

Star quality

Lighting designer Jonathan Browning opens up about his frustration with mass-manufactured fixtures and his love of 18th century design

WORDS BY Ayla Angelos

“**W**e were living in the nadir of lighting history,” says Jonathan Browning. The California-based designer, best known for his lighting, is looking back more than a decade to the time when he was executive vice-president of design at US hotel and leisure company Starwood Hotels and Resorts. This was a period when the industry was awash with mass manufactured products with generic low-quality functions – a time he sees as an all-time low for lighting.

In 2003, he acted on this catalyst and founded Jonathan Browning Studios. Setting out to create high quality pieces using 18th century techniques, he began providing lighting for the retail, residential and hospitality sectors.

“I chose to design for the lighting category because 14 years ago, when I started, I felt that the industry was making a pathetic offering of product. Lighting design was consumed by large manufacturers and quality was certainly not a main driver, neither was good design,” he says.

“There were cheap versions of antiques for sale and really bad contemporary designs: nothing subtle, intelligent or elegant. I saw a big opportunity to contribute in this sector.”

As the head of design for Starwood, Browning learned a lot from his former boss Barry Sternlicht, whom he describes as a genius, rule-breaker and an iconoclast. “When I took the job I thought I had found the ultimate position, a chance to



ABOVE The Le Pentagone chandelier is made of heavy brass tubes



LEFT The Chaillot sconce in brass with hand-polished crystal shade

“Smart, thoughtful, sensitive design is always more successful”

design and mould for six different hotel brands, including St Regis, W, Sheraton, Westin and Luxury Collection Hotels,” he explains.

While the design was exciting, the job became a “slog through internal politics and palace intrigue”. He left – “feeling hungry” – and set out to “design and manufacture the highest quality lighting in the world”.

The studio’s fixtures are timeless and elegant, produced with longevity in mind. Chandeliers, sconces, torchieres and table lamps, born out of his adoration for French Beaux Arts aesthetics, are sculpted from industrial-yet-elegant wooden carvings and waxes.

Browning also draws inspiration from three design

heroes: Otto Wagner, Louis Comfort Tiffany and Stanford White. Each has been a muse for his work, along with an interest in Italian design from the 18th century to the 1960s.

“Quality is everything to me, so I use the highest manufacturing techniques possible,” he says. “I cast in bronze, machine from solid brass, carve from industrial lead crystal and mould and carve bisque porcelain. I also use a little bit of blown glass.”

His eye for materials is undeniable. The thin bisque porcelain results in a much richer finish than milk glass, while polished bronze provides a deeper tone than plated steel. Browning is a designer who sways away from mass manufacture techniques and materials, giving his work a hands-on, long-lasting appeal.

Rather than identifying trends, he sees his main job as to identify what is beautiful and to pursue his findings along a path of new ideas. “I travel very often so I end up in a lot of hotels. I will say that my favourites are always the old ones – sensitively redone but not made over in a trendy way,” he says.

“I don’t care for trendy, of-the-moment design. It always appears cheap and looks worse as the days pass. High style on a budget rarely works – smart, thoughtful, sensitive design is always more successful, combined with the use of honest materials.” ■

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In the next issue

The return of the OnOffice Power List