attention to detail that helped forged the brand. While using modern and minimalist designs, the brand has its roots in the traditional leather workshops of Europe. As a child, Russo's mother had connections at Hermes in Paris, and he would peruse the leather workshop, study how craftsmen made the bags and even order custom pieces himself.

"I always had a high interest in leather, since I was born," Russo says. "There's something [innate] that makes us love leather — the feel, the pattern, the layers of colour."

He had long worked as an artistic consultant and director, interior designer and photographer for various luxury brands and agencies in Europe. During that time he felt that the quality of high-end goods had begun to decline as they industrialised and produced more for the mass market.

He had an idea for a new brand and potential financial backers, but he couldn't realise his vision in Europe —



not so much because of labour costs or prohibitive taxes but the loss of artisanship.

"In Europe there's no sense of enterprise. I tried to do this in Europe, but they can't apply the right methods any more; it's too rigid and nobody wants to do it."

**THAILAND AS 'ITALY OF ASIA'**

Russo made an exploratory trip to Southeast Asia. Encouraged by a Bangkok-based luxury jewellery maker, he stopped first in Thailand, extended his visit, and then decided to look no further.

Here he founded Maison Takuya, combining the French word for house with a generic Japanese name that encapsulates forward-thinking.

From an initial Bangkok workshop with 40 employees, he later moved the operation to a 1,500 square metre studio in Chiang Mai, where the company employs close to 200 workers who produce several thousand items a month. >>

## FOR LUXURY GOODS MAKER, THAILAND HAS IT ALL STITCHED UP

Francois Russo, the man behind the high-end Maison Takuya brand of leather bags, wallets and phone and gadget cases, bases his operation in the Kingdom, a surprising choice to some but not to the designer who calls the country the 'Italy of the East' By Ezra Kyrill Erker



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» All work is done by hand in-house, meaning any expansion of production is slow and arduous, as it takes time to train the artisans.

"We decided from the start to hire people who never touched leather before," Russo says. "The most difficult thing to train is when people already have bad habits. We looked for craftsmen with skilled hands. Then we took people from Europe, from Asia, from Japan, to teach them how to work with leather."

Far from being underdeveloped in terms of style, Russo considers Thailand one of the most stylish countries in the region, even globally, with much potential as a producer of luxury goods.

"The longer I stay here the more I feel that Thailand is a sort of Italy of Asia. In terms of colour, lifestyle, the feeling on the street when you walk. Japan would be more Germany, Singapore more Switzerland. Thailand has a real sense of style. When I was 15 in Europe it was a time when women were still dressing up, even people with little money

were trying to invent colours, this idea of a natural style that you find here every day. In Thailand you have the feeling everyone is trying to be stylish and inventive, trying to match things together in an unexpected way.

"You see a lot of Thai designers emerging. Thailand has a sparkle for that and I'm convinced that Thailand will be the country for Asian luxury. I'm very proud if we can be a little part of that process."

While Japan has become notable for its fashion output, Russo makes the distinction from luxury and claims they are very different fields. He says Maison Takuya is not a fashion brand.

"A lot of luxury brands do fashion for commercial reasons," he says, "but the approach of a fashion brand and the approach of a luxury brand are very different."

He also notices a few other regional trends, especially a maturity in East Asian customers of luxury goods.

"What strikes me the most are changes in the China and Korea markets. The speed at which they grew out of love with Louis Vuitton and luxury brands was incredible.

"They are very intelligent consumers and can't be cheated. How fast you had an elite in China that was aware of quality was amazing."

Even the Korean pop hit *Gangnam Style*, he says, illustrates a discernment in style and fashion, since in effect it pokes fun at the elites' preoccupation with status symbols. "To get to the stage of parody that is viewed by 500 million people shows maturity."

Although he maintains a residence in Bangkok, Russo has a studio inside the Chiang Mai workshop where he usually stays, so he can be on hand to control the several thousand leather pieces that leave the place every month, rejecting a few pieces every day. "I'm very much a pain in the ass for daily life. I'm chasing dust and things that aren't really organised as I think they should be."

He says competition in luxury brands is not always clear. "People can very well choose between a bag and a watch, or a new armchair, or a trip. We are one brand of many that people can choose. I hope people feel that we have a slightly different philosophy."

## QUALITY AND 'ANIMAL INSTINCTS'

What distinguishes Maison Takuya are its simple but eye-catching designs and the notion that quality is in the details.



PHOTOS: EZRA KYRILL EKERER



PHOTOS: VEERAPOL ASANAJARN

Russo says the company never uses cardboard, plastic or other non-leather filler materials, as Prada and other high-end brands do. The leather is thin and lightweight but durable, never using lower levels of the hide which are softer and could age or decay at a different rate.

Types of leather range from cow and goat to more exotic skins such as python, stingray and ostrich. Hides of protected species require Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species certification to import.

He makes an effort, he says, to buy more skins of animals from the wild than from farms, preferring the texture and quality of the wild skins. "They're both sustainable," he says. "The wild ones come from zones where they are a threat to humans. Like alligators in the US; they have to kill a certain number. The elephant hides come from parts of Africa where you have culls every year."

Ostrich is more similar to cow, he says, in the sense that it is an animal often raised for its meat.

Asked whether synthetic materials could become an ecological option, and perhaps be less offensive to animal rights enthusiasts, Russo offers an expression of disdain. And while almost any type of animal can be used for leather crafts, different skins require different preparations.

"It's all about how you work on a skin to make a certain item. We use shark, stingray, python, elephant. Shark skin

is extremely durable and strong. It never rots, even when immersed in water. Crocodile is a very tough skin too."

## CRAFT BEFORE COMMERCE

Growth has happened quickly, he says, but he doesn't set specific targets for the brand. "I'm not a businessman. I want to achieve something that provides the customer with a certain item made in the way I think it should be made, in designs and colours that I think should be on the market. That's it; after that we'll see. It's totally unpredictable."

He feels settled in Thailand and says there is a cynicism in Europe at the moment and a safety and consideration in Thailand that makes it comfortable to stay in the Kingdom indefinitely. "I think the way Europe is evolving is quite worrying. It's very negative, people are complaining about everything, with no sense of entrepreneurship but the feeling that they're entitled to privileges. It's a French idea that this or that is due to you. There's no pride.

"Most European cities have become very unsafe. The inability of the governments to create a social contract that can satisfy everyone is really worrying."

Although there is perhaps an element of instability in the Thai economy, Russo relishes the atmosphere, and feels that a foreigner in France would not be as warmly accepted as he is here. "Thailand is a very [rapidly evolving] country; I prefer prospects which are changing rather than going backwards. I feel perfectly comfortable here." ■