

The Art of *LIVING*

AN AMBASSADOR'S WIFE HAS A PASSION FOR COLLECTING ART AND FRIENDS—AND VALUING BOTH DEARLY.

By LEKHA SHANKAR Photographs by VARAVUDH LATTANAND



ART HAVEN
From left: Astrid Amaya Garcia in her favorite corner; the cozy living room decoated with art pieces.

IT'S NOT EVERY DAY THAT YOU meet an ambassador's wife who is also an independent businesswoman, art collector, activist, homemaker, and active parent. But Astrid Amaya Garcia, wife of the Colombian Ambassador in Thailand, has been in Bangkok for a little more than six months and she's firmly ensconced in the city's social whirlpool, and more interestingly, its art labyrinth.

Art is the *raison d'être* for this distinguished woman's life and work. As a child growing up in New York City, Astrid's parents used to take her and her siblings to different museums every weekend. When she got married to her childhood sweetheart at the age of 19, the most striking feature of their modest flat was the bright posters bought from various museums.

Since then, this innovative woman has tried her hand at various vocations, meeting success in every venture. "That's because I have business in my blood," laughs Astrid with striking candor. Our meeting takes place at her spectacular art-studded penthouse apartment in Sathorn. She plays the perfect hostess, serving fresh blueberry juice, cheeses, breads, and fruits. Her home is awash with fresh flowers in our honor—handpicked by Astrid herself from Pak Khlong Talat (Bangkok Flower Market) just before our arrival.

Astrid proudly shows us around her three-storied apartment, and explains the history of her marvelous art collections from countries as diverse as Israel, Cuba, China, and, of course, Colombia. She also lovingly points out some recent acquisitions from Thailand, a country that has totally ensnared her.

Her tall and genial husband, His Excellency the Colombian Ambassador Andelfo Garcia, joins us and confesses that he was very surprised that Astrid decided to join him in Bangkok, when his country decided to reopen their embassy after a long break of 15 years. He states, "When I was posted in London and Madrid, she visited me, but never stayed full time."

So, why Bangkok? "It's amazing! The people make all the difference, and I've made so many friends," says Astrid. "There is so much to do in the art field, a whole new world to explore, and the chance to show the rest of the world what Thailand has to offer. This is the land of opportunities for me."

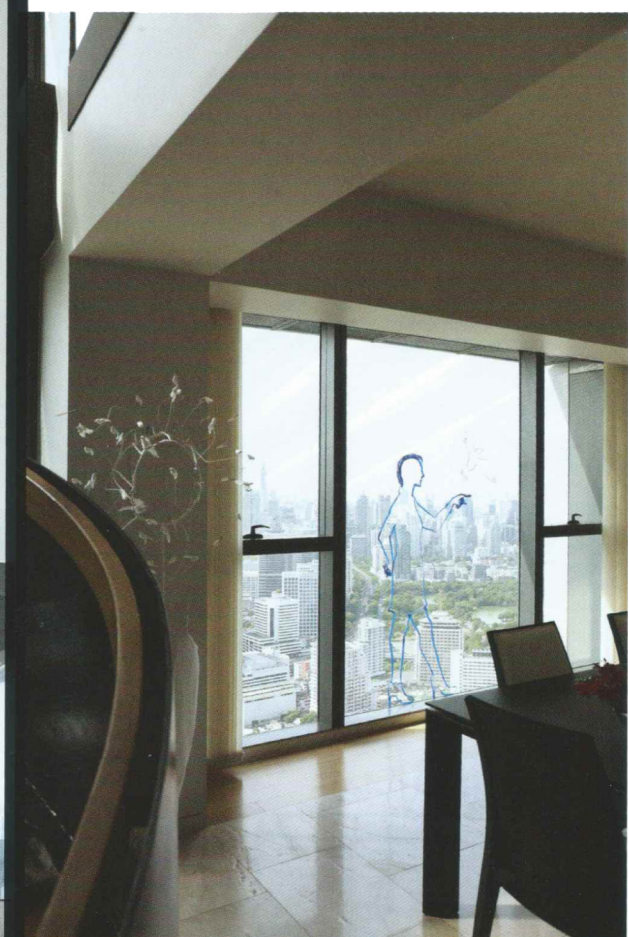
Another aim is to develop an art consciousness among the corporate and industrial circles in Bangkok, a role she has played before in the Big Apple. In the Thai capital, Astrid started her mission with a bang, shooting the pilot edition of a docu-series entitled *The Amaya Art Ventures* for the Discovery Channel. Overseen by AOT Art, the New York-based art consultancy that Astrid and her youngest son Alejandro run, the docu-series centers around the mother-and-son duo traveling around the world and discovering new artists. Astrid plans to cover other countries in this TV series, including India, Morocco, and Russia.

