



# KU AMBIANCE



United States Of America  
Brand Launch, Winter 2007



KU AMBIANCE

$$(1 + 1) = KU$$

## CORPORATE PRESIDENT



Steven Hoel, Los Angeles, California USA

## CREATIVE DIRECTOR



Tatsu Ishihara, Tokyo, Japan

Fire. The wheel. The airplane. The first people to do something, no matter what it is, usually look a little crazy. When Steven Hoel met Tatsu Ishihara in 1992, no one was thinking about creating the first Asian “concept” brand. So when the two of them decided *they* would be the first to create a brand that uses Japanese artistic sensibilities to interpret global popular culture it looked a little crazy. But that didn’t stop them. They decided to call their company “KU,” a buddhist term meaning “formless void.” And over the next 15 years, their vision formed into a ultra-sophisticated fusion between high style and Japan’s

thousand-year-old traditions of nature, minimalism, and near-mystical momentary perfection. After more than a decade of unprecedented success in Japan, they are (at last) bringing their unique conceptual designs to the USA with the launch of KU AMBIANCE. And yes, their work may still look a little crazy. But that’s the price you pay to be first.

  
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# VISION:

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## About the brand...

The “KU” brand captures an open artistic style that represents the accumulated spiritual design wisdom of thousands of years of cultural evolution in Japan. It builds on many Japanese arts that over the past thousand years have been influenced by Zen and Mahayana philosophy, particularly acceptance and contemplation of the imperfection, constant flux, and impermanence of all things. This flux is captured most eloquently in the momentary flash when a human recognizes something as “beautiful.” From this insight we can recognize that there is no such thing as “beauty” or “art” without a person to appreciate it, and to that logic, KU design products are aimed to engage the senses, and delight the person who enjoys them in their home.



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# BUSINESS:

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Originally from Michigan, **Steven Hoel's** precocious interest in business found him reading stock tables in the 6th grade; by the time he moved to Arizona for high school he was tripling international commodity investments at an age when most boys are learning to drive a car. Steve's youthful interest in world financial markets developed into a lifelong interest in global cultures. He befriended the foreign exchange students in high school, and ended up with a Japanese roommate in college. Which, logically enough, is how Steve met his first wife...also from Japan.

After college, Steve polished his business skills working at a bank, and predictably, was under-challenged and -- let's be frank -- bored. He was looking for a new inspiration, the proverbial "light bulb." This appeared when his Japanese father-in-law asked for help in a USA-JAPAN export-import transaction. This earned Steven \$5,000 for two hours work. The next day, he decided he was no longer in the banking business, but now in the export business.

By the late 1980's Steve was exporting all kind of products, even becoming the world's largest exporter of Rolling Stones tour goods in 1989. But despite growing business success, the 80's had turned into a long party and a longer hangover. In October, 1990, Steve woke up one morning, decided he'd partied enough, and became a spiritual seeker. Asian culture beckoned, rich with Buddhism, Taoism, and the accumulated wisdom of a dozen ancient cultures.

Through a set of coincidences that can only be called "fate" one of Steven's Japanese import customers, Tatsu Ishihara was seeking a business partner to start a new clothing line called "KU," inspired in part by Japanese mysticism; and KU coming from a zen Buddhist term which translates as "formless void." As their partnership grew, Steven relied on Tatsu's unerring eye and incredible sense of the "next wave" to hit Japanese

## **STEVEN HOEL** LOS ANGELES, CA / BERLIN



culture, while Steven focused on developing new business opportunities. Over the course of their two decade partnership, the combination of global brand-building, spiritual metaphysics, and high concept design have propelled them to a unique position in Japan.

