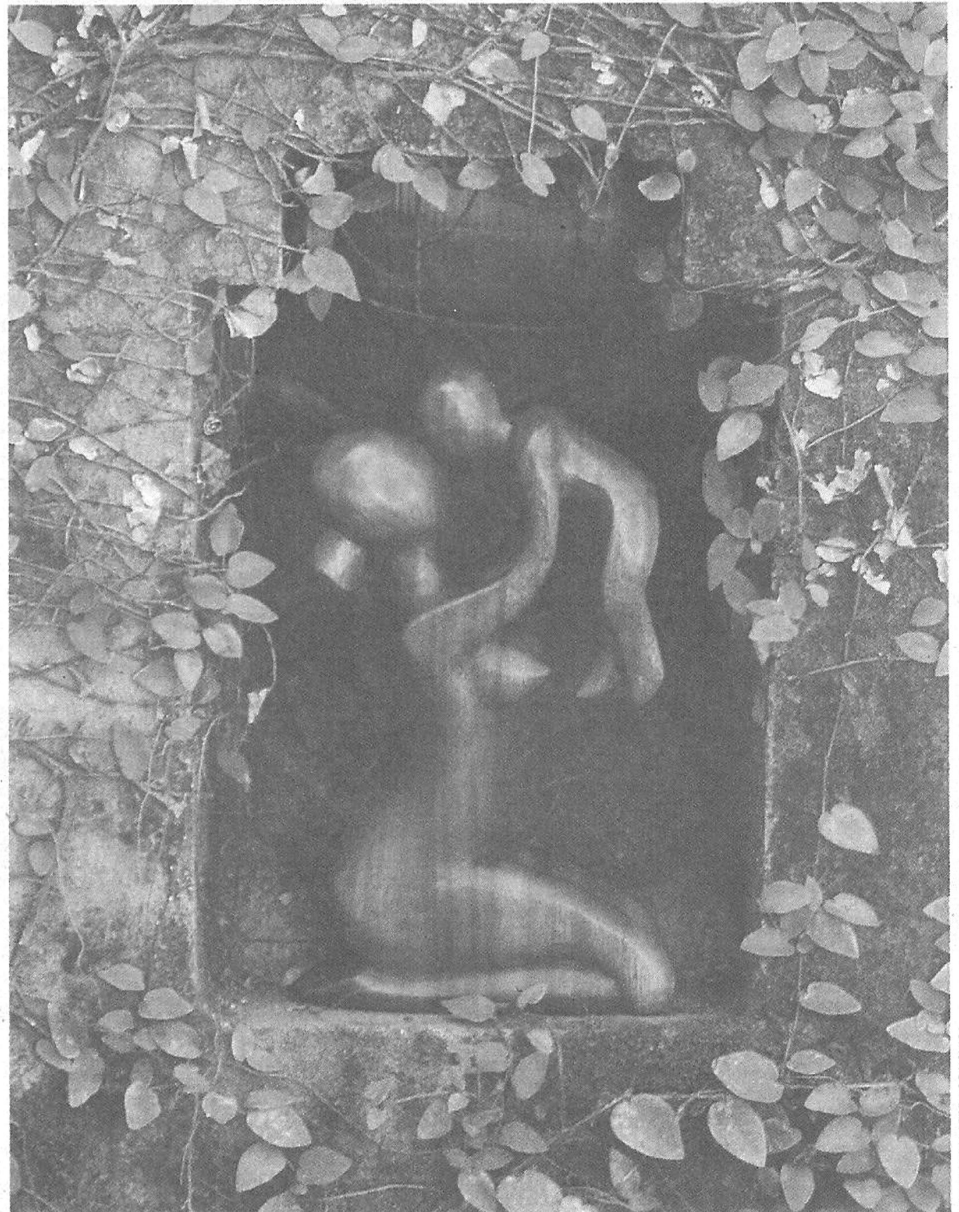


*Novica's marketplace transforms the
lives of global artists and their
authenticity-starved western patrons*

Art & Soul

*"We had to
break all the
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Mother's Gentle Touch by Made Wirata, Bali, suar wood

In the Los Angeles offices of Novica, the online global art marketplace, African masks adorn walls lined with photos of proud artists from every corner of the world. Tiny bamboo shafts are stacked delicately on top of each other to form a few of the employee's cubicles, and the stunning Murano vases illuminating the hallway are from a Brazilian artist whose family emigrated from Italy—the artist now infuses an ancient Venetian glass blowing technique with Latin flair.

