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Best of Both Worlds

A new lighting company combining British & American design formed last year so quietly that many showrooms and designers might still be unaware of it — until now.

BY LINDA LONGO

Joe McKearn, the founder of Flambeau and Gilded Nola, doesn't believe in coincidences any longer. At the Dallas-Fort Worth airport six years ago, while waiting for a cab to go to the Dallas Market, he struck up a conversation with the person next to him, an Englishman who grew up in the lighting industry named Jonathan Lucas, who was traveling to the same show to explore the notion of potential partnerships with a select few lighting brands. Strangely enough, McKearn's comparatively small company — Flambeau — was on Lucas' short list of manufacturers to visit.

Curious, McKearn asked why his business was on Lucas' radar. "Jonathan said he's been all over the world and had never seen a product line as unique," McKearn recounts. As Flambeau fans might attest, much of that style distinction comes from the creative mind of New Orleans-based designer Paul Grüber, who has been fashioning jewelry, textiles, plus one-of-a-kind chandeliers, lamps, and sconces in the French Quarter for 20+ years.

Since Lucas' partnership proposal received a warm reception from manufacturers, he returned to Dallas at the next market to firm up plans. Also arriving at the airport that day unknown to Lucas was Flambeau's McKearn, who upon entering a shuttle headed to the market center, hears an unmistakably British voice call out, "Hello, Joe!"

At that point, McKearn notes, "We figured the universe was definitely trying to tell us something." By the end of that market, Flambeau was among the American lighting brands — along with Feiss, Hinkley, Kichler, Stiffel, and Quoizel — that signed on for distribution with Lucas' family-owned lighting manufacturer Elstead Lighting. (Lucas is the entrepreneurial-minded son and nephew respectively of previous owners Stephen and Geoffrey Lucas.)

As the Managing Director of British lighting manufacturer Elstead Lighting — whose origins trace back to its foundry days in 1686 — Lucas was confident there was a desire among designers and consumers in Europe, the U.K., and the Middle East, among other countries for American lighting products. This is no small feat, as the voltage difference alone has been a hindrance for many companies that have attempted overseas distribution; however, the Elstead factory's long history of manufacturing and distributing quality lighting products on a global level eliminated this



roadblock. The next hurdle of showcasing the lines at major trade shows and investing in the proper marketing to promote those brands to a new audience was similarly overcome in large part due to the marketing acumen of Lucas' wife, Deborah, who joined Elstead in 2009 as Marketing Director.

THE NEXT STEP

Last year, Lucas and McKearn took their successful business partnership to new heights, establishing a separate company — aptly named Lucas + McKearn — that would blend the essentials of both manufacturers (Elstead and Flambeau, which had since grown to include the popular Gilded Nola division).

Starting in January 2017, the Lucas + McKearn brand began bringing together American and British design sensibilities to countries such as Poland, Russia, Europe, and the UAE with great success.

"A common factor we have learned when dealing all around the world is the appreciation of great and original design," Lucas comments. "One

OPPOSITE PAGE: These clean drum shades are indicative of some of the new style directions taken by Lucas + McKearn.

TOP: The new factory showroom — open to the public as well as the trade — at the new Baton Rouge headquarters for Lucas + McKearn is conveniently located in a popular building that includes an Ethan Allen gallery and a Habitat for Humanity ReStore. Many clients shopping at the other businesses stop in.

“Human emotion to these design styles is very similar worldwide — there is the enjoyment and appreciation of something unusual and different.” — Jonathan Lucas



Having a large enough showroom to display the full line elegantly to local designers was important when creating the new headquarters.



of the true core strengths in the Lucas + McKearn assortment is uniqueness of design. When we formed the new business, we felt by bring the quirkiness of the Flambeau footprint with some of the English Mid-Century Modern style footprint, it offered a niche but also a unique range,” he explains. “Our global clients like this uniqueness plus the individuality and the imagination of some of the designs. Human emotion to these design styles is very similar worldwide — there is the enjoyment and appreciation of something unusual and different. It may not grow the largest company, but it certainly becomes a much more memorable offer, which of course helps when building a brand name.”

