

AT HOME IN BEIRUT

Furniture designers in Lebanon's capital are creating a new aesthetic by mixing traditional craftsmanship with cutting-edge form.

By Shirine Saad

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Nicolas Bellavance-Lecompte, Carwan



The permanent gallery space of **Carwan**

THE MARQUETRY TABLE. The arabesque adornments. The faceted copper dish. The intricately coloured mosaic tiles. These are the classic design elements of Arabic homes. They were on the verge of oblivion when a generation of Lebanese designers rediscovered and began reinventing them with fresh ideas inspired by international design trends. Besides supporting local craftsmen, these designers are infusing new vitality into the iconic materials, shapes and colours of Middle Eastern life.

In the last decade, visionaries such as Nada Debs and

Karen Chekerdjian have built a thriving design scene without government or institutional sponsorship, knitting a tight circle of artists who support each other's work, finding inventive ways to overcome the countless challenges of daily life in Beirut and drawing inspiration from the city's chaotic charm. They have paved the way for a new generation of talent to grow, developing their practices here and abroad. A big step in establishing the city as a design hub, Beirut Design Week began showcasing the work of numerous local talents two years ago, offering

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panels, performances and tours of rapidly proliferating design spaces—mainly concentrated around the trendy Mar Mikhael and Saifi Village, flanked by upscale condos, concept stores, and lively bars and restaurants.

Not only have these designers shaped a radiant design capital; they also have launched a revolution in the region's design scene, ultimately helping to answer the question “what does it mean to be Arab today?” by being colourful, ingenious, whimsical and inspired. Here are some of the faces behind the movement.

CARWAN

Founded in 2010, Carwan was the first pop-up gallery in the Middle East, bridging international and regional talent to develop unique collections and exhibiting limited-edition pieces at fairs and galleries around the world. Last fall, Carwan opened a permanent gallery space in Beirut, working more closely with collectors and curators and crafting an enticing programme for the year to come.

Owners Nicolas Bellavance-Lecompte and Pascale Wakim, who both studied architecture, met when Bellavance-Lecompte visited Beirut on a whim and fell in love with the city. “I went to Beirut to discover the Near East,” says Bellavance-Lecompte, who now divides his time between Milan and Beirut. “It was a revelation for me: a mix of cities I’ve lived in, such as Berlin, Montreal and Milan, with an amazing blend of cultures, gorgeous weather, delicious food and charming people. The eclectic makeup of the city always inspires me.” The duo founded the pop-up gallery and began to travel to art fairs, museums and galleries. They also developed a network of Turkish and Lebanese artisans, pairing them with designers to reinvent ancient traditions.

This year Carwan invited the Italian creative collective Fabbrica (of Benetton) and Beirut designers to create a series of objects with Middle Eastern artisans as part of its Contemporary Perspectives in Middle-Eastern Crafts project. Each piece is specifically commissioned to set up a cultural exchange and spark new ideas. For the Landscapes collection launched with India Mahdavi, for example, the Paris-based designer used colourful Turkish tiles to create complex abstract patterns on handcrafted tables and vases—a blunt reinterpretation of a 16th-century Ottoman tradition.

BOKJA

When Huda Baroudi, an avid collector of ethnic and precious textiles, and Maria Hibri, an antiques dealer, started confecting cushions with antique Uzbek fabrics and later customized vintage furniture with patchworks of colourful oriental textiles, their creations were an instant hit. Now there’s a Bokja chair in every Christian Louboutin store; Julia Roberts, Sandra Bullock and Hillary Clinton own several Bokja wares; and magazine editors rave about the brand.



Each brightly hued textile is unique, handmade by Lebanese women using traditional techniques. Suzanis, velvets, Damascene brocades or silks are threaded together to cover armchairs, sofas, benches and cushions, which come with whimsical names such as Eames à la Bokja, Flower Power and Waiting for Godot. These pieces are displayed at Bokja’s boho Saifi Village boutique, an elegant enclave in Beirut’s old centre decorated in the brand’s signature palette.

