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STYLE

The Thriving Designers Who Dominate Beirut's Flourishing Scene

By RIMA SUQI OCT. 3, 2016

Beirut, in the words of one designer I talked to recently, is like a third world country that's put on some makeup.

It is the capital of a country that has not had a president in two years. There are daily power outages. It can take an hour to heat water to take a shower, and garbage removal is a serious problem. There are almost no street signs, but one can summon an Uber relatively easily.

Despite all this, or perhaps because of it, creativity thrives in Beirut, which seems to have more than its share of architects, interior designers, industrial designers and artists. Most speak at least three languages, have been educated in other countries and have multiple passports, so they could live someplace seemingly easier.

"There is a soul here that you can't find anywhere else," said Nada Debs, a designer in her 50s with a shop in downtown Beirut.

Others of her generation mention their interest in helping rebuild a country devastated by a 15-year civil war. And some cite more practical reasons: the ease of sourcing materials, finding artisans and producing pieces in Beirut rather than Europe.

Karim Chaya, 44, a graduate of the Rhode Island School of Design, whose company, Acid, has designed and produced furniture and fixtures for companies like Lanvin and Golden Goose, said he thinks designers thrive on the area's chaos. "The borderline danger, borderline madness is something that pushes us in our designs and our research and our need to create," he said.

Here's a look at some of the city's designers who have made names for themselves outside the region.

200Grs, Rana Haddad and Pascal Hachem

200Grs was founded three years ago by Rana Haddad, 47, an architect, and Pascal Hachem, 37, an artist, to create local handmade pieces, inspired in part by their city. They do conceptual designs, like a rolling pin with one flat side carved with the words “Keep up appearances.”

They also have a collection of oak and walnut case goods that Ms. Haddad says “challenge the wood,” and a series of steel-framed mirrors that seem to float on the wall. All are minimal, thoughtful pieces that highlight materials and craft, sometimes subtly. The firm will debut a new collection next year at the Federica Schiavo Gallery, during Salone del Mobile in Milan.

Marc Baroud

Marc Baroud, 38, founded and directs the design department at his alma mater, the Académie Libanaise des Beaux-Arts in Beirut. He also studied at the École Nationale Supérieure des Arts Appliqués et des Métiers d'Art in Paris, after which he returned to Beirut to start a branding agency and, later, an architecture firm.

Mr. Baroud is working with galleries to produce and show either one-off pieces or limited editions. His latest, Leatherscapes, was inspired by uncut shapes and imperfections of calfskins he saw. “I wanted to keep the skins as they are, with the holes, the traces of the hand, all the faults, but give them a function,” he said of the resulting pieces (two chairs, a desk and a bench) with skins seemingly melted over steel frames.

Karen Chekerdjian

Karen Chekerdjian, 46, who grew up in Beirut during the civil war, got her master's in industrial design from the Domus Academy in Milan. There she met Massimo Morozzi, a founder of the radical Italian furniture company Archizoom Associati, who became her mentor and, while art director at Edra, commissioned her first produced piece.

Fifteen years ago, she opened a studio in Beirut. Ever since, she has been designing furniture, decorative objects, jewelry and the occasional interior (she is working on a villa by the architect Youssef Tohme). It's quite a range, in style, materials and price. A collection of locally made hammered brass tabletop items shows her modern take on traditional shapes and techniques, while her Spaceship II table resembles a futuristic boulder, ripped from the mountains and reimagined in brushed brass.

1millimetre, Sara Jaafar

After earning a degree in architecture at the Architectural Association School of Architecture in London and working as a designer at Heatherwick

Studio, Sara Jaafar, 30, returned to Beirut in 2014 and founded 1millimetre studio.

The name is a nod to her reputation as a stickler for detail, which is evidenced in her small but focused and cohesive collection: several tables, a chair, a light fixture. “I enjoy materials, and the juxtaposition and intersection of materials,” she said. Her Drape chair, for example, melds tubular copper framing with leather (the slings can be interchanged, the chair ships flat and can be disassembled for storage), and the Slit table has a walnut veneer top perched on a brass base with marble accents. And the Broken Slab table, made of marble and powdercoated steel, was inspired, she said, “by all the rebars sticking out of old buildings that had been destroyed.”

Nada Debs

Nada Debs says her aesthetic was formed by the four countries she has lived in: Japan for minimalism, America for utility and use of modern materials, the United Kingdom for heritage and craft, and Lebanon for ornamentation and repetition of patterns.

Ms. Debs, who is 54 and holds a degree in interior architecture from the Rhode Island School of Design, has her furniture and decorative accessories made locally and sold at her shop in Saifi Village. She aims to “preserve the heritage in a contemporary way, taking craft to another level, creating a modern Arab identity.” This is most evident in her interpretation of inlay, marrying what she calls “noble” materials — mother-of-pearl, brass, stainless steel and even leather — with the more pedestrian acrylic, concrete and wood. The pieces feel familiar, yet surprising, and very contemporary.

Marc Dibeh

Marc Dibeh was a student at the École Nationale Supérieure d'Architecture Paris-Val de Seine, home on summer break, when the 2006 war started. He decided to stay in Beirut, earning a master's in product design from the Académie Libanaise des Beaux-Arts, where he now teaches.

Now 31, Mr. Dibeh is designing products and interiors, including the renovation of an 1800s farmhouse in Corsica, and the redesign of the Muncheez restaurant franchise in the District of Columbia. This summer, he had a solo show of new furniture pieces (a coffee table, armchair and stool, all made of blackened steel, brass, wood and leather) at the Gallery S. Bensimon in Paris.

David/nicolas, David Raffoul and Nicolas Moussallem

David Raffoul and Nicolas Moussallem are perhaps the Beirut product designers best known to the outside world. They have designed for international brands, including porcelain dinnerware for Vista Alegre, rugs for Moooi Carpets and Tai Ping, a desk for Haymann, candleholders for Verreum, and a bar cabinet for the Carpenters Workshop Gallery, which will debut next month.

They are both 28 and met while students at the Académie Libanaise des Beaux-Arts in Beirut. They are very aware of their rapid rise. “If our studio was based in London, I don’t know if we would’ve gotten the same success as fast,” Mr. Moussallem said. “Being from Beirut, people are curious, and this curiosity is something we feed on.”

Carlo Massoud

Carlo Massoud, 32, worked as an architect before deciding to focus on product design. He was part of the Armory Show’s first Design Project last year in New York, where he showed “Arab Dolls: Maya, Zeina, Racha and Yara” with the Beirut-based Carwan Gallery; it was an installation of 60 hand-crafted, black lacquered wood sculptures that, from afar, look like bullets, but are meant to resemble veiled women. “It was a statement about the polemic about the veils in Switzerland: Should we ban them from public institutions or not?” he said.

This year, he worked with his sister, the ceramicist Mary-Lynn Massoud, on an exhibit called “Autopsy,” which was shown by the Carwan Gallery at the Armory Show this spring, and featured six cast bronze stools inspired by South African fertility dolls. His most recent designs are cast brass paperweights, created for a pop-up shop that’s a collaboration between Wallpaper magazine and House of Today, a nonprofit based in Beirut that connects experts and emerging designers.

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