

Maharam Remembers Donald Maharam

Donald Maharam (1931–2022) was a textile engineer who pioneered performance-measured textiles for commercial interiors. He served as Maharam’s third-generation CEO, working with the company from 1952 until 2000. *Night and Day* by Donald Maharam is an excerpt from [Maharam Stories](#) (Skira Rizzoli, 2015).

Night and Day
by Donald Maharam

To put time and money into perspective, I graduated from college in 1952 and my starting salary in the family business, lorded over by my father and his three brothers, was \$50.00/week, netting a very impressive \$37.12 after taxes.

With nothing in the form of organized guidance, I was told to “start learning the business and all the departments.” At that time, we sold costume and scenic fabrics for the theater trade, along with all the display paraphernalia required for seasonal window displays in retail stores. In addition to some rather mundane office duties, I was the assigned recipient of incoming calls from our smaller accounts, thus my inheritance of Jack Kukoff.

Jack manufactured skirt and sweater sets in a fourth-floor loft space on 14th Street, with a thirty-person sewing pool. Every few months he would call and order a bolt of our “bunny fur,” a brushed synthetic fabric that simulated white rabbit. He would die-cut the fabric into bunny shapes—one for the skirt and one for the sweater. Not exactly Chanel, but he had his niche.

In 1953, faux leopard became extremely popular in the fashion industry. Hanora fake fur dominated the market, and demand outstripped supply. I received an “emergency call” from Jack, who wanted to know if we had “fake leopard” in our collection of costume fabrics. I explained that we offered a leopard print on white satin and that we could print this leopard pattern on his bunny fur—our best approach to simulate faux leopard. Jack immediately wanted to know cost and lead time for one thousand yards. The thousand yards of bunny fur was immediately available, and our printer on Manhattan’s west side felt he would have no problem printing—all told, the job would take two weeks.

I paid a visit to Jack, who looked at the samples of our satin leopard print and bunny fur rather quickly and said, “Here’s an order for one thousand yards, just get it going.” Based on a cost of ninety-five cents, I had quoted \$1.50 a yard, and he was delighted since, as he pointed out, the “Hanora stuff” cost him \$2.25 a yard. I called Hanora that afternoon and found that their faux leopard was, in fact, \$4.50 a yard.

Three days after I received his order, the calls began to come on a daily basis . . . “So, where are my goods?” On day ten I was able to deliver four fifty-yard bolts in a cab on a ninety-five degree day at the end of July. Unfortunately, when I arrived at 12:15 p.m., the elevator operator was at lunch and his alternate was out sick. It took two trips up four flights of stairs, one bolt over each shoulder, to deliver the four bolts. Jack opened the first roll and by the look on his face I sensed a problem. He disappeared for a moment and came back with his “\$2.25 a yard” Hanora faux leopard. When compared to my printed bunny fur, it was like a Rolls-Royce sitting alongside a Chevrolet. I was hopeful that the price coupled with the urgency of his need would prevail. His only comment was, “Night and day.” I countered with, “A wonderful tune by Cole Porter,” to which he repeated, “Night and day.” I felt obliged to repeat once again, “A wonderful tune by Cole Porter.” To my dismay, his third counter was, simply, “I can’t use it.” It was the ultimate death knell.

I departed, quite upset over the outcome since I had offered to make a strike off but he wouldn’t wait for one, and told him to “never darken our door again” (actually, it was something a bit stronger as to what he could do with his next bunny fur order). I then proceeded to make another two trips down the four flights of stairs.

I decided not to confess anything to my superiors until I could find a buyer and, fortuitously, I found a belt manufacturer from whom I was thrilled to get \$1.05/yard for all one thousand yards, which left me feeling that life was once again worth living.

Approximately two years passed then my phone rang and a familiar voice said, “Don? Jack. Do you have fake mink?” My immediate retort was, “Fake mink? F_ _ _ you!” and I hung up the phone.

In the rose-colored retrospect of sixty years, I owe a debt of gratitude to Jack Kukoff and the frightening

prospect of a lifetime of leopard-printed bunny fur for inspiring the beginnings of the Maharam you know today.

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