

Lana Marks never intended to build a mega-million dollar handbag empire; she simply wanted a red alligator skin purse to match her new crimson-colored suit.

# Ooh La Lana!

by Judy DiEdwardo

**H**er search ended unrequited on Palm Beach's elite Worth Avenue amid a disappointing sea of beige, neutral and white.

The 39-year-old daughter of successful entrepreneurs was no stranger to supply and demand; she cut her teeth on basic economics through the family business. And on that hot summer day in 1988, she saw an unanswered demand — a niche for exquisite, brightly-colored exotic leather skin handbags and accessories. Over the next four years, she parlayed that vision into what has become one of the fashion industry's hottest new entrees. Her signature styles and unique tilt on fashionable accessories has gained her fame among celebrities and the media — from the pages of *Harper's Bazaar* to the who's who section

of *People*. And the phone is still ringing.

"I've always been crazy about fashion and though I was born in London, I was raised in South Africa — an area abundant with ostrich and crocodile farms. I wanted to create high-end skin handbags in fabulous colors and no one could tell me why it hadn't been done before," says Marks.

Following two years of exhaustive research in some of Europe's finest factories, she found one manufacturer who would indulge her outrageous request. Seven months later, the first design emerged: a collec-

tion of ostrich shoulder bags in red, green, chestnut and white.

"I showed them to my closest friends to gauge their interest. Not only did they love them, they bought the whole line."

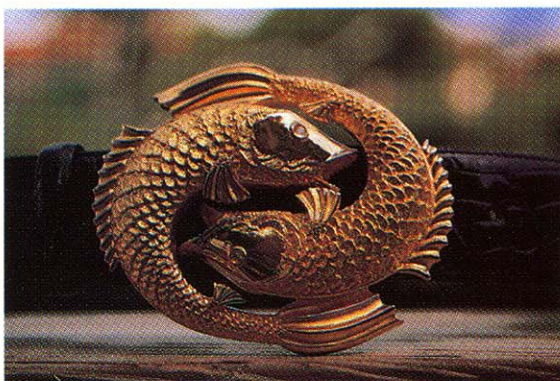
Today, the Lana of London collection is





produced by 50 factories and consists of 150 styles of crocodile, ostrich, alligator and lizard skin handbags in 50 colors. They run the gamut from basic black, brown and beige to the never-been-done-before: turquoise, yellow, orange, fuchsia, pink, purple, chartreuse, lime green, pale blue, porcelain.

National fashion editors were quick to hear of the enterprising Palm Beacher during three of her premiere personal appearances: Neiman-Marcus in Bal Harbour where she sold \$16,000 worth of merchandise in two days; Saks Fifth Avenue in Palm Beach where the numbers reached \$12,000 in one day; and Saks in Washington, D.C. when she totaled an impressive \$70,000 in single-day sales. "The responses I received confirmed my belief that perhaps I wasn't alone in my search for a red alligator handbag," she quips.



**"There are two people I always wanted to design for; Elizabeth Taylor and Princess Diana," says Marks. Liz has already purchased several items. Di has yet to call.**



**I**nspiration for each product has come from a variety of sources, some rather unconventional. The now-popular pink alligator lunchbox, for example, was inspired by an arts store display of brightly-colored plastic children's lunch boxes. This signature design has since been modified in three sizes, including one with pearls.

Marks' line of ornamental handbags was born of her own passion for jewelry and desire to combine them with exquisitely colored skins. "I wanted to do something which hadn't been done before. I started with purple alligator and included a very delicate jeweled purple amethyst shoulder strap and tassel — matching the color with the skin. The response has been fantastic."

Her evening bag collection, which was launched at Bergdorf Goodman last Christmas, is equally dynamic and unique. Finely woven metal-mesh is combined with exotic leathers to create an extraordinarily rich silhouette. Saks Fifth Avenue and Neiman-Marcus are expected to carry the collection as well.

The latest creation from the Lana of London collection has been turning heads from coast to coast: the alligator back-pack design. "This is possibly my most ultra-luxurious design. The biggest demand for them has been coming from Hollywood — movie stars and studio heads.

