

by Cinde W. Ingram

DEFINING DESIGN FOR MORE THAN 30 YEARS

RICHARD FRINIER SHARES HIS INSIGHTS

WHAT LED YOU TO FOCUS YOUR DESIGN TALENTS ON THE CASUAL FURNITURE AND TEXTILE BUSINESSES?

In the summer of 1981, I discovered a picture of a chaise lounge on the cover of *The Los Angeles Times Magazine*. I was immediately drawn to the sculptural elegance and simplicity of the design. It was a moment of epiphany for me. As a sculptor, lighting and case goods designer, I loved the minimal lines and its message – relaxation. Inside the issue, there were other outdoor furniture designs, but the one on the cover that got my attention was from Brown Jordan. I contacted the company and learned that they were looking for a designer, and that was the

beginning of this story. I stayed for over 20 years and evolved to become the company's chief creative officer overseeing all designs, product development, branding, marketing and public relations.

During the early years at Brown Jordan, I started working with the textile mills as part of the design process. One person who stood out back then was Allen Swers from Glen Raven. It was Allen, and also others, who gave me the opportunity early on to integrate fabrics, finishes with frame designs into a compelling story.

For the past 10 years, we have been creative partners and consulting with Glen Raven exploring new and inno-

vative fabric constructions and compositions, which continue to redefine outdoor and indoor upholstery.

HOW WERE YOU ABLE TO OVERCOME CHALLENGES OF ANY MATERIAL/STYLE YOU WERE TOLD WOULD NEVER WORK EARLY IN YOUR CAREER?

As a designer, I am inspired by new materials and the possibilities for their use and also finding interesting ways to use existing materials. However, it's always challenging, when proposing a new or different approach. Fortunately, we have great partners and together we find our way through the details. For me, details define the design and differentiate it

among the many in the marketplace.

WHAT WERE SOME OF THE BIGGEST CHALLENGES OF DESIGNING PRODUCTS FOR INSIDE/OUTSIDE USE?

We never know where the furniture will be placed – around a pool, on a patio, a terrace, a balcony or any number of indoor areas in either residential, contract or hospitality locations. Our customers expect our furniture to be durable and weather-resistant, so we strive to design and engineer to the highest standards of performance. That means testing fabrics for abrasion, seam slippage and fade resistance, and testing the frames to the highest level of

Richard Frinier and Stephen Elton discuss Brown Jordan's legacy of design.

To watch the video, visit: www.youtube.com/watch?v=0oUQcxwP9s

Photo by Claudia Unger for Brown Jordan



structural integrity. The challenge is to keep the design from losing its elegant form in the process.

WHY DID YOU DECIDE TO STICK WITH THESE SOMETIMES-DIFFICULT CATEGORIES?

Designing a chair is more difficult than you may think. A dining chair must have a very specific ratio between seat height, arm height and depth to be comfortable for most people, while allowing it to still fit underneath a table. Yet, there have been infinite variations of dining chairs created over the centuries. Designing outdoor furniture carries its own unique demands requiring the use of weather-resistant materials, further adding to the overall complexity and challenge.

HOW IMPORTANT HAS IT BEEN TO HAVE YOUR WIFE CATHERINE BY YOUR SIDE?

Catherine and I met just as I was starting my work at Brown Jordan, so she has been with me from the beginning. We have been working together for the past 15 years now. Catherine is also passionate about design and marketing, and she plays an integral role in our business infusing her own creative talents into our consultancy. We both believe that good design creates an experience and not just a product. It is important to tell that story in a way that is relevant for today, so that people will make that connection and understand that the design was created because there was a void, a need and something missing in the marketplace. The way in which we work together has allowed us to grow and expand our business around the world. It has also allowed us to give back. On our behalf, Catherine enjoys working with nonprofit design, trade and wellness organizations, where we have chosen to support design



Origins textiles from the Richard Frinier Collection for Sunbrella.

students through academic scholarships, trade organization student memberships, design museums through the sponsorship of exhibitions and fundraising events, and also health and wellness organizations to help sponsor public awareness campaigns and programs targeting issues surrounding wellness and balanced living.

DO YOU HAVE ANY REGRETS THAT YOU DIDN'T TURN YOUR ATTENTION TO THE KITCHEN, BATH OR OTHER AREAS OF THE HOME? WHY?

Actually, the first commercial furniture design I ever created was a bedroom case goods collection, which sold 9,000 sets. Nine thousand sets, not pieces. To date, my designs have resulted in the sales of over \$750 million in furniture,

textiles, lighting and accessories around the world.

Our design portfolio of co-branded and exclusive collections currently includes products for both indoor and outdoor use in residential, contract and hospitality environments. We are interested in selectively expanding our design collaborations into interior residential and contract furnishings, as well as a range of complementary accessory categories. It is all about identifying and working with the right partners.

WHAT HAS CHANGED MOST ABOUT THE CASUAL INDUSTRY OVER THE PAST THREE DECADES?

