TexasMonthly

August 30, 2023
Tom Foster

How a Quiet San Antonio Company Came to Illuminate the World's Fanciest Stores and Museums

Apple, Cartier, Tiffany, and other tastemakers in art and fashion bask in the glow created by Lucifer Lighting.

One of Lucifer Lighting's projects, the Witte Museum in San Antonio. Al Rendon.

Alexandra Mathews remembers the time when she was a fourth grader in San Antonio, back in 1991, and her class created a mock magazine. Each student had to interview someone. Her choice: Estée Lauder, the self-made cosmetics magnate, who happened to be a friend of Alexandra's family. Lauder was in her eighties at the time and had risen to the status of international icon. *Time* magazine would go on to name her the only woman on its list of the twenty most influential business geniuses of the twentieth century. Alexandra thought nothing of her choice back then—Lauder was just one of the many glamorous people who glided in and out of her family's orbit—but today, in her early forties, she can still picture her teacher's disbelief.

Alexandra's father, Gilbert Mathews, is a San Antonio entrepreneur whose family once owned the legendary local department store Frost Brothers, which joined **Neiman Marcus** and Sakowitz in bringing the world's finest fashions to Texas. Today, Gilbert is the CEO of **Lucifer Lighting**, a maker of high-end fixtures that started in 1979 and has grown into one of the most influential Texas companies that most Texans have never heard of. (Alexandra's mother, Suzanne, is a noted contemporary art collector and former gallerist, and a Lucifer executive.)

It's hard to overstate the Mathews family's stature in the design world. In an industry where most of the luxury leaders hail from Germany or Italy, Lucifer's products have illuminated some of the world's most fashionable and fastidious institutions—stores like Apple, Cartier, Gucci, and Tiffany, among many more; museums from Manhattan to San Francisco (and points between, including San Antonio's McNay, Ruby City, and Witte); and some of the world's finest restaurants, including Eleven Madison Park, in New York City, and the French Laundry, in Napa Valley. Even British royals have sashayed about in Lucifer's glow, at Windsor Castle. (The company's name, it should be noted, is a reference to the Latin for "bearer of light," not the fallen angel and master of Hell.)

The Mathews family's old department store was equally influential. Though it eventually grew into a chain with numerous mall stores, the original Frost Brothers location, in a four-story building on Houston Street in downtown San Antonio, was always the heart of the enterprise. There was a fur shop, a milliner, and a "precious jewels salon." At Christmastime, a mannequin appeared to play a baby grand piano over the filigreed main entrance, and lavish displays showed off décor from around the world. Christian Dior, according to legend, designed collections for the store.

Today, Lucifer's headquarters occupies a former Pace Picante plant right off Interstate 35 on the largely industrial east side of San Antonio, where nobody barreling past on the highway would ever guess at the taste-making that's happening inside. The story of how Frost Brothers rose and fell, and how Lucifer rose in its wake, is a Texas legend that has maintained a relatively low local profile even as the Mathews family has earned a dedicated following globally—one that's primed to grow as the company opens a showroom in Manhattan this October, in celebrity-filled Tribeca. But on recent sunny morning, Gilbert, Suzanne, Alexandra, and her younger sister Roselyn sat around a table loaded with art books in Gilbert's office to discuss why keeping things understated suits their tastes just fine.

The tale of Lucifer goes back to 1929, when Sylvan Lang, Gilbert's maternal grandfather and a prominent San Antonio attorney at the time, took a minority ownership stake in a department store called Blum's that occupied a four-story building downtown that the *San Antonio Light* described as "one of the handsomest and most distinctive in the entire South." Blum's later merged with a women's specialty store down the street named Frost Brothers, and the combined enterprise opened to the public in 1932 with an all-day orchestra concert and 150 salespeople. By 1945, after the founding Frost brothers had both died, Sylvan and his brother Gilbert bought out the Frost family entirely.

Gilbert Lang turned out to be a masterful merchant—a showman with great taste—and Sylvan a savvy dealmaker who blended his legal and business interests. Together they'd invested in other businesses—movie theaters, oil and gas operations—but the store became the family's crown jewel. Great fortunes had risen in Texas over the preceding years, and the brothers began to establish flourishing relationships in New York City with fashion barons eager to tap the new market.

