



MINDY DUNCAN

Visual Harmony: The Timeless Designs of Louis A. Lara

BY HOLLY STRAWBRIDGE

Pick a piece of furniture in your house – any piece. Is this something you will want to own forever, no matter where you live? What about your lamps and clocks? Would you describe them as works of art?

If you answer no, you probably do not own a Louis A. Lara design. The home furnishings and accessories created by this award-winning Fort Lauderdale industrial designer are sleek, hand-

some and graceful. More than practical, necessary or even attractive, they are functional works of art.

"I compose relationships, striving for visual stillness and harmony that transcend the follies of fashion and whim," he explains. "All objects, regardless of size or purpose, are compositions of form and space, and the manner in which they are composed determines their visual harmony or dissonance. The more

harmonious, the more inherently beautiful and timeless the object will be."

Furniture as art – or landfill?

For Americans, the idea of furniture as art is somewhat new. Most people tend to think of furniture as disposable – "landfill," as Lara puts it. The chairs, tables and lamps you buy for your first apartment are upgraded as your

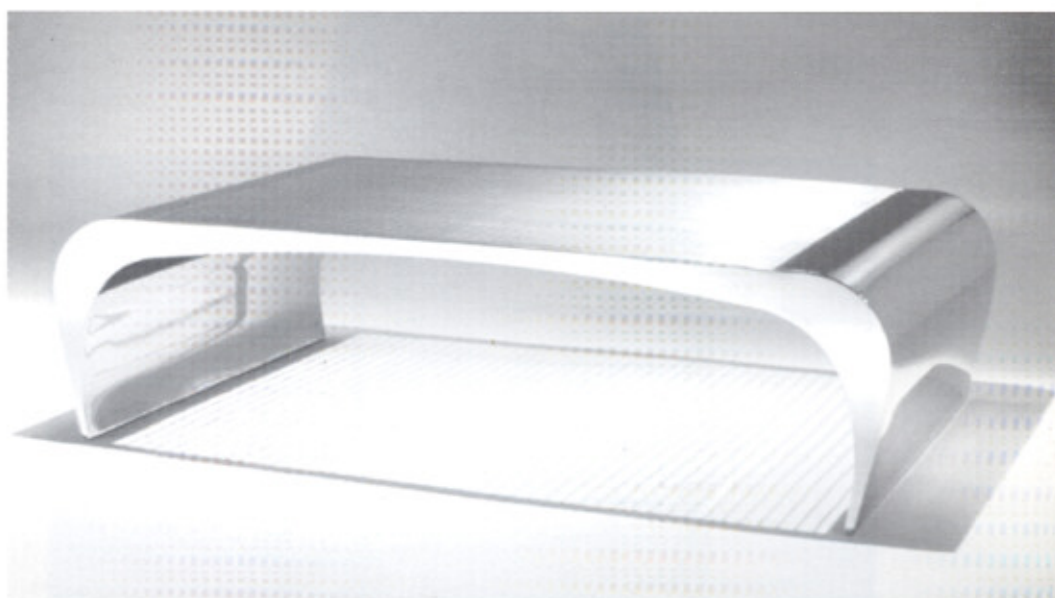
income rises, or when you move to a new residence or yield to the temptations of home decorating trends.

Tastes do change, however, and contemporary design is on the upswing. "People my age have a different aesthetic from their parents. They grew up with *Miami Vice* and very stylized films," says Lara, whose products appeared in at least four movies and a half-dozen television shows last year alone. "The percentage of Americans exposed to new styles and European taste is growing."

A growing number of people are hungry for design where shape takes precedent over decoration. The enormous success of retailers like Ikea and Pottery Barn testify to this fact. However, exposure to cutting-edge European design is limited in this country, even in trendy South Florida. In other areas of the country, it's still unavailable. Lara blames this on the closed-door policy of the interior design industry.

"Philippe Starck said in an interview with a Spanish design magazine that he thought American's sense of style was on a level with Pakistan's. I don't think he meant this as a compliment, and in defense, it's not the general public's fault," says Lara. "High design has been held as an elitist trophy and the general public is not really exposed to it. If the design trade opened their doors to the public, they would realize a surge in interest, level of general knowledge and consumption of high-design home furnishings.

"As it is, the American public is exposed to this aesthetic through a relatively small number of retail stores," Lara says, citing Fort Lauderdale's Interstyle and Dadeland Mall's Arango as examples. "Many people are just unaware that this level of design and quality are available. They need more access to become more knowledgeable."



Selina

Film's loss, furniture's gain

Lara's exposure to design changed his life. Inspired by movies like *The Empire Strikes Back*, he set out to pursue a career in special effects. He learned that a background in industrial design was needed and chose Brooklyn's prestigious Pratt Institute for his education. Much to his surprise, filmmaking did not suit him: the collaborative effort it required would give him too little control over the finished product.

On the other hand, he quickly discovered that his training in the visual arts and in industrial techniques such as welding and foundry were the ideal combination for a career in designing home furnishings. It did not take him long to discover that turning his ideas into household objects gave him tremendous satisfaction.

