



On a silver platter

Africa is set to become a powerhouse of luxury goods and fashion, now that the global narrative on its social and economic wellbeing is beginning to change. *Michael Finnigan reports on one Zimbabwean family business looking to capitalise on the growing interest in the continent*

Lost souls visiting the tree-lined streets of Chelsea, London, might be surprised to find a small slice of the savannah among the coffee shops and restaurants. The mysterious sight is not the latest production of Disney's *The Lion King*, as might be thought, but rather the flagship store of African luxury house Patrick Mavros.

Established in 2004 by second-generation Alexander Mavros, a shaggy-haired 35-year-old who moved to London to make his mark on the family business, the boutique store is a celebration of the family's three decades in the sculpting business and a physical location for their

products in Europe. Yet to understand how the next gen got his start, he says it is important to know the genesis of the business.

As Mavros explains, a little over 30 years ago in Harare, Zimbabwe – the green and light-filled capital city that sits high on the country's central plateau – Catja Mavros (the family's matriarch) walked into her local salon wearing a pair of rosebud earrings. They had been carved for her by her husband Patrick while he recovered from an illness. So impressed were the hairdressers that soon after he found himself inundated with requests from the whole town. Just two months later he founded the Patrick Mavros jewellery brand.

“Dad has a natural ability to create really, really beautiful representations of his chosen subject and, on top of that, he’s always been a very natural marketer and a great networker,” Alexander says, at an interview just a few months after his store’s tenth anniversary. “Most of his early pieces were just one-offs. But over the years he has expanded it to include everything from ants to elephants.”

Despite finding success with his ivory jewellery, Alexander says it wasn’t long before his now 62-year-old father began looking for a more sustainable material. Soon after he settled on African silver, having recognised its unique properties. To take his art to the next level, Alexander says his father studied the long lost art of wax casting, which ensures that every detail of the original is captured during the process and can be used only once.

Over the years Patrick found himself with an ever increasing product range, with some bespoke orders selling in excess of \$500,000. Yet, Alexander says it was important to his father not to price any customer out of the market and their lowest priced item comes in at \$50.

Today the entire family is deeply involved in the family business, with Patrick very much at the helm. Sons Alexander, Forbes, 34, Patrick Jr, 30, and Benjamin, 28, each have their own distinct role to play and they are increasingly global in their outlook. And while the next generation have spent their time developing the brand, it wasn’t until Alexander suggested recreating the family home in a flagship store in London that the Mavros’ spirit was finally captured.



Above, from left to right: Patrick Jr, Benjamin, Forbes and Alexander
Below: A pair of wild turkey silver sculptures from the Mavros family’s objets d’art collection; Elephant and tortoise silver ashtray, designed by Alexander for his father
Opposite: Sea urchin wire cuff in silver



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Sculpting a store

Alexander remembers making his first sale growing up in Zimbabwe at the tender age of six years old. “One afternoon we got a surprise visit from a customer. My parents were away, but I knew where the keys to the studio were and I snuck in and sold him a little piece. The next weekend he [Patrick] gave me a Swiss army knife and that was a huge inspiration for my brothers, who’d then be waiting at the gates for the next customer,” he says, adding: “That was when I realised I had a passion for serving and selling.”

Almost two decades later and shortly after graduating from his double major in psychology and business from the University of Edinburgh, Alexander pitched the idea for a London-based store that would be modelled on the family home in Harare. The Zimbabwean teak and marble-clad store is today filled with family portraits and memorabilia that in many ways outshine the family’s sparkling silver sculptures. Alexander says that the store is such a marvel that even the Queen was impressed on a recent visit, boasting that it also has the best loo in west London. ➤

➤ But managing such high-profile clients is no easy task and comes with a lot of responsibility, according to Mavros. Although Alexander was reluctant to disclose much about his high-profile clients, media reports suggest that the Mavros family brand is favoured by British royals William and Kate and also a number of America's presidential families. "Because we are a family business and because we are friends with all of our customers, discretion has always been paramount to us," he says, adding: "I think the reason why we have such a great following of high-profile customers is because they know that with us they are in a safe pair of hands."

Mavros says that there is always a temptation to cash in on their high-profile clients, particularly because there is a noticeable uptick in sales when the press run unsolicited stories, but adds: "I just think there is an element of moral decency within our family, probably to our detriment and definitely to our slow growth, but we simply don't feel comfortable taking advantage of that. We are simply not willing to damage our reputation for short-term gain, and that holds true across the entire family."

The family perspective

Sitting beneath a large clan portrait, Mavros says that it is increasingly important for the family to remain in contact, particularly as the day-to-day operations get more intense. All six members of the Mavros family are expected to call in for a weekly conference call to ensure they are working in tandem. He says this is becoming increasingly important as the business becomes more globally focused.