Wealthy shoppers would make pilgrimages to the Frost Brothers store from the sprawling ranches of South Texas or up from Mexico. Lyndon Johnson shopped there for luggage when he started "flying private" (his words for traveling on Air Force One), and a stylist from the Frost salon would head **to Johnson City to do Lady Bird's hair**. Frost Brothers was the **first store where Estée Lauder made a personal appearance** to meet customers and do makeovers herself, something that became a signature move in her career from then on.

By the time Sylvan's son-in-law, Irving Mathews, took over as CEO in 1971, the company had been sold to Manhattan Industries, a New York City fashion conglomerate whose deeper pockets funded an aggressive expansion around Texas that involved buying up stores in other cities and bringing them under the Frost umbrella. They included **Battelstein's in Houston** and **Lichtenstein's in Corpus Christi**. By 1986, there were twelve Frost Brothers locations—reaching **from the banks of the Rio Grande in Laredo to Dallas's NorthPark mall**. The company also owned a stand-alone Gucci store in Boston's Copley Square. (Aldo Gucci was a close friend of Irving's, Suzanne says. "He was nothing like the movie. He was very elegant. He wrote letters to [Irving] from jail.")

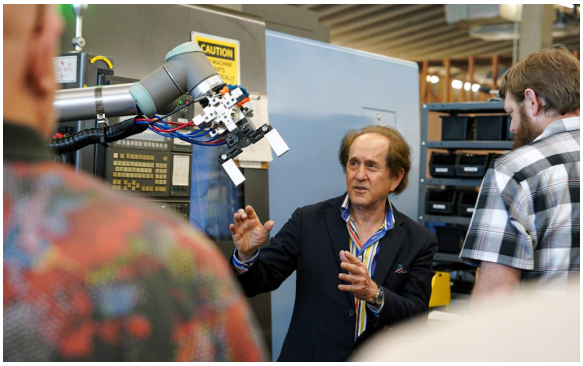
The year 1986 was also when Manhattan Industries sold Frost to the Dallas billionaire and **notorious tax cheat** Sam Wyly in a classic 1980s leveraged buyout that saddled the company with debt and plunged it into ruin as he started selling it off for parts, liquidating the underlying real estate and other valuable assets. By 1988, the chain was in bankruptcy.

Before it all crumbled, though, Irving had introduced his son, Gilbert Mathews, to the global fashion industry. There were summer jobs at the store, and trips to runway shows in Florence and New York City. Young Gilbert eventually followed in his grandfather Sylvan's footsteps and pursued law, but he remained intrigued by international business. After working at Vinson & Elkins in Houston, he opened his own law firm in San Antonio, and that's when his dad came to him with an idea for a side gig: to import a kind of

strip lighting made in Switzerland that could be used to highlight the jewels and specialty products kept in glass cases at the store. Gilbert took to the new business, and soon he had secured the right to market the lights everywhere in the world outside of Switzerland. He dropped his legal career. Lucifer was born.

Much as his forebears had done with fashion designers, Gilbert began developing relationships with lighting designers and architects. And the more he learned about the precision and subtlety of creating beautiful spaces, the more he took his company in the direction of making its own fixtures—not just assembling off-the-shelf components from various suppliers but eventually machining its own parts to meet the most meticulous standards he could set.

“This is like a Swiss watch,” he says today, holding up the housing for a recessed ceiling light, where nobody but the person installing it will see anything other than its glow. “But look how beautiful it is. That’s what gets me so excited about what we do.”



Gilbert Mathews at the Lucifer Lighting factor in San Antonio.
Hannah Gibson Gresham/Lucifer Lighting

Lucifer makes what’s known as architectural lighting, not decorative lighting—meaning its fixtures are intended to become part of the room, not embellishments to it. San Antonio–based architect Ted Flato has used Lucifer in many buildings and homes designed by his firm, Lake Flato. “If I don’t remember their lights but just the quality of the space,” he says, “that’s a great compliment.”

Alexandra, who works as the company’s executive vice president and lives most of the time in Los Angeles, oversees customer service, engineering, and sales. In a windowless room just off a hallway overlooking the assembly floor in the Lucifer factory, she describes, in exacting detail, how each component of the company’s lighting products illustrates Flato’s point. The lights turn on and off with a soft fade, so there’s no startling change. A hanging cylinder lamp is, on first glance, a seamless tube of aluminum, but then, as if by magic, folds open in the middle thanks to a hidden internal hinge that allows it to be aimed around the room. A row of “wall washers,” ceiling lights that spread uniform light across a surface, manage to do so without creating the row of shadow parabolas you might see from lesser alternatives.