"The way I approach design is sculptural. I strive for visual harmony," he explains. "We have become desensitized to imbalance in design, which is all around us. When we see good design, we respond unconsciously with a feeling of satisfaction. There's a quality of stillness and presence to these objects. We just know the design is good, it's right.

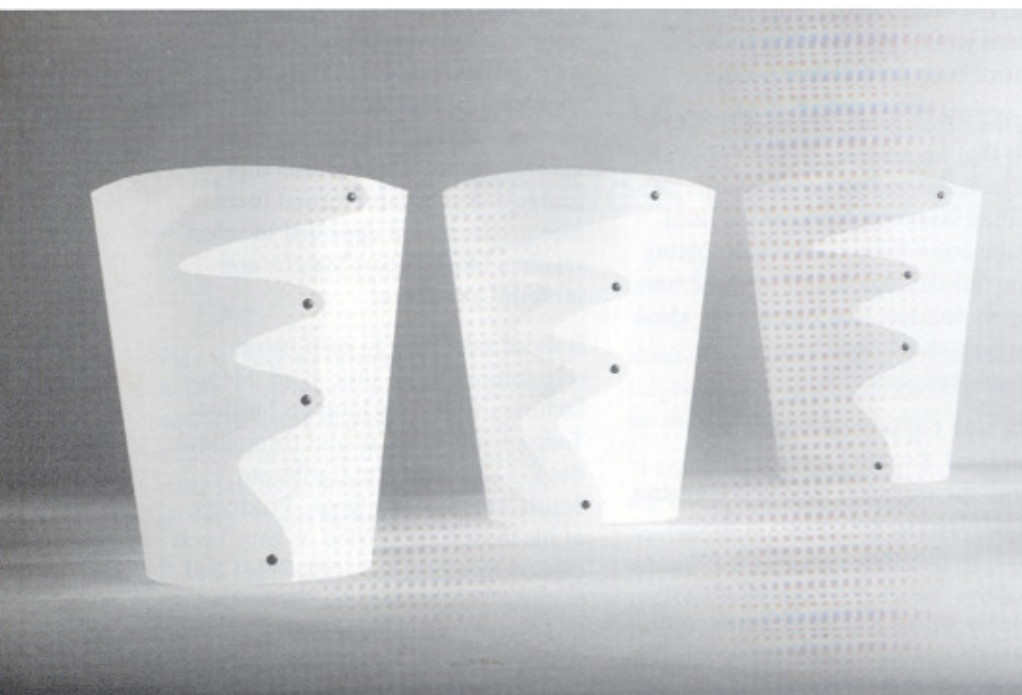
"There's no sense in creating objects that people will grow tired of looking at. It's wasteful," he adds. "I seek to create objects that people will treasure not for their monetary value, but for the value they bring to their environment, their life."

Lara began showing his designs around New York before he graduated from Pratt in 1987. His first clients were interior designers and architects. But he found that producing his own designs was frustrating and soon changed his approach, designing furniture and accessories for other manufacturers. One by one, they took his designs and turned them into products that appealed to select retailers like Neiman-Marcus and museum gift shops.

It didn't take long to earn name recognition. In no time at all, manufacturers were knocking on his door. Today, Lara's work is sold throughout the U.S., Europe, the Caribbean, South America and Japan. Products of his design are carried or have been carried by Crate & Barrel, Pier I and Neiman Marcus, and locally by the Museum of Art, Nicoletti Italia in Dania, Lunatika on South Beach and Arango in Dadeland Mall.



Nova Wall Mirror



Onda Trash Can

He has been featured in gallery exhibitions and his designs have also been seen in *Florida Home & Garden*, *Design South*, *Haute Decor*, *Interiors*, *Interior Design*, *Ocean Drive* and many trade and foreign publications. His appeal is tremendous, and his Maya lamp was a national top seller with Crate and Barrel.

Lara is quick to credit some of his success to his industrial design background. Not only does he design beautiful objects, but his understanding of manufacturing processes and techniques allows him to provide clients with innovative, practical-to-produce designs. This ensures that the final product is what everyone expects.

An artistic approach

His approach to design, however, is strictly artistic. He starts with sketches and then moves to scale models. "This is really sculpture-based design, so I need to work in 3-D to refine the scale and work out proportions and relationships," he explains.

All Lara's work is done in his sunny home office. He prefers to work alone and travels as little as possible. "I have no ambition to have a large staff of designers. My family comes first. My wife works, and when the kids come home from school, I'm here," he says. "I hate being away from them."

His contentment is revealed in his creativity. Tables, chairs and desks with curves compel you to trace and retrace their form with your eyes. A floor lamp resembles a sail; a shapely wastebasket recalls ocean waves. Contemporary designs demonstrate timeless appeal.

"Most home furnishings are here today and gone tomorrow. They are nothing but fashion. I strive to design things that will still be selling 10 to 20 years from now. If I can achieve this level of design," he says, "I'll be very happy."

Holly Strawbridge is a freelance writer in Fort Lauderdale

FEATURED ARTIST **louis lara**

Ibiza Console



Ibiza Conference Table



Maya Table Lamp

FEATURED ARTIST — **louis lara**



Tanus Pendant

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