"My brother Forbes lives in Mauritius, where we make most of our jewellery. He has a beautiful workshop and atelier there and he is incredibly meticulous about his production



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systems. Then we have my brother Patrick, who is normally in southern Africa, but is currently doing an MBA in global luxury brand management in Paris, which is obviously an exciting and interesting opportunity for him. Then my brother Benjamin – is based in Zimbabwe and South Africa – he is just a ball of energy and is very much a project leader in getting various things done. We used to be pretty laid back in our approach, but as things have expanded we've realised that you have to be very structured about communicating," he says.

The third generation of the Mavros family are not far behind, with Alexander having his first child just one month before the interview. He says this has been the defining moment of his career so far. "There is nothing in the world that focuses you like having your first child, nothing that gives you that drive to succeed and to create an incredible platform. I've doubled my normal output and I know that I speak on behalf of all my brothers when I say that we would love our kids to be involved in the business."

The circle of life

Building a legacy for the third generation is one of the reasons why

the Mavros family is committed to corporate responsibility. Over the last 30 years the business has moved away from the ivory trade to focus on sustainable sources of silver and gold. "The big mining companies in Africa are all listed and heavily regulated and they are all very aware of the importance of keeping their processes as environmentally friendly as possible. I can't attest to what happens in South America. But definitely in Africa, and where we get it from, it is extremely above board," Mavros says.

Sustainable development is becoming increasingly important for the mining sector in Africa, which produces less than 7% of the world's major metals, according to industry analysts MBendi. As a result, silver production in Africa accounts for less than 3% of the world's produce, due to the fact that most silver is produced as a by-product of lead, zinc, copper and gold mining, as is the case for the Mavros family.

While the Mavros family is not heavily involved in the mining industry, it is committed to their employees, and put its silversmiths through rigorous training regimes to ensure they are experts in their fields. Mavros says that Mauritius in particular has an extremely talented workforce as well as some of the best





silversmiths around. “We have 35 great craftsmen and we spend a huge amount of time training these people. You never stop learning at the Mavros ateliers and we have complete faith in them being the best people in the world at their jobs,” he says.

The Mavros family is also dedicated to two main causes. One in particular is important to his father, who suffered from polio as a child. “Our primary cause is giving wheelchairs to people that have never had them, and you’d be amazed by the amount of people in remote Africa that have never had access to such a device. That’s a cause that is dear to his heart,” he says. The other relates to the pangolin (otherwise known as the scaly anteater), which is on the brink of extinction. “It is the

most poached and threatened mammal in the world. We are bringing out a range of silver sculptures that we hope will bring the plight of the pangolin to the world’s attention.”

This is Africa

Poaching is not the only problem endemic to Africa. The business world is also “really challenging”, as Mavros puts it, particularly because of the lack of high speed internet and reliable telephone connections. It wasn’t until he a recent trip to Africa that the next gen was reminded just how damaging the lack of infrastructure was to good business practices.

“When you’re in London and you are used to quick and effective communication, and then return to Zimbabwe to find that the phones don’t work and the internet is so slow, you really begin to recognise how critical a robust telecommunications infrastructure is for a country,” he says.

To reduce the challenges of working on the continent, the Mavros family tries to keep things simple. “We look at the areas where customers are predisposed to making a purchase,

which makes it easier.” The family tends to focus its operations on regions with a strong tourist presence and Mavros says this will remain the focus of their operations in Africa.

Carving a future

When asked how the future of the Mavros family brand might look, the next gen identifies consolidation as a key area for consideration. “We are looking to improve our systems, our products, and our services. We have identified a number of places where we will be expanding our stores into Africa and Australia. I just thank God that there are four brothers to help,” he says.

On the topic of succession, the next gen says that the four brothers will split the responsibility based on their individual strengths, with no individual becoming the face of the brand. He added that Patrick will likely remain at the helm of the business for the foreseeable future.

Alexander also says that their new product ranges will feature in their plans, with Forbes Mavros’ new sea urchin collection – a jewellery range that “embodies the natural beauty that exists within our fragile oceanic realm” and combines sterling silver and 18ct gold



with coloured stones, diamonds and pearls – being considered as a key component.

But their ultimate aim is to cement their status on a global platform, alongside household names in luxury goods. “We’ve spent a great deal of time thinking about our ambitions as a business. America has Tiffany, France has Hermès, and Italy has Bulgari. And then you think about Africa, the one continent filled with mystic, intrigue, romance, adventure, and you ask: What does it have to offer the world of luxury? It’s going to be our job to make sure the next logical thought is the Mavros brand.” FB

Below: Alexander, Catja, Patrick Jnr, Dr Mavros, Patrick, Benjamin and Forbes

Right: Walking pangolin statue. The endangered mammal’s scales are made of matted fused hair like rhino horn

Above: Second-gen Alexander sporting a ZoZo Elephant Silver Buckle in Harare, Zimbabwe

Opposite, top: A pair of elephant hair gold and silver bangles