This is not your average company headquarters. But Novica isn't your average company. The place feels connected to the rest of the world in a deeply spiritual way, thanks in large part to its visionary young founder and CEO, Roberto Milk.

Fresh from an all-nighter he pulled with some of his staff, Milk is proofing a holiday catalogue that has to be rushed to the printer in 20 minutes. Milk, whose soft-spoken demeanor and youthful good-looks exude a bright, quiet confidence, tells the story of Theus, an artist featured in the catalogue who left his urban dwelling in Lima to paint in an abandoned water tower in Peru's countryside.

"He brought his easel and painted there for something like three months just to get away from it all," explains Milk, as he gives the catalogue a final font change.

Because he needs the work done as soon as possible, Milk grabs the hard drive and gets in his car to drive it over to the printer's office himself. Dangling from his SUV's rear-view mirror is a cross from his Peruvian grandmother, who wove slippers for children before she passed away. She was not only a tremendous inspiration for Milk, she was Novica's first featured artist.

"My brother and I used to run around the woods near her house in Peru when we were kids, while she did her weaving," he recalls. "When she passed away, we sent an e-mail to everyone about her life story, telling people how she kept weaving even with serious kidney problems. She was an amazing person and her story really moved people."

While at the printer, Milk negotiates the four-day turnaround he needs for the catalogue. He blesses his hardworking staff for their long hours that have allowed him to close the printing deal today. It is this very DIY moxie and commitment to communal entrepreneurship that has transformed Novica from a start-up venture into a favorite of eco-conscious and socially aware consumers.

As a partner of the for-profit wing of *National Geographic*, Novica has regional offices in Latin America, Asia and Africa. Their online gallery, *novica.com*, gets over two million hits per month, allowing consumers to buy paintings, sculptures, clothing, furniture, musical instruments and jewelry from more than 10,000 artists around the world. Fair trade-conscious consumers appreciate Novica's business model for cutting out middlemen and emphasizing humanitarian economic development over bottom-line profit.

"People really crave authenticity and meaning in their lives in this anonymous era of mass-manufactured goods and chain stores," says Milk. "They want to know who made the décor in their home, what culture it came from and what deeper meaning it holds."

Changing Artists' Lives

"After our first artists became successful, word quickly spread," says Milk.

With more than 100 employees worldwide, Novica staffs each office with community art experts who recruit local artisans in the hope that their work will find a larger audience. Shipped items often come with personal notes from the artists, and more than a few customers have been known to strike up ongoing relationships with the artisan after purchasing their work.

One such artist is drum and mask-maker Ernestina Oppong Asante from Ghana.



"Before Novica, I had only one shop," explains Asante. "I've been able to make enough money now to send my six foster children to secondary [high] school."

While Asante's success with Novica is common, his process of making drums is as unique as the pieces themselves. He uses Tweneboa wood for the drum, and goatskin leather for the surface, manufacturing each drum by hand. Such pieces are imbued with the kind of personal attention to detail and labor-intensive care that Milk prizes, the quality that attracts buyers like Robert Iglesias, who purchased a Cuban painting through the Web site.

"I haven't been able to experience the culture of my people firsthand," writes Iglesias in one of Novica's testimonials. The son of Cuban immigrants, Iglesias says the painting gives him "a glimpse of the rich heritage" he experienced only through stories and photographs passed down to him as a child.

Genesis of a Gallery

In contrast to Iglesias, Milk's childhood brushes with culture were the real thing.