For the North American market, the Lucas + McKearn company is the umbrella organization that owns and supplies the Flambeau and Gilded Nola brands as well as distributes Elstead Lighting exclusively; in the U.K. and other countries, the Elstead Lighting brand continues to produce a more comprehensive assortment of categories in addition to the Lucas + McKearn line including a comprehensive bath collection which is slated to make its way over to the U.S. by 2019.

Training people to get used to a new name is not easy — just ask P.Diddy/Puff Daddy/Puffy/Diddy/Sean Combs. For example, it will take time and plenty of repetition for Flambeau fans to look for the new name in the Dallas, High Point, and Atlanta market directories.

“It is quite a big task changing a business name and identity and spreading that message in such a large and diverse marketplace, and it has been a big change for the original team in the business whom all embraced this change with open arms, none more so than our partner Joe McKearn,” Lucas remarks. “We certainly have made progress in spreading this message to what were typically Flambeau-specific clients over this past year, but it will likely take us another two years until most of the trade remembers and recognizes this change.”

There are other regional differences to get used to as well. “We have found the U.S. market is very challenging in a competitive way — not competitive so much in price, but more in design and service. There is such a large number of great home décor and lighting vendors in front of buyers; there is an absolute overload of choice. Trying to make yourself stand out from the crowd has been a very interesting learning experience and is

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BELOW:

Renowned designer Paul Gr  r in his New Orleans studio, where he makes custom pieces for clients as well as designs for the Flambeau line.

BOTTOM:

This sampling of just a portion of the Elstead Lighting line has already been a hit with Baton Rouge-area designers.



still very much a work in progress for the Lucas + McKearn team,” Lucas comments.

THINK LIKE A RETAILER

As Lucas + McKearn enters its second year of operations this month, on a corporate level the addition of a factory showroom at each location has been effective for perhaps unexpected reasons. It is important to note that establishing a showroom is not intended to compete with any retail business – IMAP is strictly enforced, for example – but it has yielded some unique benefits.

According to Lucas, the Elstead Lighting showroom at its headquarters has three core strengths. “Every week we have several interior decorators or lighting showroom owners coming in to see all of the products in the flesh and observe how we display the products in a way the consumer finds easy on the eye and for decision-making,” he explains. “It is always a successful visit resulting in expanding business together. Unlike a trade show where you have limited space, in the U.K. showroom we have almost every fixture in our line-up – over 2,500 models – so it is a great source of inspiration for trade dealers and designers.”

The second benefit is as a reference resource for Elstead’s internal staff, sales office, and internal technical support teams. “We always get questions about dimensions that you think would never be needed or spare parts identification and installation queries,” Lucas comments. “The staff uses the showroom regularly to help give our clients quicker, better answers. It also means employees can see what our ranges actually look like instead of having to rely on photographs. They all love the fact that they can show their friends and family what they do and which part of the process they specifically take care of.”

The third benefit occurs when Elstead personnel can hear first-hand what the expectations of the consumer are and the challenges that brings. “I think we have become a better vendor to our designers and showroom clients because we can empathize with them so much better,” Lucas notes, adding, “It was because of this success that we wanted to replicate this business model for Lucas + McKearn’s headquarters in Baton Rouge. It has been the first time the staff has ever seen most of the models in person, not to mention lit and hung. This has hugely enhanced their connectivity to the product as well as their customer service skills by being so product knowledgeable.”

WELCOME CHANGES

The formation of Lucas + McKearn last year coincided with another development that benefited customers. For many years, the Flambeau (and later Gilded Nola) inventory was located in a third-party distribution center in Georgia while the staff (with the exception of artist/designer Paul Gr  r in New Orleans) occupied general office space in Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

Although quick shipping wasn’t a problem,



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The addition of furniture, accessories, and seasonal touches bring a warm residential feel to the showroom and make visitors feel welcome.

when the opportunity arose to occupy a larger property in Baton Rouge that could encompass the 60,000-sq.-ft. warehouse plus have room for administrative offices and the creation of a 3,000-sq.-ft. showroom, McKearn jumped at the chance. Best of all, this location was on a well-trafficked street in a building that includes a popular Ethan Allen gallery as well as a Habitat for Humanity ReStore.

