SHOPPING WITH
STEPHEN BURKS

Artisanal Treasures

Valuing the personal in an era of mass production.

HIROKO MASUIKE FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

INSIDE OUT Stephen Burks juggles paper Surprise Balls ($40 each), which are made in New Mexico and unwind to reveal trinkets, at the entrance to Kiosk in SoHo.

MODERN manufacturing processes are good at churning out one identical product after another. But shoppers in search of a little more character are increasingly drawn to objects handmade by artisans around the world.

In recent years, the handicraft movement has grown, with the involvement of designers like Stephen Burks, who runs the Brooklyn studio Readymade Projects and regularly collaborates with artisans in far-flung locales.

"Having that immediacy of making, and that direct connection to people and community groups is amazing," Mr. Burks said, noting that it helps to build "a bridge from the developing world to the first world."

One of his most recent projects is a wooden tool he developed with the aboriginal Noongar people of Australia, who use it to crush plant materials to make skin-care products. The piece, which resembles a pepper mill, is on view at the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum, as part of the "Design for a Living World" exhibition, through Jan. 4.

Earlier this year, he started rajboori.com, a Web site that sells silk quilts, duvets and pillows he designed with artisans in India. He also created a line of tables and chairs produced by the Italian company Moroso in collaboration with weavers in Senegal, using nylon-over-zinc anodized tubing.

"We have so much to learn from places like India, Thailand and Africa, which have centuries-old traditions in making that go much deeper than our midcentury ideal of design," he said.

Shopping in Manhattan for products that combine traditional crafts with contemporary style, Mr. Burks found several favorites. His first stop was B & B Italia in SoHo, where he admired the basket-like quality of Patricia Urquiola's Crinoline outdoor armchairs, woven in the Philippines from polyethylene cord and abaca rope.

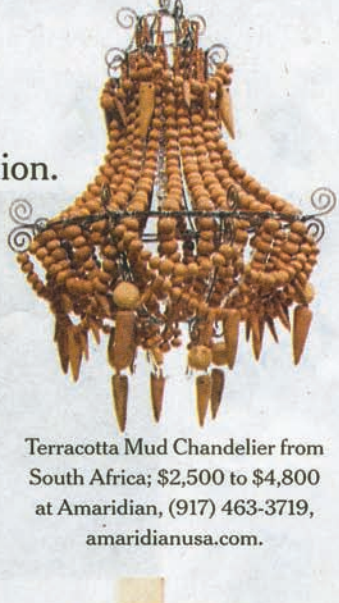
A few blocks away at Kiosk, he found a rustic birdhouse from Sweden with no-fuss construction and materials: a hollowed-out birch log and a couple of pine boards.

At Amaridian, he liked the Terracotta Mud Chandelier, by the Mud Ceramic Studio in South Africa, strung with hundreds of clay beads to mimic a crystal chandelier.

And at Vitra in the meatpacking district, he found a set of wooden dolls designed by Alexander Girard in 1963. The naïve-looking dolls, inspired by Central American and Eastern European folk art, have been reissued, and are hand-painted in Poland.

Consumers can expect to see more products like these, Mr. Burks said, because collaborative efforts are "the future of design." And in the 21st century, he added, luxury means more than high-end materials and expensive finishes — it "involves authenticity, generosity and sustainability."

TIM McKEOUGH



Terracotta Mud Chandelier from South Africa; $2,500 to $4,800 at Amaridian, (917) 463-3719, amaridianusa.com.

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Birdhouse, made of birch and pine in Sweden; $45 at Kiosk, (212) 226-8601, kioskkiosk.com.

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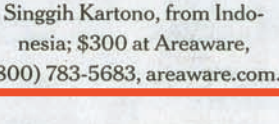
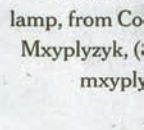


Magno large wood radio by Singgih Kartono, from Indonesia; $300 at Areaware, (800) 783-5683, areaware.com.



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