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Diverse in Dubai

By Griselda Murray Brown

The Middle East's emerging design fair is establishing itself as a global meeting point, with work from six continents



Twist lamps by Simon Hasan (£1,750 each, www.libbysellers.com)

It may be early days for the Middle East's first design fair but, with its tent pitched in the shadow of the Burj Khalifa, the world's tallest building, it's hard to think of one in a more spectacular setting.

The second edition of Design Days Dubai took place last month: with 29 galleries, it's an intimate affair compared with the London Design Festival or Milan's sprawling Salone del Mobile. Yet it is one of the most diverse fairs, with work from six continents – Dubai styling itself as a natural meeting point between them. The fair's French director, Cyril Zammit, brought in galleries from Seoul, São Paulo and Wilderness in South Africa as well as from cities traditionally associated with high-end design, such as Milan, Paris and New York.

Some of the most eye-catching pieces came from Mexico City-based Galería Mexicana de Diseño, showing furniture by Telharmonium through the company Fabrica México. It

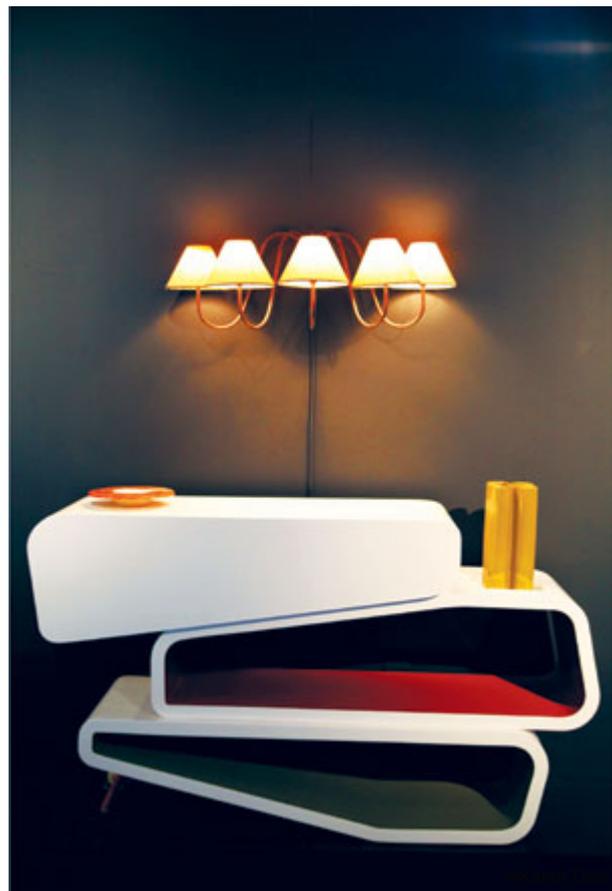
was the first time contemporary Mexican furniture had been exhibited in the Middle East. “I wanted to bring really contemporary pieces that have a bit of wit,” says Richard Eagleton, a British expatriate who set up Fabrica México just a few months ago. It seems he judged the market well: his entire stock sold within 24 hours.

This year there were twice as many Middle Eastern design galleries than at the fair’s debut, yet their pieces were not necessarily local. Art Dubai – Design Days’ older sibling, which opened its seventh annual fair a couple of days later – had a strong show of contemporary art from the region, whereas almost everything at the design fair was imported, much like Dubai itself. Twentytwentyone from Beirut, for example, had a Gio Ponti cabinet based on the original 1950s model decorated with Fornasetti’s architectural designs.

The scarcity of indigenous works is unsurprising: the nascent local design scene lacks the infrastructure of more established centres. The American University of Sharjah’s College of Architecture, Art and Design, which Zammit describes as the best in the area, only launched a product design course – and a “minor” at that – in 2010. Of the four designers showing at the Dubai Culture and Arts Authority’s booth, just one, Khalid Shafar, can make a living from his work, the other three juggling day jobs.

