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La Beaute owner Camal Pirbahai's high standards means he hand-sews many of his client's window treatments.

Drapery designer elevates his work to an art form



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Right at Home

It's the modern age. Anything the consumer desires is at his or her fingertips — or at least as near as a local retailer. It is fully formed, of guaranteed quality, perfectly uniform, and in most cases we have absolutely no idea where it really comes from. Not so with the hand-made, handcrafted, regional offerings of the artisan.

Despite the fact such talents reach relatively few in the population, a true artisan labours with respect for the craft, an authentic desire to create, and the faint hope a discerning buyer will recognize the artist's hand in the finished piece. These motivations are surely infused in the work of drapery designer Camal Pirbahai.

Maintaining Standards

Pirbahai is the owner of La Beaute (1015 Mount Pleasant Rd., 416-485-1422), a bustling sewing room where the drapery panels, Roman blinds, Austrian shades, pelmets, and valances destined for some of the city's most beautiful windows are created. Pirbahai maintains the exacting old-world techniques he learned as an apprentice in Europe. For example, he insists on hand sewing many of the elaborate window treatments, despite the more time-consuming practice.

"Hand-sewn draperies never pucker, something nearly inevitable with three-layer machine stitching," says Pirbahai. "Also, stitching luxurious trims to drapery panels on site allows for precise placement, something I insist on."

Like the owner of a family-run restaurant, Pirbahai is involved in every aspect of his work, from the initial consultation where he recommends suitable window treatments and fabrics, to the final installation, where he addresses each individual pleat, coaxing it precisely into place. It's this level of attention to detail that elevates his role to that of artisan.

Twist of Fate

A twist of fate delivered young Pirbahai to his chosen career. Abandoning a 12-hour workday selling stereos and attending evening classes at York University, he purchased a one-way economy seat on British Airways. Bound for an apprenticeship with a well-known furniture maker, he arrived in London only to discover the talented craftsman had vanished.

With no money and no prospects Pirbahai stumbled onto a drapery shop with a handwritten sign in the window, "Help Wanted." His decision to apply for this less-than-appealing post had nothing to do with a desire to sew, he simply needed a job. Convincing the mistress of seams to employ him was no easy task. The fact that he was perceived as "American" did nothing to advance his cause, but she was impressed with his fluent French and he did seem willing to work hard. Reluctantly, she awarded him the job of

sweeping floors, running errands, and catering to the cantankerous but talented seamstress.

Men don't make curtains

The drapery shop catered to a high-end clientele that included ladies and earls, dukes and duchesses, even members of the royal family. In short order, Pirbahai discovered he had a natural affinity for the craft but his employer did not encourage his interests. "Men do not make curtains!" she admonished.

But his curiosity was insatiable and he looked forward to installations, which would take the proprietor and her assistants out of the shop. Using the unsupervised time, the curious apprentice would take drapery panels apart and put them back together, discovering exactly how they were made. In time, he got to steam the finished window treatments, cut the luxurious fabrics, and finally to sew.

Camal Pirbahai's Reluctant Guide to Window Treatments

When I pressed him for some insights on drapery-making he hesitated, leading me to conclude he maintains another European standard — the guarding of valuable knowledge. But here are some highlights to consider when considering window treatments.

★ **Period of house.** Drapery treatments should be chosen with consideration of a home's architecture. Period homes such as Victorian, Georgian, Tudor and Colonial all have traditional window treatments that are most suitable. Contemporary homes look best with more restrained window treatments.

★ **Style of room.** Furnishings and accessories will influence the type of drapery treatments, much the same way style of architecture does. Formal French furnishings will benefit from luxurious window treatments. Modern furnishings require streamlined panels of fabric, often with little or no pattern.

★ **Room function.** Consider how you plan to use the room before you make decisions regarding window treatments. A bedroom may require black-out shades; a kitchen with full privacy may look best with bare windows.

★ **Light exposure.** Rooms facing east or south enjoy lots of natural light. Rooms that face north or west are often used for more intimate purposes or evening entertaining, where rich, full draperies create the desired atmosphere.

★ **View.** When a great view is in sight, tone window treatments to blend in with wall colour. That way, draperies won't be competing with the more impressive view.

★ **Fabric.** Each material has its own inherent qualities; fine wool drapes beautifully, a rich silk puddles deliciously on the floor, heavy patterned fabrics such as a crewe or brocade pleat very differently from lighter fabrics such as sheers and linens.

★ **Passementerie.** Trims and embellishments such as braid, rope, tassels and beads add elegance and polish to finished window treatments.

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