"Because I started out in this business not knowing anything, I had a fresh approach that allowed me to be completely creative. I wasn't hindered by old ideas of what couldn't be done. As a result, my designs are truly innovative. And people love things that are new and creative and beautiful."

True to her reputation for outpacing convention, Marks has also designed two couture collections of belt buckles — an English sterling-silver design, that will be featured in Bergdorf's Christmas catalog, and a highly-sculpted zodiac collection that is sold exclusively by Saks and will be featured in its Christmas catalog. Marking her debut in the domestic manufacturing market, the collection is fabricated by five different U.S. factories. The zodiac collection features a unique three-dimensional design that allows for striking detail.

"Some of the country's most prestigious casting companies said it was impossible to do this. They were right. So I found a company that devised a new technique of casting."

Handbags range in price from \$450 to \$12,000. The belts, with buckles, start at about



\$500 and sell for as much as \$2,000.

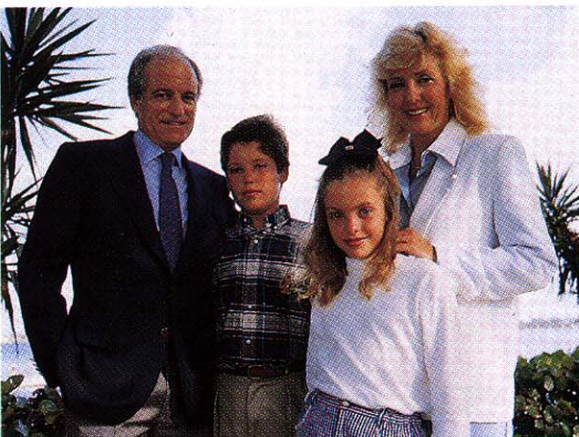
Her customers read like the Academy Awards guest list: Elizabeth Taylor, Barbara Sinatra, Barbara Grant, Wendy Goldberg, Barbara Walters, Georgette Mosbacher, Blaine Trump, Carolyne Roehm and fashion-conscious members of the British Royal family.

"There are two people I always wanted to design for; Elizabeth Taylor and Princess Diana," says Marks. Liz has already purchased several items. Among them are a red alligator lunch box for \$4,800; a black crocodile evening bag for \$2,600; and a purple alligator bag for \$3,350. Di has yet to call.

"My dealings with celebrities have been by



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Team Marks: From left, Neville, Martin, Tiffany and Lana

word of mouth — which makes it all the more exciting. I never know who will call!" For example, after seeing the Lana of London "look" on a close friend, Elizabeth Taylor requested meeting Marks to see more of the exquisite collection.

"When I went to her home, I was overwhelmed by her incredible beauty — and she wasn't wearing makeup. She is one exquisite lady!"

**M**arks attributes part of her success to the support of her family: Martin, 12; Tiffany, nine; and hubby, Neville, a prominent Palm Beach psychiatrist. "When I have an extremely tough business situation, I discuss it with my husband who has been a fantastic help. He knows human nature and he's given me great advice and support. At the very beginning he said, 'The very worst thing that could happen is you have a very expensive handbag!'"

"My kids have been absolutely adorable with the business. In fact, Martin suggested making a handbag for Chelsea Clinton. Tiffany carried out his idea by designing a little black lizard bag with a beautiful delicate gold chain with crystal flowers. We'll be sending it shortly. I hope she likes it!"

Surprisingly, Marks works with a staff of less than seven, though she will add to her administrative team in the near future. With the exception of the belt buckles, all of her designs are made in Europe and then shipped to her West Palm Beach office for distribution.

Of late, the Lana of London camp is abuzz with what could be one of her most prestigious honors. "One of the world's most celebrated fashion houses has requested that I design an accessory line apart from Lana of London. It's similar to Karl Lagerfeld designing for Chanel. We are currently in negotiations," she says, matter-of-factly. "I think the sky's the limit. Everything I've done has demonstrated this to me. After all, five years ago, some people thought I was preposterous. I knew absolutely nothing about this business. But I learned. Despite a less than favorable business climate, my company's revenues have doubled each year. I am now taking *major* orders from the nation's top stores," she says.

"What's my secret? I don't view the world in a cookie-cutter way," she smiles. "All I see are possibilities to be explored and new ideas to be developed. And that's not very much of a secret, now is it?" ♦