

## THE MEN SHAPING THE BEIRUT DESIGN SCENE

Meet the people leading the charge in Lebanon

By [Kate Hazell](#)

Photography By Ethan Mann



Design in the Middle East's is becoming a boom industry, and no where is this more prevalent than in Beirut. So, *Esquire Middle East* flew over to Lebanon to hunt down the men who are making an impact in the Beirut design scene. Here they are:

\*\*\*

### **Khaled El Mays**

The statement piece



Lebanese designer Khaled El Mays has a degree in architecture from the American University of Beirut and an MFA in digital arts from Pratt Institute in New York.

He uses this education to tackle multiplicity and repetition in his work. Growing up in Lebanon and inspired by his artist mother, El Mays' 2011 debut solo show *Loba*, in New York, comprised a series of images and videos that allowed El Mays to understand the power and advantages of selective repetition. He continues to explore this theme from his multi-disciplinary design studio, Atelier Khaled El Mays, in Beirut.

El Mays featured in the *Cities'* exhibit at Dubai Design Days earlier this year with "Circus Series", made up of the Audience Set, the Stage Set, and the Backstage Set, each representing elements of the circus experience. As part of his Audience Set, El Mays designed benches, bars, chairs and tables from mixed materials, all intended to reflect staged luxury. The chair pictured above is part of his Backstage set, which was made up of unique pieces from rehabilitated old and used objects. "This piece is one of the first designed in this series and is a personal favourite," admits the 30-year-old. "I believe the balance between the sculptural aspect and its usability is just about right. It was created to enclose you."

**Hazem Aljesr**

The curator



Dubai-based curator and Cities Boutique owner Hazem Aljesr (pictured above) has become an integral part of the region's art scene. Born in the Lebanese capital and brought up Saudi Arabia, Aljesr first honed his artistic palate at the Tom Dixon design studios in London. Returning to the Middle East in 2006, he then opened his own web and design firm in Riyadh, before launching design and art concept store, Cities. The concept store, in Jumeirah's Galleria Mall, has been supporting Middle Eastern designers and artists, and Aljesr also curated an exhibition at September's Beirut Art Fair handpicking these fellow three designers.

"Lebanese designers are truly unique," explains the 37 year old. "Lebanon has always existed as this mix of cultures and traditions, and the result is an intriguing combination of all of these diverse influences. There is a lot of depth and variety in the design and the designers seem very open to taking risks and pushing the limits." This is what excites Aljesr most about the region's artists – their sense of adventure. "Most Lebanese designers don't want to just create another pretty object; instead they create because they have a story to tell and are a part of their work."

**Hawani**  
The wall hanging



Lebanese art collective, Hawani, recently emerged from the Beirut art scene, thanks to their versatile style and unique, statement-making art pieces. The trio of architect 42-year-old Wissam Moubarak, 52-year-old designer Haytham Hreiz and social worker Nisrine Nasr (not pictured) take inspiration from music, people and everything around them as they “draw, cut, weld, stitch, knit, paint, collect and connect with no boundaries” with each installation. At Beirut Art Fair, the creatives presented two art pieces called “Shemagh”, named after the Arabic men’s headdress. Each one was constructed from a large sheet of glass embedded with small nails to create a geometric pattern typically seen on the traditional cloth. The meaning behind it? “It’s meant to be an interpretation of traditional forms and playing with the conventions of culture,” explains Hreiz.

The three now continue to work on what they’re calling The Nail collection, with a series of further artworks constructed using nails and acrylic paint on a multi-layer Plexiglas frame with stainless steel edges. Each work in the series is constructed in a Pop Art style and several are reinterpretations of famous pieces from Pop artist Roy Lichtenstein, giving the contemporary iconic art genre a truly a Middle Eastern feel.

**Nayef Francis**  
The installation



Nayef Francis' work looks fairly simplistic but that's what the Lebanese designer wants you to think. "The main aim is to develop a response that makes the most complicated design process end in the simplest outcome," explains the 40-year-old. By creating work that is visually streamlined and uncomplicated, Francis' design process is not the focus of the object, but instead the function. His most recent work was created for a solo exhibition at Cities in Dubai this summer, titled Undo, Move, Construct, Repeat. Each piece was aimed at incorporating the transitional lifestyle mirrored by so many people, and certainly UAE residents, in today's world.

The result? Modular furniture and home items that can be modified and customised, depending on the space and purpose, by the users themselves. For instance, the Wand dining table is placed on top of brass supports which double as candleholders. "I always try to inject a bit of nostalgia and fun in my design work," he says. You can even flat-pack each of Francis' piece to simplify moving the pieces from place to place. So, in conclusion: form, function, fun. Sorted.

