

LARRY KORNEGAY

# THE MINDFUL MASTER

Working with concrete and desert inspirations, Larry Kornegay creates sculptural containers

BY THAD ORR | PHOTOGRAPHY BY BILL TIMMERMAN

At the moment, designer and sculptor Larry Kornegay is working on 15 to 20 projects at his personal art studio in Phoenix, Arizona. It's the process of cultivating these side projects—his creative outlet—that influences the products he designs and fabricates at his company, Kornegay Design, which he runs with his wife Paula. "You have to live with the artwork. Inspiration comes from an amalgam of sources, observations, and people," says Kornegay. There are sculptures he works on that end up informing the pieces released through Kornegay Design. "My observations inspire the art, and the art inspires the designs," reveals Kornegay. His mindful process of observing, investigating, and experimenting—which he follows when creating personal and professional work—is what makes his work so remarkable.

Growing up in the small copper-mining town of Miami, Arizona, Kornegay developed a deep appreciation for the landscapes that surrounded him. "The desert greatly influences my designs. I love the landscapes and I frequently take hikes. These excursions, my attachment to the deserts, and observing the scenery around Arizona drive my designs," he explains. Kornegay might see something on a hike (a plant, the shape of a rock formation, a desert animal) and it eventually finds its way into his work.

For the recently introduced *Agave* planter series, the original inspiration came from the agave plant. "I've long appreciated the shapes and variety of the leaf patterns, and always planned on doing a container based on this form. I worked on the concept on and off for around two years," recalls Kornegay. "When a piece comes to a stand-

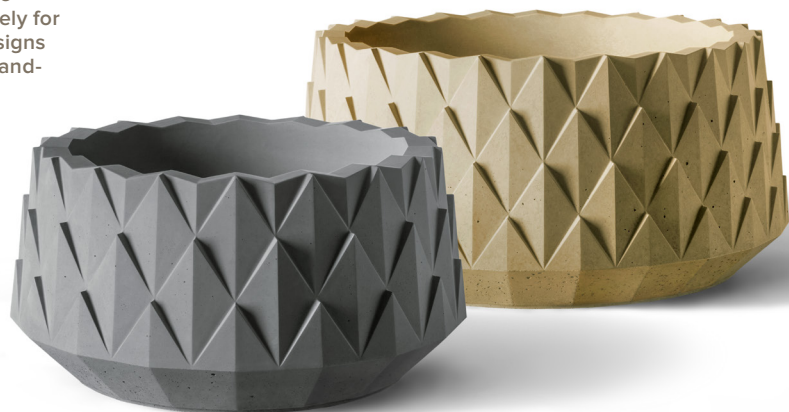
still, the solution might not strike me for months or even years." The turning point came when he was visiting an Art Deco hotel in downtown Yuma. "The hotel had towers with repeating patterns going up the sides. It was beautiful," he remembers. Then it clicked, and he knew how to finish the design for the *Agave* series, which has a repeating leaf pattern climbing the outside. The finished design reflects his long love of the plant and his artistic process.

Kornegay's father, a passionate craftsman and gemstone collector, was one of the most influential people in his life. "I learned more from him by watching than from what he said. I watched him build our house when I was a kid. He did everything—from the block work, to the framing, to the cabinetry. Everything except the electrical he did *himself*," Kornegay recalls. He would also take trips with his father to look for rare gemstones. "We'd drive out to these remote places to find the exact stone he was looking for. These are some of my fondest memories of childhood." It's not hard to see how experiences like these shape what Kornegay does today—building a mold for a container by hand or tracking down the right material combinations to fabricate it.

With a passion for building and design, Kornegay obtained a degree in fine art at Arizona State University, honing his skills in woodworking, painting, and sculpting with concrete. After graduating, he worked as a graphic artist and sign painter as well as designing and building theme park structures around Arizona and California. He later co-founded Studio Productions, Inc., a company which designed and produced architectural signage at

**Below:** The *Agave* series, with its design inspired by an agave plant, comes in three sizes. Shown here are the 18-by-36-inch and 22.5-by-48-inch models in cobblestone and palomino.

**Facing page:** Larry Kornegay standing among the *Larkspur* series that he designed exclusively for the outdoor designs manufacturer Landscape Forms.







**Above:** Carving the *Nutshell* series by hand was no small feat. In a process that took nearly two months of work, Kornegay etched a pattern in the surface of a blank container that would later be used to make a master mold.

commercial locations. In 1997, Kornegay sold his ownership in Studio Productions to focus more on art at his studio in Phoenix (the one he still uses today). Having visited dozens of properties over the years, he recognized a need for more design-focused containers. “I would visit these sites and wonder if there were better looking containers available. I thought the containers could be more expressive in shape and color so they’d fit the style of the architecture and landscape,” he says. Working with containers combined Kornegay’s three loves: sculpture, architecture, and landscapes. He began experimenting with designs on paper, starting with about 10, that he sent to friends in the design world (architects, interior designers, landscape

architects) to get feedback, and began production on two series—the *Ribbed* series and the *Faceted* series.