"My parents were both teachers, so we would take road trips to Mexico and Latin America during the summer," Milk remembers. "My dad was in the Peace Corps when he met my mother in Peru. They really didn't believe in spending money on anything except traveling."

Paying his way through Stanford, Milk worked as a college DJ borrowing records from friends before

"She said she felt delighted to see my painting and that it gave her more courage to live with her crippled legs."

—RAWAT VONGLA



**Pray for the World by
Mohammad Arffin,
Indonesia, oil on canvas**

finally landing a job at Prudential. By analyzing other companies and their financial structures, Milk learned the skills needed to help build Novica's cyber-community. He floated the idea to his brother Andy, his roommate, his now-wife Milena and her mother, Armenia Nercessian de Oliveira, a native of Brazil whose father had been a refugee from the 1915 Armenian Genocide—formerly, de Oliveira worked as a refugee and peacekeeping specialist with the United Nations. With a little bit of seed money and a lot of ambition, they launched Novica from the basement of their Santa Monica home.

"People were, and still are, motivated so much by the idea that what they were doing was helping to change people's lives," says Milk.

Utilizing de Oliveira's international connections, they started a technologically sophisticated company that emphasizes the value of indigenous peoples. Before a mission to Bosnia, de Oliveira began contacting the very same refugees she had worked with to see if they would join Novica's team as artists.

"When I traveled, I always found myself amazed by the art and handcrafts that I saw," explains de Oliveira. "I always bought gifts for friends and family... at the same time, I was inevitably troubled by the difficulties faced by artisans in selling their products and earning a reasonable living. Novica resulted from our desire to share this beauty with a larger number of people."



**Peace for the World by
Handara Baskoro, Bali,
hibiscus wood
with batik painting**

For Milk, transforming that desire into a practical business model proved to be a challenge, especially in the wake of the dot-com bust.

"Everyone said it couldn't be done," says Milk. "We had to break all the rules and make it possible for artists to earn more than they had ever earned before."

De Oliveira recalls the early days of a fledgling company trying to use efficient high-tech sales to vend the traditional crafts of artists in areas where the Internet was, at the least, a questionable sales tool.

"We had to explain to artists that we wouldn't purchase from them, but sell for them," she says.

"They were so used to being cheated by buyers they found it hard to believe we wouldn't take advantage of them."

As soon as the new system began to prove itself profitable, artists started flocking to Novica's offices where they found people with a like-minded philosophy. De Oliveira and Milk's spiritual determination is matched by the energy fueling the creative fires of Novica painters like Thailand's Rawat Vongla.

"Inspiration sometimes comes from the power of the natural world and sometimes it comes from people you know," says Vongla. "One day I noticed a little handicapped girl was looking at my canvas. She said she felt delighted to see my painting [a blue mountain covered in mist and sunlight on the Buddha] and that it gave her more courage to live with her crippled legs."

According to Vongla, a Buddhist doctrine says that if you give more, you will receive more.

"I understood then that this is the way of life I want," he adds.



Roberto Milk, Cofounder & CEO



Armenia Nercessian de Oliveira, Cofounder & President

A Place for Peace

Although Novica's founders don't see themselves as political, such powerful personal and spiritual sentiments may be indicative of something larger at stake.

"Almost everywhere I've traveled since the Iraq war began, I've noticed an increasing anger toward the United States and Americans," says de Oliveira. "Yet among our artisans and their families, there is a much more positive perception of Americans whom [they] see as individuals. I believe this direct connection we strive to foster helps contribute to peace and understanding between people."

In launching their Peace on Earth division, Novica reserved specific retail space for peace-themed art.

"Many of us do believe that peace can perhaps best be achieved through better understanding and appreciation between people," says Milk. "Increasing understanding between diverse peoples has always been one of Novica's greatest goals."

Now that Novica is a proven success, for Milk and his dedicated team, such a lofty goal might not seem so unattainable.

WLT

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