

DESIGN TO THE FORE



March 2012, the UAE hosts the inaugural Design Days Dubai, the first fair in the Middle East dedicated to collectible and limited-edition design. Complemented by a program of workshops and talks, it will bring together makers, lovers and collectors of design from the Middle East and beyond.

Exciting, dynamic, exploding: over the past decade such words have defined contemporary art in the Middle East, taking it from being barely a footnote in the international art world to global recognition – with the UAE, especially Dubai, emerging as an important creative hub.

Meanwhile, art's younger sibling – design – has been enjoying a global boom, yet has hardly dented the region's consciousness. And that is something Design Days Dubai, the region's first fair for collectible and limited-edition design, is setting out to change. Timed to overlap with Art Dubai, Design Days will bring together some 20 galleries from this region and around the globe and will represent the work of more than 50 designers. Alongside rare and unique pieces by

major names – from 20th century stars Jean Royère and Oscar Niemeyer to contemporary leaders such as Hella Jongerius and Nacho Carbonell – smaller and more accessibly priced works, starting from around 500 euros, will also be well represented.

The geographic reach of the fair reflects the emergence of new centers of creativity on the global design map, from São Paulo and Seoul to South Africa – not to forget emerging names from the Middle East, with work by Beirut designer Karen Chekerdjian and the UAE's own Khalid Shafar (both to be shown by Beirut's Carwan Gallery).

Alongside the fair will be a program of talks and workshops by leaders such as Li Edelkoort, the world-renowned trend forecaster, curator and former chairwoman of Design Academy Eindhoven, Lebanese designer Nada Debs and London-based curator/collector Rabih Hage.

What is clear from the line-up is not only the huge growth of global interest in design – both creating and collecting – but also the shift in what it has come to mean, with the boundaries between art and design being transcended, and the conventional distinction between the conceptual and functional becoming increasingly blurred. With the advent of 'design-art' in the past decade (a term attributed to the auction house Phillips de Pury, which triggered as much debate as clarity) it has become clear that, as well as having a practical purpose, design is an important form of creative expression. And, like art, it can be read and understood both emotionally and rationally. There was huge growth in both the output and price of design-art during the economic boom years before 2008, which, not surprisingly, was stopped in its tracks by the financial crash. But now, as designers have to adjust to the new world order and need to consider different questions, some pieces from the height of the boom seem even more relevant. Take, for example, Studio Job's Robber Baron table (Carpenters Workshop Gallery): at the time when the designers were creating it, bankers were still Masters of the Universe – so its

public debut at Design Miami in 2007, just months after Lehman Brothers collapsed, was poignant. Today though, with the Occupy movement in the news and ‘The One Percent’ part of our vocabulary, Studio Job’s satirical comment seems even more pertinent – and no less ‘artistic’ than many contemporary paintings.

Indeed, if it is true that art is an expression of society and culture in a given time and place, design is certainly a form of art – even the simplified ‘form follows function’ design of last century.

And, just as the Great Depression triggered a golden age for American design, with the Eamses, Platner, Nelson et al creating beautiful, intelligent pieces that were also easily affordable, many of today’s designers are experimenting with different materials – often the cheap materials more normally used for industry.

One designer makes its intriguingly beautiful chandeliers from simple metal-bead chain, Another will bring Florian Schmidt’s Stitching Concrete stools to Dubai: four designer’s prototypes of those destined for production, they are made from concrete-impregnated canvas, a material used for waterproofing ditches.

The combination of humble materials and hand-crafting informs much of current design.

Wherever one may stand in the art-design debate, there is no question that the value of rare and special design objects has grown tremendously, with prices often approaching those of fine art.

Quality and scarcity, as well as intrinsic beauty make the work of 20th century masters highly collectible and a sound investment. One of the world’s leading dealers in work by those designers, François Laffanour (whose Paris-based Galerie Downtown will be at Design Days) showed a remarkable Prouvé piece at Design Miami in December; priced at \$700,000, it was reported by L’Express newspaper to have been reserved by a buyer on the first day of the show.

Original work by the Scandinavian masters of simplicity is, rightly, valued for its significance in the history of modern design. Work by living designers is similarly sought-after. While it may be some time before the market returns to the heady levels of the \$2.1m paid in 2010 for Marc Newson’s prototype of his Lockheed Lounge chair, by bringing work from such designers to the Middle East – for collectors to purchase and the

public to see and enjoy – Design Days Dubai stands to trigger an interest in design here that may, before long, generate energy and dynamism similar to that which now surrounds contemporary art.

The fair also has a purpose beyond serving local collectors: presenting design to a wider audience in order to promote greater appreciation and understanding; fostering and promoting emerging local design talent; and strengthening connections with the global design and art community, while becoming a vibrant addition to the region’s cultural scene.

It may seem an ambitious agenda but there is plenty of evidence that the region is ready for it: along with a small core of dedicated and passionate collectors, there is a larger design-hungry public; new art and culture spaces have opened in Dubai. Dubai and Ajman have dynamic and well-respected design faculties; more of the younger-generation Arab diaspora are returning from abroad to design after exposure to it elsewhere... the list goes on. And it is being repeated across the Arab world, from Beirut and Kuwait to Cairo and Marrakech. A rediscovered confidence in the region’s cultural references, aesthetic and craft techniques is breeding a new, contemporary Arab design movement that is a world removed from the trivialisation of ‘Arabesque’ architectural detailing and made-in-China ‘sadhu’ cloth. The combination of international thinking and local talent is a powerful one: deeply touched by what surrounded her as she was growing up in Japan, Nada Debs truly found her stride as a designer when she returned to her roots in Lebanon; Younes Duret proudly translates his Franco-Moroccan background into utterly modern, often humorous takes on zellij tiles, beldi teapots, mashrabiya and the patterns of Islamic geometry.

At Design Days Dubai the relaxed atmosphere and open format are conscious choices to help make design accessible and more understandable, even to neophytes. By offering direct access to designers, collectors and gallerists it will invite conversation and questions, encourage discussion and stimulate debate. By doing so, this pioneering event will provide some clues about the future of design in the UAE as well as the wider Middle East, and hopefully help to define what part the Middle East will play on the global design stage.