The most immediate advantage to having the distribution center/warehouse adjacent to the headquarters was the ability to give personal attention to how items were packaged — something one has to rely on faith with when using a third-party facility in another state. “Now that we can personally see the orders before they are shipped out, damages have shrunk to nothing,” says McKearn, crediting his warehouse manager Roy Thompson with devising several effective shipping and warehousing strategies along with strict quality control methods.

As with the Elstead factory in the U.K., having a showroom on site allows the customer service staff — headed by Ashley Holstein — to become even more familiar with the product, which results in a better experience for customers contacting

the company. “If there is any question about inventory, we now can literally take a look for ourselves,” McKearn remarks. In addition, orders are typically shipped the same day that they are received.

The Lucas + McKearn showroom is also a practical way to show interior designers and clients the breadth of the line. Since the company only has temporary booth space for highlighting select pieces at major markets (i.e. Spectrum in Dallas, the Salon section of the Suites at Market Square in High Point, and in AmericasMart Atlanta), the factory showroom is ideal for showcasing a great deal of product.

McKearn hired renowned stylist/merchandising expert Fred Munnell to help design and lay out the showroom space from the preliminary stages through to completion. The result is a stunningly elegant showroom that is well-appointed with occasional furniture and accessories that provide an instant residential feel.

In November, a mere two months after the showroom portion opened to the public and trade, Lucas + McKearn held a Designer Night for the local community. “People didn’t just stop in and leave; they stayed for a good while,” observes Alana Roussel, the showroom manager who is an

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The mix of vintage furniture as well as custom pieces and stock items blend well together and inspire visitors to the showroom.

“More significantly, we are about to launch our 2018 price list and our pricing is being reduced, making our prices more competitive.”

— Jonathan Lucas

interior designer by trade. The event was successful in introducing Baton Rouge’s architectural design community to the new Lucas + McKearn name as well as the expanded product line. Roussel’s proficiency with all social media platforms is helping to increase awareness of the Lucas + McKearn brand and product line nationwide as well as providing inspiration for local designers. To further advance the adoption of the Lucas + McKearn name, the company has invested in widespread advertising in national and regional interior design plus lifestyle magazines.

NEW YEAR, EXPANDED STRATEGY

With the start of 2018, Lucas + McKearn customers are in for another pleasant surprise. “There are two missions we have recently decided to do,” Lucas reveals. “One is to have a mechanism to support bricks and mortar showrooms that invest in displays, and sometimes stock, in recognition that their yearly sales are being challenged while their operating costs are increasing. Competing with the online community is very tough — not just on a price level, but also with the amount of choices available. So we have a stocking dealer price list which gives recognition to those showrooms and interior designers,” he comments.

“More significantly, we are about to launch our 2018 price list and our pricing is being reduced, making our prices more competitive,” Lucas affirms. “This has arisen after analyzing all of our cost base in 2017 as we transitioned from Flambeau Lighting to Lucas + McKearn, and by having our stock on site instead of 800 miles away. When we did all of the calculations in 2016, there were a lot of hypotheticals; we have found that particularly in the last quarter of 2017, as we streamline our operation, we can be more competitive. This in turn hopefully will help our customers make more sales, too.”

Lucas also intends to grow the product range on a larger scale, expanding in the U.S., Canada, and overseas markets as well. “With the international sales experience we do have, we see ample opportunity to be a recognized specialist vendor to many markets,” he states. “We certainly hope there are other brand opportunities that could be sold under our umbrella to help the potential of the business in the longer term.”

McKearn echoes those goals. “I so admire Jonathan for his thinking all of these plans through and putting the business together in this way,” he says.

For his part, Lucas is appreciative for the reception he has received in the U.S. market over the years. “Since Deborah and I started working with partners in the USA, and then the experience in starting Lucas + McKearn, we have been immensely impressed by such a huge amount of talented, but thoughtful and caring people that we have been fortunate enough to have met connected with the lighting industry. We feel very lucky to have made so many friends over in the States who have always made us feel so welcome.” ❖

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