But just as Dubai’s appetite for collectable design is growing – with 25 per cent more sales and 28 per cent more visitors at this year’s fair – grassroots production is also developing. Peter Di Sabatino, dean of the College of Architecture, Art and Design, says it is working on a product design “major”, as well as other design courses. Shafar and his three peers on the booth had benefited from “Design Roads Professional”, a new six-month programme that took them to London and Barcelona to gain exposure and build contacts. Zammit had learnt from the inaugural fair that, to create a market, you must first build awareness. This year’s edition, therefore, included talks, film screenings and workshops, and there were industry experts on hand to guide people round the fair in the evenings.

Any new market can be hard to predict. Of the 22 galleries at Design Days Dubai last



Lamp by Jean Royère; pebble console by Fadi Sarieddine

year, more than half returned – but even they said it was hard to know what to bring. First-timer Galería Mexicana de Diseño admits to taking the “brave decision” to avoid gold and silver. But Alexander Garbe, director of the Hamburg-based gallery Stilwerk, which was at the fair last year, says, “our experience was that people were really interested in the metal and copper things, so we decided to go in that direction”. The gallery even commissioned Sebastian Herkner to make a limited-edition “bell” side-table with an Islamic influenced pattern.

With its high concentration of wealth, the UAE is an increasingly important market for western art and design. The British Crafts Council brought a selection of UK design galleries to the fair. As its director Rosy Greenlees explains, although the US has traditionally been the primary market for British craft, “with the way the world has been developing over the past four or five years, it’s become obvious we need to seek some new places.” So what did it bring? Ceramics, glass and silver were the dominant materials and, unlike on other booths, most pieces were small-scale. Among the more distinctive designs were Simon Hasan’s twist leather lamps, crafted using the medieval armour-making technique *cuirbouilli* (boiled leather) and available through Gallery Libby Sellers.

The differences between craft and design are subtle but revealing. Greenlees says that while there is huge overlap, most craftspeople have an expertise in a certain material and process, while designers tend to work across a broader range of materials and objects. The former usually want tighter control over the production process, making one-offs or smaller batches, while the latter work in a more scaled-up way. There has been a resurgence of interest in craft, at least in Britain, with the hugely popular Power of Making exhibition at Victoria and Albert Museum in 2011. But how easily do the values of craft sit with the fast-paced culture of Dubai? None of the Crafts Council galleries made sales at the fair – which is less disheartening than it sounds, since sales often happen after the event.

Greenlees was clear even before Design Days Dubai began that, for the Crafts Council, it wasn’t just about sales. Her focus was on creating “new markets for makers and new opportunities. Obviously one market here could be selling, but another could be teaching or commissioning.”



And Design Days Dubai’s commissioned, non-commercial aspects were certainly better aligned with the Crafts Council’s values – with two performances focused on sustainability. As well as giving workshops, the Belgian designer Jens Praet spent the fair making a table out of discarded magazines that he shredded, bound together



Guests at the second Design Days Dubai fair, which was held last month with 29 galleries attending

with resin and poured into moulds. The resulting piece was a curious and beautiful thing, its layers of hardened confetti locked beneath a perfectly smooth surface. On the other side of the fair, British-based Studio

Swine's performance involved converting local construction waste – rubber, concrete, crushed marble, camel leather – into a quirky new piece of furniture each day. In a city whose skyline has changed beyond recognition in the past 10 years, the project was topical and poignant.

But does sustainability sell in Dubai? Stilwerk exhibited a sleek sideboard by sgroll/vidal with a blown-up photograph of materials at a recycling plant encased within its Plexiglas frame. "It's quite abstract," says the gallery's Angelika Maupilé. "You really have to go quite close to see what it is. It's not a political statement."

She's probably right to be cautious: eye-catching sells here but political might not. As one gallerist puts it: "The design scene in Dubai is young: young in years, young in attitude."

www.designdaysdubai.ae

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