

EXPLORER IN A BORDERLESS WORLD

Jewellery designer, cultural historian and renaissance woman Kai-yin Lo claims to be slowing down. But as CATHERINE SHAW discovers, she's as active and creative as ever

KAI-YIN LO IS A jewellery and accessories designer, a curator and a collector. But perhaps above all, she's a historian. After a diverse career, the Hong Kong-born Lo says it's been her lifelong passion for enquiry that has taken her from studying European medieval history at Cambridge University to her current de facto role as a cross-cultural ambassador.

"I'm a historian, and that means that I always question things," explains Lo in her Mid-Levels home. The spacious, sunlight-filled apartment reflects the designer's vivacious personality with its eclectic decor and art – a fascinating medley of old and new, East and West, with works from the likes of Cy Twombly and Xu Bing alongside creamy white Song Dynasty ceramics and sleek modern furniture by Thomas Heatherwick.

"I always ask why things are the way they are," says Lo. "For instance, why is traditional Chinese furniture made in a particular way and used in a specific setting? I've come to understand that it's about synthesis, how things come together, that is most significant."

Lo's introduction of British designer Heatherwick at an Asia Society event the previous night offers the perfect illustration of her deep fascination with exploring the links between design and society at large. Heatherwick's presentation, titled *The Bridge of Aspirations – Connecting East and West*, examined the exchange of creativity and innovation between cultures.

"Heatherwick is a cross-discipline thinker and doesn't do anything unless it's done well," says Lo, who was acting in her role as Central St Martin's first Visiting Principal Lecturer, Cross Culture, a role she was honoured with in 2013. "It's so prescient of them to create that title, to understand that today it's all about a borderless world with East and West, old and new."

Although widely recognised for her scholarly

research into Chinese design, Lo first made a name for herself by introducing a contemporary style of jewellery that bridged the divide between precious and fashionable. Her career began, she says, when she returned to Hong Kong in the 1970s and started collecting interesting jade, bronze, ivory and semi-precious stones from areas like Cat Street.

"I loved putting things together that have no relation to each other to create wearable art," she recalls. Soon, while working in New York City, Lo's unique designs caught the eye of the manager of Cartier's Fifth Avenue boutique, and it wasn't long before her highly original pieces were being sold in Bergdorf Goodman, Neiman Marcus and Saks Fifth Avenue, as well as Harrods in London and Japan's Wako and Mitsukoshi.

"The stones were not appreciated or understood then," explains Lo. "Agate, for example, was considered a lowly stone, but it comes in many varieties, and some were 5,000 to 6,000 years old. Now we know that colourful beads from places like Iraq and Mesopotamia show ancient history; how people roamed around the Caucasus and how cross-cultural exchanges were being undertaken even then."

Without any formal training, Lo chose stones based on visual appreciation. "Beautiful things enrich everyday life," she says. In 2005 her jewellery designs were exhibited

as part of *The New China Chic* exhibition at the Kennedy Center in Washington DC.

Along the way, Lo discovered an interest in Chinese history and started to explore the worlds of classic Chinese furniture and house design. She was, she recalls, driven by wanting to understand the Chinese way of living and how the family home was structured. "Before that, scholarly work undertaken by the Chinese was very compartmentalised, looking at specific dynasties, so there was a disjuncture between understanding the social cultural development of that time and the work."

She has edited several books on Chinese culture and contemporary design. Her 2006 publication *House Home Family: Living and Being Chinese* was selected by the Association of Museum Curators, USA in 2010 as one of its 15 Great Books for Understanding China.

An avid collector of contemporary art, Lo was instrumental in organising and curating the landmark exhibition of Chinese artist Wu Guanzhong at the British Museum in 1992. It was, she believes, the most important thing she has ever done.

"That was a mission. Today he's one of the most important artists, the founder of modern Chinese painting, but back then he was recognised by only a small number of people. When my sister and I met the artist, he knew I travelled a great deal, so asked me to help market his exhibition."

It would take two years before a serendipitous cancellation of a show in the Asahi Shimbun Gallery of the British Museum offered a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. "The museum said they had no budget because they were putting money into a major Rembrandt show, so we did everything ourselves. It launched modern Chinese works in the West," Lo recalls with pride.

More recently, Lo curated the Hong Kong official design exhibition at the Shanghai Expo

in 2010, an onsite installation of contemporary artist Xu Bing, again at the British Museum, and the first art-design-innovation exhibition at Asia Society Hong Kong Center in 2012-13. Lo is also a visiting professor at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing and a member of the Global Leadership Council, Museum of Art and Design in New York. She sits on the Asia-Pacific Art Acquisition Committee at Tate Modern and Asia Society's Global Council.

Although Lo claims to be "slowing down and simplifying her life", she seems as active as ever, having launched a range of contemporary Chinese ceramic tableware and a collection of ethereal cashmere created in China.

And she is especially devoted to championing the creative industries in Hong Kong as a board member of the Hong Kong Design Centre and a member of the West Kowloon Cultural District Museum Committee.

"There's so much information available these days that curators are even more important," she says. "And today young designers face the particular burden of starting up in Hong Kong. We need to remember it's about synthesis; mature designers need to help through creating support systems, like at PMQ, the city's new cultural hub. That's what keeps things exciting and fresh. It's about creating support for future designers." ■