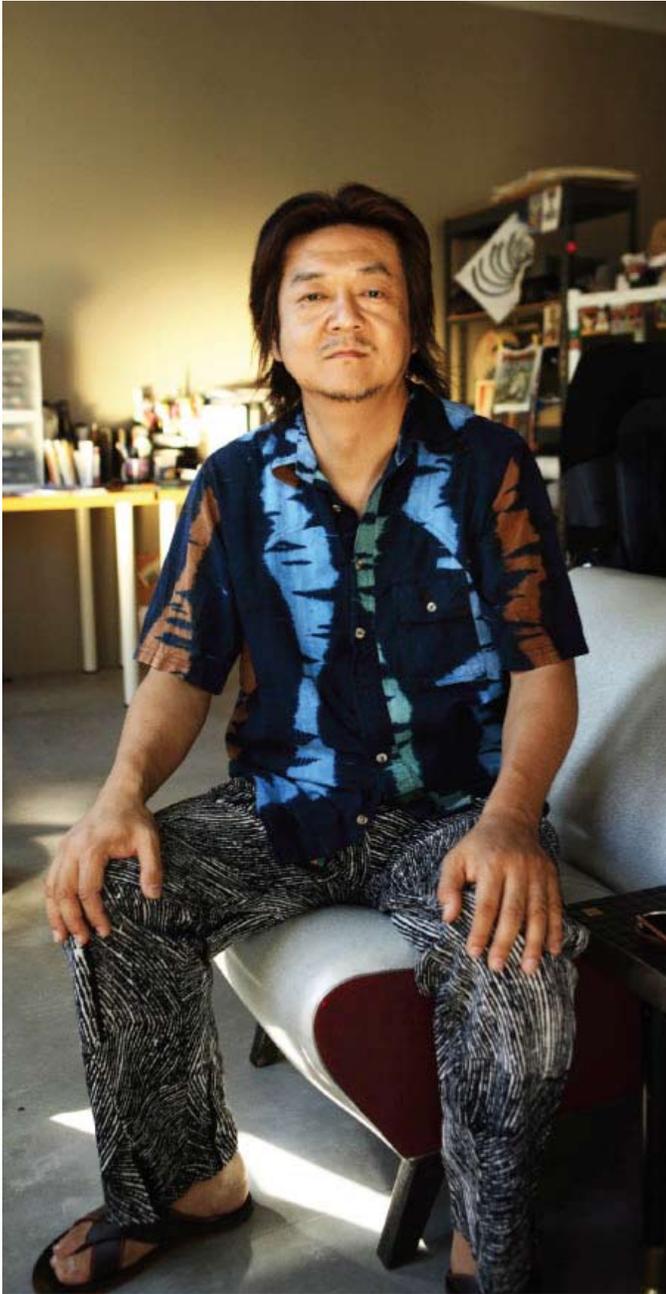
From here, Steven's next challenge is to leverage the successes of the KU brand overseas and bring that intelligence to the high-end luxury market in America and Europe. In a time when artworks and custom-crafted masterpieces of design are hotly sought by elite buyers, KU AMBIENCE sells one-of-a-kind art, innovative home furnishings, ultra-fine clothing, and luxury accessories that represent a rarefied high-culture global lifestyle that is spiritually conscious and without peer. Whew. It takes a challenge at that level to keep Steven interested. He's that good.

  
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# CREATIVE:

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## **TATSU ISHIHARA** TOKYO, JAPAN

**Tatsu Ishihara** was born in Okayama in 1955. He comes from a family with a long history of dealing in Japanese textiles, design, and antiques. After attending business school in Tokyo in the 70's, Tatsu was profoundly influenced by the "New Wave" culture that emerged in London, kicked off by punk bands like the *Sex Pistols* and rising to worldwide popularity with the art-fashion conscious music of the *B-52's*, *Talking Heads*, *Blondie*, *The Police*, and *Devo*. Tatsu created several stores in Japan exploring new wave culture, fashion, and music. When the initial popularity of New Wave as a worldwide phenomenon waned in the late 1980's, Tatsu faced a moment of personal crisis. Should he look outward to the rest of the world for inspiration, or turn inward to the rich history of Japanese art, craft, and design innovation for inspiration? He awoke to the realization that he needed to create a uniquely modern Japanese brand, and that brand was to be "Ku," the first Japanese high-concept brand fusing the best of Japanese design with a sophisticated global sensibility. The "Ku" brand was in part Tatsu's reaction to the sterile plastic anonymity of much modern design. He wanted to live in clothing and spaces that activated the five senses. Design is more than just a "look," it must satisfy all the senses and present a pleasurable organic truth to activate a personal reality. Ku was created to be a "touch and feel" brand, not removed from the senses but enchanting them. This credo has proven a successful ideal and for over a decade Ku design has been an international success. Now, Ku moves to the USA market as "Ku Ambiance," the unique high-culture design brand.

  
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# ARTIST:

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## **DON ED HARDY** **SAN FRANCISCO & HONOLULU**

A southern California native, in 1967 Don Ed Hardy received a B.F.A. degree in printmaking at the San Francisco Art Institute. He then underwent a private tattoo apprenticeship and developed the fine art potential of the medium with emphasis on its Asian heritage. In 1973 he lived in Japan, the first non-Asian to work there with a traditional tattoo master. He has continued to work and study extensively in Japan as Asian art and aesthetics inform the core of his creative output.

Since 1982 he has written, edited, and published over twenty books on alternative art under their Hardy Marks imprint. In 1986 Hardy turned from

tattoo to focus on his personal art. Since that time he has continuously had numerous solo and group exhibitions of his work in galleries and museums both here and abroad, as well as curating a number of internationally traveling shows. His work is in numerous public and private collections. Although painting is his main focus, he still operates Tattoo City in San Francisco's North Beach, established in the city in 1974.

In 2005 Hardy and his partners formed Hardy Life, LLC to create an all- new international fashion line *Ed Hardy* based on his artwork. This has become the fastest growing pop-fashion brand in history, with flagship stores in Los Angeles, New York, Tucson, Australia, Japan, Thailand, Singapore, Korea, Taiwan, Prague, and Dubai.

Starting in 2005, Hardy began a new phase of experimental works merging fine art and Japanese design traditions. This is both a return and an amplification of his earlier exploration of the tattoo arts within the hierachical world of Japanese arts. Hardy's new forays included investigations of painting, drawing, printmaking, and original works in porcelain, created in Japan.

The result are extraordinary works of art and design fusing Japanese styles and techniques that are over a thousand years old with a contemporary global iconography that is Hardy's postmodern signature. Ku Ambiance is delighted to present them for public view.

  
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