Flato, who lives near the Mathews family in Alamo Heights, has been a frequent guest at the intimate dinner parties Gilbert and Suzanne have become known for in the design world. The wine flows, and “these wonderful conversations go on into the night about design and art and making things,” he says. “You don’t think of San Antonio for that, but they have become major players in that world.” Suzan Tillotson, a New York City–based lighting designer who used Lucifer lights in the Norman Foster–designed Comcast Technology Center, a sixty-story skyscraper in Philadelphia, among other projects, has also been a regular at those events. She notes that, like a well-lit room, the dinner-party patter doesn’t happen by accident. “Every time, they seat me next to the perfect person,” she says. “Suzanne makes it seem effortless, but I know it’s not.”

Until about ten years ago, a refined aesthetic, a deep understanding of retailing, and an extraordinary social reputation were enough to make Lucifer an industry leader. But in the era of incandescent bulbs,

there was only so much a lighting manufacturer could do to control the performance of its products. Then came LEDs. The new energy-saving technology gets criticized by some for emitting light that can feel soulless or flat, but for Lucifer it represented an opportunity. Whereas before it could excel on the look of a fixture, now it could also exercise far more control over its performance. Lucifer's team figured out how to design optics systems, to shape and color the light with greater precision and consistency than ever, to create new space-saving designs that could give architects more freedom behind the walls of their structures. Headcount at the company doubled, to roughly 150 today.

When Apple's glass-walled Chicago flagship store opened in 2017, Lucifer lights in the ceiling were able to beam down thirty feet to evenly highlight the tables of products. It was but one of the mega projects that have defined much of the company's work in the past decade, including campuses for eighteen of the top twenty most valuable Nasdaq firms. Some forty years after Irving Mathews urged his son to pursue a quirky side project, it had eclipsed the storied store that sparked it. "My father would never believe what this company has become," Gilbert says.

Lately, Gilbert has been poring through old newspaper clippings and troves of photos to assemble a chronicle of his family's history, which to date exists mostly in the memories of longtime San Antonio families. The Mathewses have surprisingly few mementos from the department store days, Gilbert says, with the exception of a collection of prints from the company's **iconic advertisements**.

Alexandra, Gilbert, Suzanne, and Roselyn Mathews.
@caseykelbaugh

"And the handbags," Alexandra cuts in. "My grandma had a *lot* of handbags." Each of the Mathews women has a collection of them. But perhaps the most alluring artifact from Frost Brothers is the name itself, which the family bought back during the bankruptcy and hasn't used since. Alexandra and Roselyn, who works in marketing for Lucifer and splits her time between New York City and San Antonio, sometimes muse about what they could do with the retailer's name, but so far it's just a notion they like to dream and talk about.

What they *don't* like to discuss is who will take over the family business when Gilbert and Suzanne, who are both in their seventies, one day have to step back. "We don't talk about that," says Alexandra. "Nobody knows the future," says Suzanne. It's a conspicuously unsettled question for a family in which multiple generations have handed down their legacy to their offspring. Alexandra and Roselyn, who are eleven years apart in age, have both thrived at Lucifer but also kept their distance, choosing to live on the coasts. They have a brother, Ben, the middle child, who used to be an executive for Lucifer and now is estranged from the rest of the family. He owns a lighting design consultancy in San Antonio, the Mathews Lighting Group, and it's easy to imagine him one day finding his way back into the fold, but that's a subject nobody will touch. Besides, Suzanne insists she and Gilbert will "never" retire.

On the walls of the executive suite at Lucifer headquarters hangs a museum-worthy collection of contemporary art from Suzanne: a Campbell's Soup apron from Andy Warhol here; a splash of color from the abstract expressionist William Pettet there. But what Gilbert wants to talk about is a set of doors off the lobby area. They're painted in a white that shines like polished chrome. "It's automotive paint," he

says. “These doors were all tomato red, and we repurposed them from Pace,” the former salsa-bottling tenant. “We had someone work on the doors for more than a year.”

The result is both subtle and immediately arresting. But why go to the trouble? How was it worth a year of someone’s time? Gilbert lets a quizzical expression flash across his face, as if someone has just committed a fashion faux pas. “Because we wanted this clean, minimalist look,” he says. “Because it was emblematic of our quest for just the best in design.” He moves on. “I don’t know what else to say.”