Much has changed. The earlier shift to offshore manufacturing. The globalization of the casual industry from design and manufacturing to market-

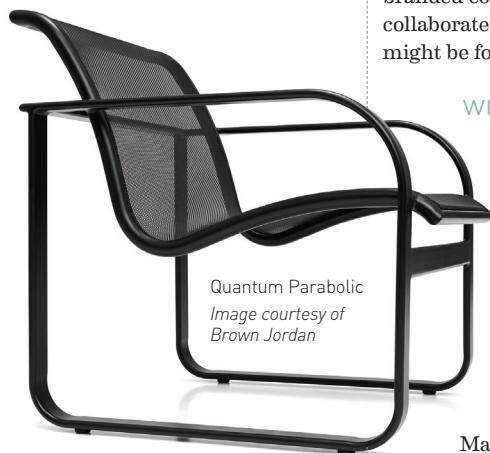
ing and sales. Mass market and home improvement retail channels. Lifestyle retailers and mail order catalogs. The emergence of "The Outdoor Room." Lighting, rugs, electronics and art once limited to interiors crossed over the threshold to become a way of living outside. Outdoor barbecues and grills becoming outdoor kitchens. Staycations. The impact of international trade shows and their ability to broaden options in not only products but also new business opportunities. Specialty retailers evolving their operations to become purveyors and curators bringing the best of the industry's design and products to their communities. Furniture stores and indoor furniture manufacturers acknowledging and embracing "The Outdoor Room." The Internet and online sales. Social media. The adaptation of existing and emerging technologies and materials. The return to "Made in America." The application of recycled materials. These are only some of the changes we have seen. What has not changed? Two driving forces of our industry remain: 1) design innovation and, 2) the remarkable people within our industry.

CAN YOU SHARE ANY HIGHLIGHTS OF PAST CASUAL MARKETS?

The Casual Market has been such a part of my career culminating in many milestones and memories for which I am grateful. I would have to say that the highlight of these markets so far was winning a Lifetime Achievement Award in 2009. I was completely surprised, overwhelmed and honored to be the first designer to ever win this award.

HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT THE PRODUCTS YOU AND STEVE ELTON ARE BRINGING BACK IN AN UPDATED WAY FOR BROWN JORDAN?

My collaboration with Brown Jordan over the years has resulted in pioneering and launching many trends, new material categories and award-winning designs. I am very proud to share that this year we are celebrating Quantum's 30th anniversary, which was my first design for Brown Jordan. With so many new products launched into the marketplace every year, its modern form has never gone out of style. This year, we will be extending the Quantum line to include two new seating surface materials that did not exist when it was first developed: Brown Jordan's Parabolic sling and Resinweave. These additions will create an expanded offering of the original Quantum series.



Quantum Parabolic
Image courtesy of
Brown Jordan

WHAT PART HAVE TEXTILES PLAYED?

When I first became involved in the casual industry, some of the popular materials for seating options included vinyl strap, PVC mesh and a good but rather limited range of fabrics, which at that time may or may not have been weather or fade resistant. Since then, there have been many major developments in textiles, including the introduction of Sunbrella brand weather-resistant performance fabrics to the industry.

Since my partnership with Glen Raven/Sunbrella began

over 10 years ago, outdoor fabrics have become defined as performance textiles and upholstery for interiors not just exteriors. So far, we have created hundreds of fabrics together, including some industry favorites like Sailcloth, Sailing, Chino Twill, Vintage and Classic Linens, stretch-strap with recovery as seen in my Flex collection for Brown Jordan, and recycled-yarn content as seen in my latest Origins' textile collection for Sunbrella.

Today, I am still inspired by textiles in my design work, where they often serve as the jumping off point in my conceptual design process. It is a pleasure to partner with Sunbrella to create my own co-branded collections and also to collaborate with them on what might be for the future.

WHY DO YOU THINK THAT PRODUCT FOCUS MAY BE IMPORTANT FOR TODAY'S CONSUMER?

Today's consumers have access to a full range of resources once reserved for professional designers.

Magazines, social media and the blogosphere continue to educate and empower consumers by providing immediate access and awareness to create their own living spaces. This has become the democratization of design. With all of this available, the challenge for our industry is to get focused, be creative and introduce unique designs that give people choices, which they may then personalize and make their own.

WHAT ARE SOME OF THE BEST REWARDS YOU EXPERIENCED DURING YOUR MORE THAN THREE DECADES OF DESIGN?

Ultimately, the best reward is when a customer makes that emotional connection with what I have created.

Design for me is both a process and a journey. I have traveled to more than 40 countries. I am proud of the work I have been able to do around the world and the accomplishments achieved along with my partners. I am grateful for the colleagues and friends from whom I have learned and for others I have had the privileged of teaching. I am proud of the communities and villages of people domestically and internationally, where jobs have been created, sustained and will continue to be available as a result of the design process. It all starts with design.

OF WHICH DESIGNS OR ACCOMPLISHMENTS ARE YOU MOST PROUD?

1) Celebrating my first 30 years of designing for this industry.

2) My two decades of work at Brown Jordan, because that was the beginning of my career in this industry. Also, because my involvement there evolved from starting as a product designer to becoming a brand ambassador creating advertising and marketing campaigns, collateral and display, and working with people all over the world.

3) When I started at Brown Jordan, I was very aware of the significance of the brand and its design heritage.

I am proud that I was able to follow in the footsteps of the brand's original founders and continue its legacy.

4) I am proud of my first design, Quantum, now celebrating its 30th anniversary at this market.

5) I am proud of helping to develop technologies and introducing collections, which launched new furniture categories in our industry.

6) And I am most proud to call many colleagues my friends and to have partnered with some of the finest brands and individuals in our industry.

LOOKING AHEAD, WHAT DO YOU SEE AS THE FUTURE OF THE CASUAL FURNISHINGS INDUSTRY?

I see much more growth and opportunity on the horizon. The concept of the outdoor room is not only commonly accepted it is now expected as part of today's modern lifestyles and living environments. Restaurants, resorts and spas continue to proliferate, and this is just the beginning. The population continues to explode. Statistics estimate that our planet's current population is around 7 billion people and in the next 10 years it will grow to 8 billion. The odds are in our favor that more and more people will need a place to sit.

IS THERE ANYTHING ELSE I HAVEN'T ASKED THAT YOU WOULD LIKE TO SHARE WITH THE INDUSTRY?

I work at my art and craft every day, and will continue to be a part of designing the future of this great industry. **cl**



Quantum Resinweave
Image courtesy of
Brown Jordan