

The acclaimed designer passed away in January 2014, but his company will maintain his vision and values as it continues creating the unique wall coverings and surfacing materials that have become synonymous with the Romanoff name.

By Christine Aebischer

Maya Romanoff set new standards in the world of design. His wall coverings, created by hand and incorporating unexpected materials such as beads, shells and gold leaf, were more akin to works of art than traditional wallpaper.

"[Maya] changed the way people looked at room design, and he was not a designer of rooms. He was an artist," says Joyce Romanoff, wife of the late designer and president of the Maya Romanoff Corporation.

The process may have been more tedious than using machines, involving a great deal of trial and error and years to perfect, but the results were incomparable.

"Today designers expect what we deliver," says Joyce Romanoff. "We try to really give them a product that was handmade but as close to perfection as possible — crafted but consistent."

Maya Romanoff's first experience with design came in the '60s with the discovery of

# Remembering Maya Romanoff



Joyce and Maya Romanoff



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tie-dye. After graduating from the University of California at Berkley with a degree in anthropology, he traveled to foreign locales including Africa and India, where he saw natural tie-dye with the use of indigo inks.

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Not only did the craft stick with him, but so did the name bestowed on him by one of the gurus he frequently visited. He left home as Richard Romanoff and returned as Multifarious Maya, reborn in name and ambition.

Once back home, he began tie-dyeing first t-shirts, then leather, canvas, silk and paper. "He became obsessed," says Joyce Romanoff. "All artists to a certain degree have an obsession; they're never quite satisfied with what they do."

Next, he ventured into couture clothing, creating one-of-a-kind tie-dyed caftans, which, while successful, left him starting from scratch each time one was sold. His entry into interior design, influenced by the textile designer Jack Lenor Larsen, allowed him to make repeatable art, and in 1969 he established the Maya Romanoff Corporation.

"He was a trailblazer," says Joyce Romanoff. "He went into interior design by accident; he didn't go to school to be an artist, it just happened. Because he was such an intellectual, he was able to bring things to a higher level."

One of his most well known works, which adorned the Chicago Sun-Times building, was one such example of the higher level he was capable of achieving. "Bess' Sunrise" was made of 28 hand-dyed canvas strips, each measuring 6 feet wide and 120 feet long. The multicolored installation was one of the reasons Joyce Romanoff went to work for the company in 1988. "I thought, 'Oh my god, this is show biz,'" she says. "It was amazing."

Maya Romanoff also designed the main stage curtain for Chicago's Harris Theater for Music and Dance in 2003. While the curtain itself is silver, it both absorbs and reflects light, taking on whatever color light is shone on it. During the process, Joyce Romanoff recalls that Maya was not always certain what he was trying to achieve or even what he was doing, but he was confident that it would work in the end. "He liked the discovery," she says.

Always looking for inspiration, Maya

Romanoff traveled to Japan where he discovered the craft of papermaking, which he brought back to his company. While keeping the integrity of the traditional technique alive, he experimented with texture to create wall coverings that were anything but conventional. The materials themselves dictated the finished product, from the design to how it was sold.

"He believed in the value of materials," says Joyce Romanoff. "It came from his hippie roots." Even before "going green" was the norm, Maya Romanoff worked to create a healthy environment for his employees and to impart an appreciation of materials by using water-based dyes and paints and reusing as much as possible.

This positive work environment is one of many reasons why the company's employees have remained for decades and continue to bring in their family members to join the Maya Romanoff team. Several of Maya and Joyce Romanoff's own family members have joined the company, as well. All of them, having worked closely with Maya Romanoff for years, instill the standards that he set for the company.

"We're a family company," says Joyce Romanoff. "It's about valuing the work we do





CHICAGO'S HARRIS THEATER FOR MUSIC AND DANCE



THE CHICAGO SUN-TIMES BUILDING "BESS' SUNRISE"



and valuing the individual, not numbers."

Maya Romanoff has received countless awards for his work and has influenced many designers. His "Beadazzled" wall covering collection made of small, sparkling glass beads will be on permanent display at the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum. These accolades as well as his company's continuation of his legacy will ensure that his work will not be forgotten; but above all else, his character will be long remembered.

"His personality was extremely impressive," says Joyce Romanoff, who has been receiving thousands of letters and emails since his death from people who met him 30 to 40 years ago. "He had universal appeal."