

HOME FURNISHINGS

## Greece's Kostas Togas talks US strategy with market entry for eponymous textile brand

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*Togas stands by craftsmanship*

By **Kathryn Minckler**

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Greek textile pioneer Togas entered the United States market this summer with its first retail store in the tony Connecticut enclave of Greenwich, home to some of the wealthiest Americans drawing their clout from running hedge funds, financial services firms and major corporations.

The 91-year-old company currently employs more than 1,750 people worldwide, operating 120 stores and 57 bespoke couture interior boutiques. Merchandise ranges from bedding, pillows, duvets and comforters and bath products to curtains, bedspreads, tableware, accessories and gifts around 3,000 SKUs, selling and manufacturing an average of 3.2 million items a year. Togas continues to operate out of its Athens, Greece, base.

In this Q&A with the third generation running the firm, Kathryn Minckler, chairman of the **Luxury Marketing Council of Connecticut-Hudson**, digs out Togas' go-to strategy for the U.S. market, the continued focus on luxury home furnishings including textiles and tableware, the import of European design trends, the role of family and the emphasis on quality.

Here is the interview with Kostas Togas, CEO and owner of **Togas**:

What does luxury mean to you?

Luxury to me means quality, craftsmanship and innovation in every product we offer. It means bringing the best to our customers who look for new home solutions and innovative products with a very personalized approach and attention to detail.

In both our readymade and custom-made products, our customers enjoy a royal treatment: from selecting the best quality of home linens to match their personal style to enjoying our complimentary in-house interior design services and our custom-made services.

What is the history of Togas and the importance of family to your brand and company?

I am the third generation of a family-owned business based in Athens, Greece, founded in 1926 and we have grown over the past 90 years to become a leading global brand with world manufacturing capacities and 130 retail stores

around the world.

We owe the success of our brand to our authentic family values passed on from one generation to the next.

We have grown to become a global brand because we are inspired by those enduring values of craftsmanship and quality, investment in continual innovation and building a relationship of trust with our customers.

We practice old-world craftsmanship, but we always combine cutting-edge techniques to look forward in the future and make the best of what technology has to offer.



*Kostas Togas, CEO and owner of Togas (left), and Nellia Togas, head of research and development at the company*

I am fascinated by the different aspects of the business that you seem to be involved with, from raw materials to design development. Would you please describe your global operations in more detail?

It is indeed a fascinating and creative business.

We travel the world to bring the best raw materials with the highest standards.

Our in-house creative studio and designers create original hand-painted fabrics and our collections draw from rich cultural traditions, styles and historical periods.

When a customer chooses our products, I feel we are invited to their home.

To me home is a sacred place and being invited by our customers gives me a sense of honor and respect. It's a mutual loyalty. That's why I said previously that the customer is at the heart of our mission.

We have won this relationship of trust with our customers and this is the best encouragement and base of growth and every plan for expansion into new markets.

How is your company divided between regular and custom luxury?

Our approach to luxury has a full range of services and concepts. It's an integrated approach, but there are differentiations based on the products and services a customer needs.

Our offerings respond to every individual need and style.

Those who need to elevate their personal space can find the finest readymade bed linen collections and enjoy a complimentary service by our in-store interior designers.

Our couture/bespoke department operates as a shop-within-a-shop. This service is offered across all product categories from bed and bath linens to table linens, throws, and curtains.

Clients can choose from hundreds of combinations of fabrics and colors that they can personalize with embroideries, monograms and trims and can order home furnishings made-to-measure.

What are some of the European interior design trends that you hope to bring to the United States?  
In order to answer this, one must first look at the underlining lifestyle proposal of our brand.

Due to the Togas family origins and heritage, the main primary style is the European Art Deco movement.

This style, not unlike our brand, combines modernist styles with fine craftsmanship and rich materials, represents luxury, glamour, exuberance and faith in social and technological progress.

Art Deco and Togas alike are a pastiche of many different styles united by a desire to be modern while maintaining classic foundations, rather than being trendy.

Influenced by the bold geometric forms of Cubism, the updated craftsmanship of the Louis XVI era and all the way to the exotic styles of China, Japan, India, Persia and Egypt, Togas aspires.

The second style that represents the Togas design aesthetics is the warm influence of the Mediterranean.

The classic charm and the seductive beauty of the Mediterranean style creates an atmosphere of light, peace and tranquility. This influence has arisen in Western Europe and Western Asia.

All the elements combine creativity, comfort and practicality.



*Togas fabrics for a summer look*

Furthermore, the Mediterranean style is a virtual bon voyage, a trip abroad without leaving the house. It carries a strong sense of place and entices you with its exotic promise. Although it's bold and striking, this style's innate dignity keeps it from feeling over-the-top or gaudy.

The combination of these two styles result in a look that is unpretentious, elegant, inviting, pure, sophisticated, sleek and stylish.

To my belief, Europeans are open to styles that there simply has no fear in them.

A common observation is that Europeans also have a very specific understanding of beauty and are constantly searching for novelty, as no one wishes to just imitate. This is why the Togas design aesthetics is perceived as eclectic, authentic and true to its self.

Europe is a wealthy and diverse flock of design customs, some of which date back a few centuries.

Contrary to Europe, America is youthful, vast and an originator of different design trends.

We at Togas believe that a perfect match for these diverse interior design customs of the old world and new will create a very interesting experience for our U.S. customers.



*Togas bedding collections*

What are your goals for expansion into the United States and what was your inspiration for launching your company's U.S. operations in Greenwich, Connecticut?

We have recently decided to cross the Atlantic and bring our craftsmanship and expertise to the American client.

We chose Greenwich as our gateway to America because we have been inspired by the history, the beauty of the town, the landscape and the people.

We are really excited to be part of this wonderful community. We come from a country rich in history and tradition, and we believe the values of our brand are well reflected in the eclectic homes of customers looking for new inspiration, a cosmopolitan approach and first-class service.

[The] United States market is our biggest priority and we are planning to open the Togas boutiques in the major cities. This summer we are opening [the] flagship store on the Fifth Avenue, New York.

What is the single most important or surprising thing that you've learned in your short history in the United States?

I am happily surprised to see that the American customers in our target market are well-educated customers. They look for the best and they know how to get it. This may be a big challenge for a new brand, but I am confident we will win their mind and heart.

Americans are always looking forward, they always look for new ideas and sources of inspiration. This is what our brand can offer: New inspiration in the market of premium home linens made with craftsmanship and expertise one can rarely find anymore in a mass-market mind set.



*Togas Web site showing catalogs*

What kinds of companies are you hoping to collaborate and partner with?

With those we share similar values with and those who will expand our brand awareness in the U.S. market.

What are your most important objectives and challenges for 2017?

Business objectives are mainly expressed in numbers.

We do have a business plan to expand both our online and brick-and-mortar operations.

New York City will be our next major destination. This is certainly a big project, a big challenge. But we are cosmopolitan, multicultural, and New Yorkers will appreciate our offerings.

However, I would like to think not just in terms of numbers, but in the context of bringing a whole new lifestyle experience through the widest assortment of luxurious products in the richest diversity of materials and fabrics one can find.

This is our major challenge, but I strongly believe that once our customers visit a Togas store they become loyalists and this is what we are all striving to achieve.



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