

BALTIC BOOM

From Arne Jacobson's Egg to Hans J. Wegner's Wishbone, Scandinavia has dominated design for decades. But, with Latvia selected as the visiting pavilion for this month's Downtown Design fair in Dubai, can this Baltic state become as big as its European neighbours and make a splash on the international design stage?

Latvia is not a country you would instinctively think of when exploring furniture design, yet it is the nation of choice for this month's Downtown Design fair in Dubai, a four-day event dedicated to original design.

Geographically speaking, it's crammed with cultural references. Its capital, Riga, was named European Capital of Culture for 2014, while the city's 'historic centre' has been inscribed on the World Heritage List for the quality of its art nouveau architecture ("unparalleled anywhere in the world," says UNESCO) and 19th-century wooden structures. Such recognition hasn't gone unnoticed, particularly with Cristina Romelli Gervasoni, Downtown Design fair director.

"As we are an emerging fair we wanted to keep the same concept and exhibit something that was new and not known," says Gervasoni. "And Latvian [design] is something that is really new and not a lot of people know it. They have amazing products and we think there is great potential."

While Gervasoni agrees that Scandinavia, the "school of design", dwarfs most other regions with its simple and minimalist design, she's quick to praise Latvia's unique style. "Latvia and its culture, and consequently, Latvian design, have been influenced since the late 13th century by the Baltic Germans and later on from the early 18th century, by Imperial Russia," she says. "The key words for me are: heritage and crafts translated in a contemporary

way. And Latvian taste in colours and materials is rooted in the historic necessity to use home-grown fabrics and dyes, harvested from nature."

For Agne Araka of Design Isle, the firm behind the Riga International Design Fair, which takes place in the capital from October 2 to 5, Latvian design is "simple yet complicated", and full of "creative and witty ideas". "The fact that Latvian designers can surprise is no longer a secret and they are looking for more and more new, non-standard solutions. Latvian designers' work represent enjoyable shapes, lines and materials, while tradition, uniqueness and true quality make their work excellent," she says.

Does Gervasoni think Latvia can become as big as design heavyweight Scandinavia in the creative arena? "When we talk in terms of becoming the new Scandinavia it's quite ambitious but at the same time we can see that there are opportunities to be recognised."

Said opportunities could well arise later this month as five Latvian designers roll in to the UAE for Downtown Design, which takes place at The Venue from October 28 to 31. What can visitors expect? "What they're going to do as a booth is quite interesting. You can see from the designs that it's quite catchy and the way they exhibit is very contemporary," concludes Gervasoni.

Here, AIR picks three designers set to showcase at this month's event, and explores the methods behind their design magic...



1.

1. ARS TELA

Specialising in natural, hand-woven fabrics produced on traditional hand looms, Ars Tela has designed premium class interior textiles, carpets and even clothing fabrics. The team comprises of a young and energetic design arm, whose ideas are given life by the more experienced craftspeople, who pour their years of weaving experience into the new designs. Incomparable in quality to any machine-made products, the Ars Tela weavers can produce only two metres of hand-woven fabric per day. Simple, comfortable and stylish, the natural Latvian style is evident in the textures and fabrics the company uses. arstela.lv



2.

2. AN&ANGEL

Creating minimalist and functional glassware, An&Angel is unique by virtue of its hand-crafted nature. Each bowl is expertly mouth-blown and contains three to five layers. Each layer is rigorously checked for perfection in standards before the next can be added, ensuring 100 per cent quality that is just as usable as it is aesthetically pleasing. For its



3.

3. MAFFAM FREEFORM

As the only workshop in the world manufacturing furniture from volcanic basalt fibre, Maffam Freeform has put itself in an enviable position of uniqueness. Latvian designer Raimonds Cirulis has created a distinctive furniture manufacturing technology, whereby dark basalt fibre "hairs" and natural resin are combined by hand to create forms that cannot be found anywhere else in the world. By nature of the method of production, no two pieces are completely alike – therefore every item that comes out of the studio is totally original. Cirulis' revolutionary production methods create pieces of furniture that are light, sturdy and perfect for indoors or outside. They combine lighthearted designs with industrial materials, in a way new to furniture manufacturing. maffamfree.eu

2013 DECO collection, the brand was conferred the highly regarded "red dot award", beating off competition from over 1,900 manufacturers from 54 countries. Creative director Artis Nimanis agrees with Audrey Hepburn's famous maxim that "elegance is the only beauty that never fades", which is why the company strives for simplicity in the shapes of its works. angel.lv