



Perfect blend

CID MEETS NADA DEBS, A DESIGNER WHO FUSES JAPANESE, MIDDLE EASTERN AND MODERN TRADITIONS IN CONTEMPORARY FURNITURE

Had Rudyard Kipling met Nada Debs, he may not have penned his famous 1889 line “East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet.”

Debs grew up in Japan, studied in the United States, started her company in the UK, and now lives and works in Lebanon. From what may appear to be an array of polar design forces, Debs has beautifully synthesised into contemporary and high-quality interior furniture and accessories.

Although trained as an interior architect, Debs immediately gravitated towards furniture design, even though she only had one furniture design course at the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD). She recalls her desire to design something that she could touch and feel; it needed to be a functional object. She explains: “When something is functional, you need it; it becomes justifiable to make.”

For Debs, it was a natural transition. In fact, when designing interiors, which she also offers, the starting point with a project is the furniture objects that are needed in the room rather than the interior space. From there, she works

outwards — a rather reversed hierarchy from a more typical approach of working from the shell of the space inwards.

About her process, Debs adds: “Actually, I think it should be that way. I think about what is really needed, and what’s functional, an emotional function.”

Debs found an emotional tie when returning to her Lebanese roots in Beirut after a 40 year absence. She discovered designs for modern Middle Eastern furniture to be almost nonexistent. This void made her determined to use her multi-cultural background to create furniture appealing to a global market.

However, she found the traditional Middle Eastern craft, although beautiful, wasn’t fascinating to people anymore. “When I saw how Middle East craft was done, it was over the top; everything was crowded and ornamental. No one appreciated it. But there’s such beautiful workmanship put into it. We have to be able to see it. I needed to show it in a more minimalist way.

“That is what I’m trying to express in the work. I brought it down to its essence,” she explains.

By mixing the minimalism of Japanese design and the Arabesque patterns

found in marquetry, Debs created the East & East collection in 2000. The line is a harmonious combination of the Far East and Middle East.

She reveals: “In Japan, the philosophy ‘less is more’ is most evident. They pare things down to the minimum to express themselves.” So, she fused the craftsmanship from the Middle East with the purity of lines and simplicity of shape and form from Japanese design.

Debs’ designs utilise both traditional materials, such as walnut, oak, tin, brass and mother of pearl as well as contemporary materials like stainless steel, resin, concrete, laminate and wood acid-washing processes. “I like to play around. The idea is that furniture has to relate to our lifestyle. It can’t be seen as an antique thing of the past; it has to adapt to our living.”

She describes the process of traditional Arabic marquetry, which originated in Damascus: the craftsmen melt tin in a mould, form it into tubes, and then create strips by running it through a hand-operated machine. The strips are fit into thinly chiselled wood, “like little fences,” Debs adds. The wood is further carved and the mother of pearl added.



1

Nada Debs

2

SLICE Console

2

Her marquetry interpretations vary from punchy polka-dot, 60s inspired florals, calligraphy, inlaid buttons, random linear expressions to more traditional Islamic patterning.

Through Debs' designs, the company has helped encourage the preservation of local Arab craftsmanship, which is of high importance to her.

Debs explains that it is challenging to find craftsmen because they need to have the right personality — they have to be calm and patient. "It has to be in your DNA," she opines.

She explains that it's often a family business, and they actually have one family they work with — all of the sons and brother-in-laws included. They have added a few women to their hand-craft workforce as well.

One manufacturing challenge, she explains, is struggling with consistency. "Right now, I'm only manufacturing in the Arab world, and working with craftsmen. They don't see things in a modern

way. One time it works, the next time they don't make the same thing. On the other hand, maybe that is the beauty of hand-made," she muses.

Whereas Debs' East & East Collection is a blending of primarily Japanese and Arabic influences, her Contemporary Collection mixes Western with Arabic design. Debs identifies two pieces from this line which best represents this bridging of Western and Eastern approaches: the Pebble Table and the Star Arabesque Bookshelf.

"What I like is it appeals to people of all backgrounds. In a lot of my pieces, the Arabs see something affiliated to their identity, whereas in Europe, they identify it with the exotic. Maybe in the States or in Asia it's a functional thing — it's a practical piece, not just something decorative to look at."

The 'Vintage Meets Arabesque' line uses forms from the 50s and 60s. "I adapt with the times," she remarks. She notes that a designer's job is to feel

the collective needs of the people and analyse what it is they are seeking, and it's usually an emotional need.

"Right now, the vintage look is really in," she says. Using plastic laminate as well as wood, the pieces have a mid-century feel, but with Debs' hand. The line is more colourful and fun.

"We actually named the furniture from famous cinema houses in Beirut from the 50s, 60s and 70s." Some of the movie house monikers include Piccadilly, Strand and Opera.

Available internationally, Debs' products are represented in New York, Geneva, Cairo, Amman, Paris, Dubai, Canada, and recently Saudi Arabia. In Beirut, the Nada Debs Gallery showcases both the East & East and Contemporary Collections while her two Nada Debs Boutiques carry only the home accessory collections. However, Nada Debs ships worldwide. Future plans include an extension in the Far East as well as a soft furnishings collection.



3

PEBBLE Low Table

3



4



5

In addition to furniture design and manufacturing, the Nada Debs brand also includes accessories, interior design services and art installations.

She also created Concrete Carpet, which was an art piece designed for “The Future of Tradition – The Tradition of Future” exhibition at Munich’s Hausderkunst Museum. “It mixes the calligraphy tradition of Japanese Kanji and Arabic calligraphy in a contemporary geometric typeface,” she describes. It was shortlisted for the prestigious Jameel Prize 3, an international award for contemporary art and design inspired by Islamic tradition. Partnered with the Victoria and Albert Museum and sponsored by the Abdul Latif Jameel Community Initiatives (ALJCI), the Jameel Prize illustrates the link between traditional Islamic art and a contemporary discipline.

Nada Debs blurs the lines between art and craft, traditional and contemporary, functional and decorative — and East and West. More than just furniture, her designs connect the traditions, skills and aesthetics of the world and encourages them to thrive. 

- 4 STAR Arabesque Table
- 5 KHATT Low Table
- 6 STAGGERED Chest of Drawers



6