For over a decade, AOT Art has been offering art-related advice to private collectors and large corporations in the U.S., as well as acquiring pieces for their respective art collections. In this role, Astrid has been able to spot new talent in nearly every country she has visited, from her beloved Colombia to Cuba, Israel, China, Turkey, Sri Lanka, and Lebanon. This, in fact, has been the unique highlight of Astrid's success in the art field.

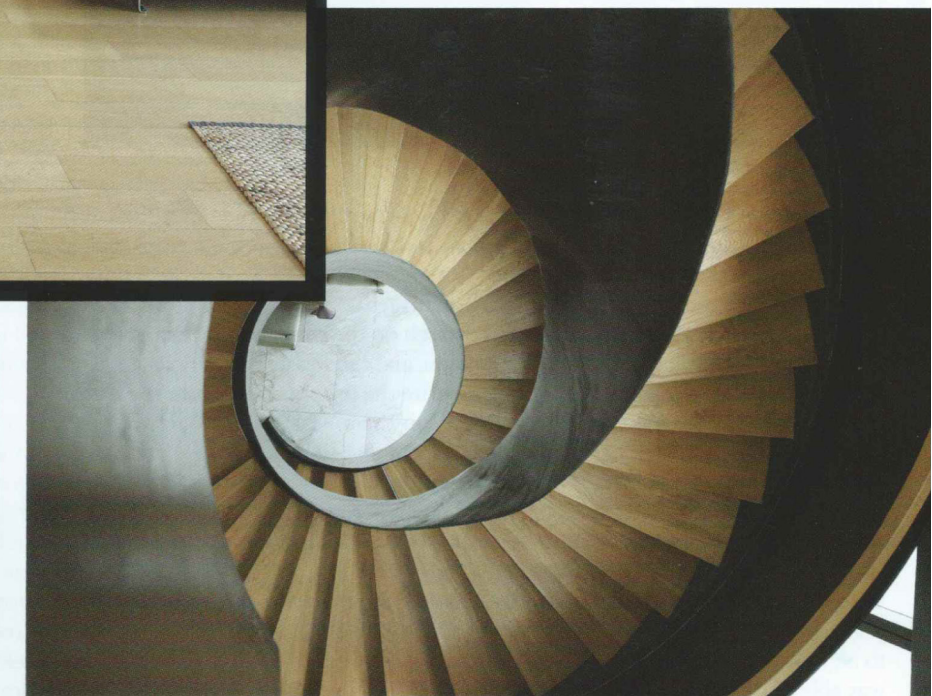
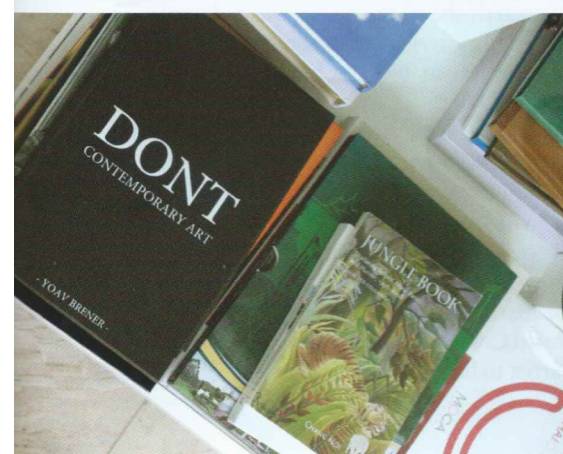
"Some of the artists I chose had never sold any works—most of them had never stepped out of their country!" she exclaims. But once she discovered them, she confesses that "their lives changed from black to white" when their works were sold in New York, the epicenter of the art world.

