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global sensibility

BANISHING BORDERS = BETTER DESIGN

Chesapeake Bay Candle and Blissliving Home founder Mei Xu talks about the intersection of travel, culture, and modern design.

Writer: **Bethany Kohoutek** Photography courtesy of: **Blissliving Home**

At the beginning of each season, Mei Xu and her trusted design director close themselves in a room for hours—often days—surrounded with swatches, advertisements, fashion photos, bolts of textiles, artisan crafts, bits of paper, paint chips, and tiny trinkets—items collected by Xu's team from all over the globe. Though the pieces would appear to have little in common, together they form a fragment of modern culture with the potential to inform Xu's new home decor and fragrance collections.

As founder and CEO of Chesapeake Bay Candle, one of the most successful candle companies in the United States, and Blissliving Home, an up-and-coming bedding textiles and accessories company, Xu remains intimately involved in the design process. Her mission for both companies is to bring global sensibilities to items for the modern home. Sound like a weighty vision? Not for a woman with a background as intriguing and a life as passionate as Xu's.

Xu was born in China and studied there to become a diplomat. While working for the World Bank, she traveled to countries such as Afghanistan and was profoundly affected, both personally and professionally, by the social conditions she witnessed and the beauty she found in the diverse cultures.

In 1994, following a move to the United States to attend school, Xu and her husband, David, began making candles in their basement. Today Chesapeake Bay Candle partners with Target, IKEA, and other major companies, while Blissliving Home, though young, has raked in critical and consumer acclaim. Xu took time to talk with *Decorating* and unveil the inspiration behind her collections.

It took courage to leave your career path in international diplomacy and switch to home design.

We were not scared. We come from a country where you start from nothing, not everything. You don't look at the Joneses





and compare yourself to them. You think, *I have dreams and I can pursue them.*

Our creative idea began small. In the early 1990s, I lived on 72nd and Broadway in New York City. I'd pass shops and boutiques on my walk home. I found there was a distinct disconnect between the home decor and fashion worlds. Fashion had a clean, contemporary style, yet home design was still very classic, ornate, almost gilded. I thought, *If people don't dress this way, why would they want to dress their homes this way?* I knew there was a role for a home company that could design on a more contemporary scale.

How did you develop the overall concept for Blissliving Home?

Sometimes I have a hard time falling asleep when I travel. I began taking my pillows and sheet sets with me when I traveled because I didn't like the white, blank, uncomfortable beds. My family and friends teased me about it, but it got me thinking about the bedding available on the market. People in million-dollar houses would put these bed-in-a-bag sets on their beds. It seemed so backward that people gave so little thought to the place they sleep, without regard for style, personality, season. Even in hotels, the experience is supposed to be about a good night's sleep.

We decided to launch a home textiles company that would utilize design as a main characteristic and draw upon our experiences in travel and trend shopping. We don't just build a bed. We build a whole solution around it.

THIS PAGE: Blissliving Home founder Mei Xu's inspiration begins with a sketch, above, and becomes reality, above right, with each brand-new collection. Here, a bedding set from the Icelandic Dream collection, part of the just-released fall/winter 2009 line, comes to life. **OPPOSITE LEFT:** Blossom embroidery and appliqué pillow. **OPPOSITE RIGHT:** Gemini Flamingo embroidered linen pillow.



good design

Mei Xu is not only a highly successful businesswoman, she is also a crusader for social responsibility and a mother of two. She is actively involved with Vital Voices, an organization that gives skills-based training to women in Third World countries, and she is working to green industrial factory standards. In 2003, she created the Mei Xu Cultural Exchange Foundation to encourage children to learn foreign languages. "It started with the knowledge that if we all speak a language other than our own, we will be less prejudiced and more interested in making peace," she says.





How does designing a solution differ from designing a bed or a candle fragrance?

When we're designing something, we are very dimensional in terms of color, motif, and texture. It's about being connected. We want to give you an escape in your own home. We want to transport you to different places.

How do you stay abreast of so many current global trends?

Our team is international and diverse. We are German, French, Russian, British, Chinese, Colombian, Brazilian, American. We feel so comfortable with this point of view that it is easy to design for a global audience as well. We find that whatever sells well in the United States sells equally well in Asia and Europe.

Why do you think that is?

I think of it as globalization of aesthetics and taste. People instantly access trends, design, and fashion; they develop a voice that transcends country. It democratizes the design process.

How do you balance luxury and affordability?

We've never been the kind of company that charges customers an arm and a leg for the quality of design we offer. Most customers are nicely surprised when they can purchase a silk pillow with 99 percent down fill for \$50, or a \$20 candle formulated with top fragrance houses and made with soy wax produced in the United States. That's what helps us stand out.

We are a passionate lot. We obsess over beautiful design—that will always be a path we follow—but we continually strive for a balance between quality, design, and value.

"We want to give you an escape in your own home. We want to transport you to different places."

—MEI XU, FOUNDER, BLISSLIVING HOME AND CHESAPEAKE BAY CANDLE



THIS PHOTO: Ashley Citron duvet set. OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Mallory duvet set with Mallory pillow; Kalina Citron silk douppioni and silk linen pillow; Jenna cashmere-blend tweed pillow; Shadow printed silk satin pillow; Callum cashmere-blend tweed and appliqué pillow.