



IS LATVIAN THE NEW NORDIC?



How many Scandinavian designers can you name, off the top of your head? There's the famed Arne Jacobson and Eero Saarinen, Vernor Panton, Hans Wegner, Poul Kjærholm... The list goes on. How many Latvian designers can you name? Errrrmm... Not one?

Why then, you might well ask, is Latvia taking over this year's Downtown Design, a show that champions luxury international brands? Fair director Cristina Romelli Gervasoni has the answer: "So much is happening in our 2014 edition. We wanted to bring to this region those brands that are shaping the future of design." Scan the exhibitor list and you've every reason to think Italy, Latvia and Denmark (in that order) have worldwide influence, with ten, six and four companies, respectively, representing those countries at the show.

The chosen theme for this year's fair, 'Original Design', goes some way in explaining the strong presence of this small Baltic state. "We chose 'Original' because it reflects a global view: the sustainable growth of the design sector worldwide," explains Gervasoni. "This is a concept with which brands wrestle with the world over. An original piece carries with it the brand's heritage and ethos. It is the thought that goes into designing that perfect glass; it is the robust fortitude of a couch that envelops you in comfort; it is how a light suggests a mood. It is all that cannot be replicated."

Maffam Freeform, based in the Latvian capital Riga, is making its debut at this second edition of the show, with a product that is truly original. Harnessing one of the world's

bhomes.com

Maffam Freeform; left, both Ars Tela



most natural yet rarest of materials, the company creates furniture from volcanic basalt fibres – and is the only one in the world to do so. Designer Raimonds Cirulis is the brains behind the first basalt fibre workshop where the material is tamed and transformed into thick lace-style furniture. The signature piece is the Magnu Nest hanging chair, an extremely durable yet ergonomic garden seat made from volcanic fibres woven carefully into lace-like patterns. And with no machines yet invented to handle this type of material, each item has to be made by hand and is wholly inimitable.

"It is not possible to create two identical objects; therefore they are original and unique, and that's what we love about Cirulis' pieces," adds Gervasoni. "If you're looking for truly

unique pieces then look no further."

While there's no danger that Scandinavian design will slide into the shadows any time soon, it is interesting to witness the emergence of this small eastern-European country in the design market, especially in the UAE where other design-savvy countries reign – namely Lebanon, Italy, Germany, France and Scandinavia. However, with Riga heralded as the European Capital of Culture for 2014, we may be seeing more of this country from now on.

Latvia can thank its rich history for shaping the harmonious and natural aesthetic typical of its contemporary designs. The 13th-century Baltic Germans, 18th-century Imperial Russia and the serf generation of the 19th century upheld an ancient matriarchal and spiritual culture that continues

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This page: Studio Natural; right: an&angel



to influence; add to this centuries of craftsmanship and a proclivity for homegrown fabrics and dyes, plus a fledgling state of independence, and the mix is like no other. Over the past 23 years, since independence was restored, the design sector has been rejuvenated along with manufacturing and entrepreneurial skills. And while it's hard not to draw comparisons with the clean lines championed by Scandinavian designers, who typically design by the motto 'form follows function', the history behind each design movement varies greatly.

A further five Latvian companies have been invited to Downtown Design – an&angel, Anna Kilpe, Ars Tela, HUGU and Studio Natural – to showcase their work within a special Latvian Pavilion, set up to promote

design from this emerging region. While these may not be names you recognise now it would be wise to take note of these artisanal companies for future reference.

"Latvian design will be widely represented at Downtown Design and this can be explained by the gradual expansion of Latvian design in Europe," says Artis Nimanis, creative director at an&angel, winner of last year's prestigious Red Dot Design Award. "Many Latvian designers have proved themselves as prominent and very interesting entrepreneurs who can surprise the world with unpretentious and pure design which includes many innovations.

"Until now Latvian designers have not been widely represented in the European (and world) design market,

but things have changed in recent years and we are very proud of it. Before, the world's famous design trendsetters were Scandinavians and Italians who are very popular worldwide for design, but now such a small country like Latvia is slowly but thoroughly becoming a serious player in the design market. And because the UAE is a country that values qualitative design and innovations this is a good place for Latvian design to be represented.

"Scandinavian design nowadays speaks for itself and is known across the world for its quality and pure design, but this also puts it in a frame that to some extent limits the creativity. Small countries that are not widely represented in the design market have new opportunities, and it is like that for an&angel; we can keep



Scandinavian features such as quality and pure lines while adding innovations to make products that are unique in the world. I don't think that this will change the international position of Scandinavian design but it expands the choice for the customer."

an&angel is no stranger to the UAE, having worked in partnership with Bits and Pieces in Abu Dhabi for the past two years. Bits and Pieces spotted the company's highly decorative crystal and glass bowls and vases at another design show, Maison & Objet, and sought to introduce the whole collection to the UAE.

"We aim to bring world-renowned designers to the Abu Dhabi market, a market that caters to the discerning shopper," says Polina Sochou, business development manager at Bits and

Pieces. "an&angel is a brand that not only offers a beautifully and meticulously made product, but a product that is highly functional. Our loyal customers are fascinated by the endless use of their an&angel product and are constantly reinventing its use from a sculptural piece to a vase, or a salad bowl to a floating candle vessel."

Nordic design may hold the crown for design classics, minimalism and functionality, but when it comes to being original there certainly seems to be a new contender on the international design scene. After all, there's nothing like a new kid on the block to peak our curiosity.

Visit the Latvian Pavilion at Downtown Design, from October 28 to 31, at The Venue, Downtown Dubai; downtowndesign.com