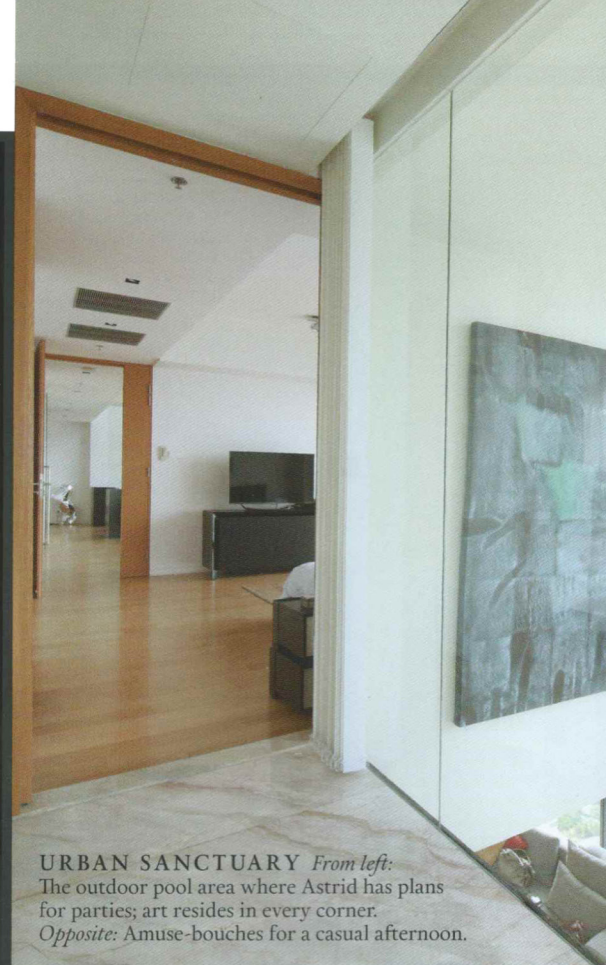
In addition, AOT Art has launched art shows for more than 70 Fortune 500 corporations, from Goldman Sachs to IBM and American Express, and 400,000 professionals, helping them "to

"A LOT OF PEOPLE LOVE ART, BUT ARE AFRAID TO TALK ABOUT IT, AS THEY FEEL THAT THEY DON'T UNDERSTAND IT."



HIGH LIVING Clockwise from top left: Looking out from Astrid's office where she works everyday; an art work by a tape artist she met in Bangkok; the penthouse's spiral staircase; part of her coffee table book collection. *Opposite:* A little dining corner on the first floor.





URBAN SANCTUARY From left: The outdoor pool area where Astrid has plans for parties; art resides in every corner. Opposite: Amuse-bouches for a casual afternoon.

use art as a vehicle to strengthen brand equity, client relations, and community engagement,” declares Astrid with pride.

She explains that her clientele’s tastes, requirements, and budgets are very diverse, but her company manages to please them all. “Once we get a request, we do research on the company to understand their background, their mission, and their taste. We also inspect the exhibition space. Then, we write the proposal and start selecting the art pieces that would best suit them,” she says.

Astrid informs us that heritage themes are popular with American corporations. “That’s why we’ve done art shows on the Hispanic heritage, Jewish heritage, and Asian heritage,” she states. For the Asian heritage show, Astrid traveled to countries such as China, Singapore, Vietnam, and Cambodia to buy art. She is immensely proud of the Chinese artist she discovered five years ago: Jiang Guo Xiang. She brought the 70-year-old painter to New York in his first trip outside of Guangzhou. There, he was able to be at the opening of his very own exhibition, and

witnessed his works sold outside of China for the first time. Today, his art pieces are part of several important corporate and private collections. The artist did not speak a word of English, but his wife did, “and we have become sisters”.

Another artist Astrid discovered include Katarina in remote Serbia. In fact, Astrid plans to bring her to Bangkok for a local exhibition. “Our residence has enough space for artists to paint—I want to bring many to Bangkok!” she enthuses.

And how does she go about spotting and selecting great art? “One can feel it in one’s gut,” says Astrid with a smile.

The first country where she experienced this intuitive feeling was in Cuba when visiting her husband many years back. Astrid found some unique artwork there, and brought them home. They created a sensation, as Cuban art was then rare in the U.S. “Suddenly everyone in my (upscale) neighborhood of Scarsdale wanted Cuban art!” she states. So, she started a cultural exchange program, where she carried brushes, oils, and canvases to the Cuban artists, and in return, brought their completed artwork to New York City.

Five years ago, on a trip to Israel, Astrid discovered Yoav Brenner in Tel Aviv. She brought the artist to Bangkok, where he found a strong inspiration to paint. The striking yellow canvas that greets you in her living room is by this Israeli artist; it made its global debut on the cover of the top financial publication, *Private Equity International*.