“We like to use the term ‘Bokjadizing’ as a way to describe how we work,” explains Baroudi. “Our designs are never innocent, as they are often references or reinterpretations of something from our past. Within these objects there is a tangible charm that takes us back to the way things used to be, when products carried legacies that transcended time. Bokjadizing offers a new perspective to something old, while adding a twist, perhaps a sense of humour, and often a new life.”

The designers say their mission is to provoke dialogues between the Middle East and the West, and they find constant inspiration in their ancient culture. “Beirut is a very schizophrenic mix of East and West,” says Baroudi, “a very unpredictable place that has seen the passage of many civilizations and many wars and ups and downs. This is directly reflected in our work, in our mixing and matching that is intuitive and not aesthetically rational.”

NADA DEBS

Nada Debs has wandered throughout the world: Though her roots are Lebanese, she grew up in Japan, attended the Rhode Island School of Design, then moved to London. This nomadic upbringing inspired her search for a style that’s

Above: Taking pride in the past, the **Bokja Rise 'n Shine** pouffe features traditional designs in a contemporary form.

rooted in Arabic traditions yet globally meaningful. “I wanted to find a universal language that everyone could understand,” she muses. “I chose to work with geometric patterns and human craft because they go straight to the heart.”

When Debs moved back to Lebanon in 2000, she concluded that the design scene needed more creativity. She combined elements of the countries she has lived in—the practicality of the Japanese Zen aesthetic, the American ethic of “form follows function” and the British love of craftsmanship—to create her line East & East. “When I first visited local craftsmen, I fell in love with their work and their pride,” she says.

Combining craft and minimalism, she created a new Middle Eastern design aesthetic, inspiring several emerging designers to follow her lead. Her now world-famous creations mix ornamental Arabic patterns and colours with Zen or modernist forms: Precious wood tables are subtly inlaid with mother-of-pearl cherry blossom designs; arabesque patterns are laser-cut into the wood of armchairs; brightly hued stools are inspired by the shape of an oriental drum. For those who prefer sleeker designs, Debs’ Contemporary collection is pure minimalism—the Pebble, a cluster of steel oval coffee tables in different sizes and tones, has become a cult classic. “I want the rest of the world to see the beauty of our culture,” explains the designer. “That is my mission.”

KAREN CHEKERDJIAN

Designer Karen Chekerdjian handcrafts contemporary furniture and accessories that look back at Lebanese tradition: Derbakeh, a brass stool shaped like a Lebanese percussion instrument; Living Space III, a multipurpose lounge/side desk/magazine rack made of wood and rattan straw; One to Two, mouth-blown glasses in the traditional turquoise hue.

“My approach is conceptual, experimental and adapted to the local landscape,” says the designer, who studied at Milan’s prestigious Domus Academy under the mentorship of luminary Massimo Morozzi. When she was in Milan, Mobil, a suspended hanger system Chekerdjian created, was produced by EDRA.

Back in Beirut in 2001, the designer became active in the city’s creative and conceptual scene and began working with local craftsmen and materials. “What interests me is the history of an object,” she says. Mixing minimalist, cerebral designs with local patterns and materials, she creates avant-garde items that have become



Above: Karen Chekerdjian’s boutique in the edgy Port neighbourhood
Left: Nada Debs’ pieces feature geometric patterns infused with a Zen aesthetic.



classics in many homes and interiors throughout the country.

At her boutique in the edgy Port neighbourhood, Chekerdjian also sells handpicked books, spirits and accessories from other designers she loves. She finds them throughout her extensive travels to fairs and cities, but now she is firmly established in Beirut, where she has two children. She draws on the city’s madness and multiculturalism: “Its chaos is inspiring—the dirty, the beautiful, the ugly, the strong emotions that are always floating around you.”

Beirut-born, Brooklyn-based **Shirine Saad** is the author of *Boho Beirut: A Guide to the Middle East’s Most Sophisticated City*.



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