Creating containers can sound basic at first (mix concrete, pour it in a mold, ship it out), but from the beginning Kornegay has always had a more detailed and holistic approach to his work. He continuously investigates his entire operation, from manufacturing to delivery, asking questions like: How can we best deliver information that educates the customer on what we do? Are the temperatures at which we pour the concrete at just right? Are we sure our shipping crates are well designed and protective? Are the molds crafted to just the right dimensions?

This interest in the details is what sets Kornegay apart.



Kornegay’s cast-concrete art sculptures like *Old Hippie* (shown here) bear resemblance to his concrete containers. As Kornegay notes, “Whether it is design or technical execution, it all comes out of the same bucket. There is a sameness to my designs and sculptures, in terms of what influences them, and in the mindset that is needed to create either.”

“One of the first big orders we got was from a landscape architect,” he says. “He’d ordered several truckloads of our containers. We were all nervous when we shipped them. The day they arrived at the project we got a call from the landscape architect before he’d even opened the crates. He said that if the containers were as nice as the crates then he was going to be a very happy man.” This meticulous consideration for every aspect of his work is one of the reasons Kornegay takes his time releasing a new series of containers—something he does every other year or so.

For each new design, Kornegay sketches the container by hand on plain 8½-by-11-inch paper or vellum. Then he works with a master mold maker to create a mold based on the drawings. “Master mold makers are artists in their own right; they are experts who know what materials will be best to create the shapes I’ve designed,” Kornegay notes. In fact, the master mold maker often introduces him to new materials. “Constantly investigating new materials feeds my creativity,” Kornegay says.

For the *Maple-Pile* seating series Kornegay’s design came from a sculpture in his art studio, but in order to manufacture it consistently he needed an affordable and reliable wood. He ended up using thermally modified red maple. “I originally wanted to use teak but it was prohibitively expensive. So I investigated and found that thermally modified wood, which is heated to a high temperature, is very durable. Insects are no longer interested in it because the extreme heat causes structural changes to the sugar. It’s almost like petrified wood and will last over 25 years,” says Kornegay. This discovery not only made the *Maple-Pile* bench more durable but also more affordable, fulfilling one of his original goals—to create pieces that are well designed, durable, and reasonably priced (containers, \$200 to \$2,000; seating, \$1,500 to \$4,000).

“Designing a new series is a process,” notes Kornegay. With each new series comes a new set of challenges. The *Nutshell* series’ master mold, with its rugged exterior,

took two months to complete. “I carved it pretty much by hand,” he says of the procedure that was unlike anything he’d done for other containers. A landscape architect wanted a large version of this piece, so Kornegay delivered a bigger “nutshell”—creating a new, giant, hand-carved mold in the process. And this is another area where Kornegay Design shines. They go out of their way to work with designers and landscape architects to create pieces for specific projects and clients, changing the sizes, colors, and shapes in addition to creating custom pieces. “We have really good relationships with landscape architects like Christy Ten Eyck, Nord Eriksson, Steve Martino. Sometimes Steve just comes by the studio and hangs out here or photographs work being done,” Kornegay says. The result is a sharing of ideas that improves the designs.

Another thing Kornegay has learned through working with landscape architects and creating larger-scale containers is that they serve as interactive elements in the landscape. “There’s a human-planter interaction. People want to touch them, lean against them, or run their hand along the edge. People gravitate towards large planters,” Kornegay asserts. He also notes that thinking about how someone might interact with the piece when he’s designing it pushes him to design at a different scale—examining what will be at eye level or what they’ll enjoy sitting on.

Kornegay’s next project includes re-releasing his existing series of container designs (he currently has 10) in new materials (all are concrete right now). Lately he’s been experimenting with combinations of concrete, rocks, and minerals as well as making more modular pieces that have interchangeable parts. Additionally, he’s working on incorporating the use of mediums like paper packaging that has been ground up and can be used as a sort of admixture to cast elegant containers. Kornegay feels that his trials with “papercrete” are just the beginning of how he can use recycled materials to fabricate well-designed sculptural containers, benches, and other landscape elements. ©

Kornegay containers (clockwise from left): *Agave* series, *Dune* series, *Mundo* series, *Ribbed* series, *Quartz* series, and *Mex Bold* series. These containers range in size from 30 to 44 inches in diameter and 18 to 45 inches in height. Colors include brick red, mesa buff, adobe, Yosemite brown, willow green, and outback.