At the dining room area of her magnificent living room is a huge canvas by celebrated Colombian artist Mario Ayerbe, the first Latin American artist to have his work exhibited at the iconic

Bloomingdale’s department store in New York. Another spectacular work is an emerald-green canvas by Colombian artist Leonardo Salazar, likely to be bought by a prominent jeweler in Bangkok soon. “A lot of people love art, but are afraid to talk about it, as they feel they don’t understand it,” says Astrid. That’s why she is more than happy to take guests on a tour of her home, and discusses art over gourmet wine, food, and music (the latter is her husband’s forte).

DURING THESE SOCIAL evenings, Astrid always invites Thai artists to perform, from live painting to body art, and even tape art (on her glass window). Many of them have come from the V-64 Art Studio, one of the first art venues she visited—and loved—because of its wide range of new talents. The Colombian Embassy also hosted an event there, helping the gallery to sell their works. Unfortunately, the space recently closed.

Nevertheless, Astrid proudly displays some of the studio’s work in her home, and she has managed to sell some of them to her New York collectors. “I showed the Thai artworks on Skype, and the deal was done!” she says with excitement. Astrid strongly feels that Thai art needs to be gauged with international art—a belief that led her to work with the new Central Embassy luxury mall to unveil a series of international art exhibitions on the mall’s premises.

“Art is a lifestyle. There can’t be luxury without art,” she says with a twinkle in her eye. “We have done successful art projects with none other than Saks Fifth Avenue!”

Astrid plans to put on her first art exhibition at Central Embassy in September, focusing on top Thai artists from one of

“ART IS A LIFESTYLE. THERE CAN’T BE LUXURY WITHOUT ART.”



her favorite art spaces in Bangkok, the Museum of Contemporary Art. “Thailand is lucky to have a Boonchai,” she says of the museum’s patron and creator (also founder of DTAC) Boonchai Bencharongkul, who took her on a four-hour tour of his collections.

Astrid admits that being an ambassador’s wife gives her the advantage of meeting interesting and important people in the higher echelons of society. She uses this opportunity to hold her unique Thai Women Leaders dinner every month, where she invites dynamic women from different spheres—corporate, business, academic, and cultural—in order to understand the many levels of Thai society. “The best way to understand a country is through the women; we talk and share a lot!” Astrid laughs.

Reflecting on her own life, Astrid says with characteristic honesty, “In business, they say that you always need a business plan. But I firmly believe that no business plan can map your life. The main thing is to be creative, and just do it.” She adds, “For me, nothing was planned. Everything started with my passion, and they ended up as successful businesses.”

And so, the New York girl has ventured down many paths. She went to her homeland of Colombia and used her English-language skills to start a holistic bilingual pre-school, which was hugely applauded. She moved to partnering with a friend to market shiitake mushrooms to natural medicine companies and food stores—again, to great success. Then a friend who had to leave the country suddenly asked her to run his flower business that employed a thousand employees. Astrid made use of the rich floral culture of Colombia and starting exporting to Russia, which had just opened up economically, and the business boomed.

When Astrid’s oldest son Ricardo was in college, she partnered him to start an IT company in New York. Before they knew it, their company was named the Best IT Innovation Company and received coverage from *The New York Times*. Soon after, they bagged an exclusive contract from the Melanie Gates Foundation to supply computer programs to 22 public libraries in New York. This was followed by another huge contract to train the IT staff of the well-known Best Buy chain stores in the city. “We had ten Beetle cars,” laughs Astrid, “and they were all painted by artists!” Her second son Andres, whom she supported to successfully work as a deejay when he was young, completed an MBA degree from the prestigious Wharton School, and moved to work with a top financial investment company.

Astrid’s youngest son Alejandro studied finance, and worked in this field. But when the financial crisis hit New York, he moved to Colombia. After being away for 14 years, Alejandro found himself in love with his native culture and wanted to find his roots. That led him to team up with his mother to start AOT Art in New York. The rest is history.

Astrid admits that she is lucky to have a supportive family, “including (her) amazing daughters-in-law!” She also has grandchildren, though it’s difficult to believe this slim, attractive lady is a grandmother. Astrid is careful about what she eats and drinks, works out every day, and takes care of herself. The New Yorker loves all things Colombian, and while her clothes are American-styled, her exotic jewelry is pre-Colombian-inspired, based on a famous antique collection in Bogota’s Gold Museum.

When I mention to Astrid that her style and look remind me of American actress-turned-president’s wife Nancy Reagan, Astrid laughs heartily and says that she had been told this before. Beyond this timeless façade, what is truly at the heart of this diminutive, dynamic woman? “I guess it’s my passion for art and friends. I love collecting both, and value them dearly!” •