



Sophisticated Luxury

An Interview with Michel Bernardaud, BERNARDAUD

EDITORS' NOTE Michel Bernardaud was invited by his father, Pierre, in 1979 to join the eponymous family owned-and-operated company. The brand was founded in Limoges, France in 1863 and is known for its commitment to quality and traditional artisan craftwork. Michel Bernardaud represents the fifth generation of family leadership. He continues to modernize production facilities while preserving standards of time-honored savoir-faire and refinement.



Michel Bernardaud

COMPANY BRIEF Bernardaud is the premier manufacturer and exporter of porcelain collections in France. The company operates two production facilities in France as well as two U.S. retail boutiques in Chicago and New York, and five throughout France. The company continually calls upon designers, artists, and renowned chefs to help create beautiful and functional objects – including tableware, decorative pieces, lighting, and jewelry – that highlight the distinct properties of porcelain. Bernardaud (www.bernardaud.com) has a total workforce of 380 with a total annual output of four million pieces. Seventy percent of the brand's output is designated for export markets. Bernardaud was awarded "Entreprise du Patrimoine Vivant" in 2006 by the Ministry of Economy, Industry and Employment. This honor – designated as part of the living heritage of France – is given to French companies that preserve cultural legacies with their reliance on traditional crafts and industrial processes to create products of excellence. To this end, the Fondation Bernardaud was established in 2003 to promote and educate the public about the historic, economic, and cultural significance of Limoges and French porcelain. The company is a member of Le Comité Colbert, an association of 70 prestigious luxury brands, whose members collectively promote the French traditions of refinement, craftsmanship, and creativity domestically and throughout the world.

This is a brand with a long and storied history. How has it evolved from its inception?

In two years, we will celebrate the 150-year anniversary of Bernardaud. We remain a family-owned business, which is becoming more difficult, especially in our industry.

In business you have good and bad times – we have been through some big changes. But I always remember that those who came before me had to face difficulties that were of the same

caliber or worse than ones I have had to confront. We have been invaded three times by the Germans; we had to deal with the 1929 Depression – it was important because at the time, 90 percent of our production was going to the U.S.

As the company grows, how do you sustain the family culture?

From the beginning, we have tried to entertain a privileged relationship with those artists and designers involved in creating our products and we have always positioned ourselves as a top quality brand that continues

to bring in new styles and remains up to date.

My ancestors produced art nouveau in the 1900s and art deco in the '20s and '30s so when you have that as a basis, it's in the genes of the family and of the company. You have to honor the past, and in our case, it's a good one that has been created by our predecessors.

Is it important to couple history of the brand with modern concepts?

Yes, you have to know the basics of your product. We have been immersed in porcelain for many years so we know what you can and cannot do with it. As long as we know that, we can be open to work on special projects that push the limits.

Porcelain is a noble material; firing and shaping clay is one of the oldest industries in the world. But with such a history, there is a lot that we can do with this material, like creating new shapes or playing with the colors. It's great.

Is it tough to find the talent today in an industry driven by handcraftsmanship?

In the Western world, it's difficult to find people to work in this industry. Young people are more intellectual and want to work in finance, marketing, administration or as civil servants. There are fewer that want to work in factories. It is important for a business like ours to promote the fact that a human being can demonstrate intelligence not only with a brain but with the hands. Parents don't want their kids to work in a factory, which is silly because you can make a good living and also have an interesting job.

What is the strength of this brand globally and where do you foresee opportunity?

Globalization is good because it means new markets and opportunities, but it shouldn't happen without forethought. Intellectual property is not protected as it should be, particularly in Asia. While it may be considered an honor to be copied, I certainly don't appreciate it.

Also, this is done with the complicity of big corporations in the Western world that are involved in mass distribution because they close their eyes to it. While there is someone producing these unauthorized copies, there also has to be someone buying and selling them, so even the public supports it. But people have to realize that when you buy something cheap, it's probably a knock-off. Quality is absent. And labor laws are not respected and working conditions are terrible for those making the copies.

Have you been happy with how the redesigned Park Avenue store has been received?

We have been in the same location for 15 years, so we needed a redesign of our U.S. flagship boutique. It was a long process but we're happy with the results.

Having a flagship store in New York is as important as having one in Paris. The United States is our number one market and it drives the business in other places around the world.

Is your clientele more of a niche market at the high end or is it broader?

We have two markets: the retail market and the hotel and restaurant business. We have a product that is high end but the prices aren't as high as some might imagine. The margins in tableware, crystal, silverware, and china are far smaller than those that exist in leather, jewelry, or fashion. Yet, there is a resistance to price in our industry that is hard to explain.

So we have high price points, but we also have lines that are affordable for a large market. It's not always a question of money but of sophistication.

How do you determine what the key areas of focus are to ensure continued success?

I travel a lot and see the trends. You have to know your limits also. As a family-owned business, we don't have the means that big corporations have. We are part of the very sophisticated luxury industry, because our products are not seen publicly, like personal adornment; they're in your home. So you don't have a label or brand visibility as you do with a car or suit. ●

A glazer dips a plate into a glaze slop to ensure even distribution on its surface, work that can only be done by hand; Kaolin, the white clay found in the Limousine region that gives Limoges porcelain its translucency, durability, and luminous white color; When fired, gold has a matte appearance, but hand polishing with a fine cloth and sand reveals its luster; The precise decorative engravings on pieces in the Louvre collection were inspired by the architectural frescos of the grand galleries in the Louvre museum (top left to right)