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Design Days Dubai: a showcase for the UAE's creative scene

Trish Lorenz

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Key players at the annual fair are combining Emirati traditions with contemporary ideas



Table by Khalid Shafar, from \$1,225, khalidshafar.com



Dubai, with its towering glass edifices and its focus on entertainment, shopping and business, is perhaps not a natural home for an emerging scene of designer-makers. But last month's Design Days Dubai, the city's international design fair which has been running since 2012, was notable for featuring a growing number of Emirati designers who were showing their work for the first time.

The fair has always had a large international presence, reflecting the city's position as a stepping stone between Asia and the west, but since its inception there has also been a surge in interest from the Middle East. According to Cyril Zammit, director of Design Days Dubai, 44 of this year's 90 exhibitors were from the region, compared with just five in the fair's first year. Lebanon, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Jordan were represented this year, along with seven stands dedicated to Emirati designers.

The United Arab Emirates, in which Dubai is situated,

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The United Arab Emirates, in which Dubai is situated, is a young country. Only founded as a nation in 1971, its cultural identity is still emerging. But in a country where private developers take responsibility for cultural projects (even the national opera house, due to open next year, is being developed by property group Emaar) designers face unique challenges while also playing a role in preserving and transmitting cultural heritage.

Khalid Shafar is one of the most highly regarded designers working in the UAE today. He studied at Central Saint Martins in London and released his debut collection in 2012. It includes the Palm coffee table, with its hand-woven palm-leaf top, and also the Arabi table lamp, inspired by the traditional headdress of the region.

Shafar believes that the Gulf region is culturally distinct from what is often perceived to constitute the Middle East. "Countries like Lebanon, Egypt and Morocco have long histories and traditions. The styles

that people associate with the Middle East — luxurious materials like gold and silver and more oriental-style patterns — emerge from there, but we don't relate to that here," he says. "The Gulf states were always nomadic and the materials we use, like mud and palm leaves, and the motifs that represent our culture are very different."



Women weaving at Design Days Dubai

Architect Hamad Khoory, a partner at the Dubai-based design practice Loci, agrees with Shafar. Loci has recently created a range of products that embrace Emirati traditions. For example, the Khatt, a contemporary wood and brushed-steel valet piece, is designed to hold traditional wardrobe items such as the white *kandura* worn by local men.

Khoory says that contrary to stereotype, Emirati culture traditionally eschews brazen displays of wealth. "Culturally, we're not about ostentation," he says. "Traditionally our houses were all the same on the outside, so it wasn't obvious if you were wealthy. We all wore the same unbranded clothes and even in the mosque there is no hierarchy, we all sit on the floor. Flaunting wealth isn't normal for us."

It is too early to begin to identify an Emirati style — there is still only a handful of product and furniture designers working in the country — but the aesthetic that is beginning to emerge bears out both Shafar and Khoory's comments.

In the main, contemporary Emirati pieces are distinguished by a reference to local crafts and traditions, featuring refined handicrafting rather than ostentatious luxury. Furniture designer Aljoud Lootah launched her first standalone collection, the Oru Series, comprising a lamp, chair, mirror and cabinet, at Design Days Dubai.

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The Oru lamp, which references the octagonal shape that is often used in arabesque motifs, is a good example of the style emerging from the region.

“I’m inspired by geometric arabesque patterns, but they tend to be used in a very classical way here. I want to break these patterns down and simplify them; I want to modify the aesthetic in a very modern way,” says Lootah.

“ Making is not in our culture . . . Here, it’s not socially desirable to be a maker; it’s seen as labouring work ”

- Khalid Shafar

Latifa Saeed is another emerging Emirati designer. Her first collection, released last year, was a range of furniture inspired by the way local children braid their hair. It includes a headboard and stool. For her second collection, she is working with *khoos*, the traditional Emirati craft of weaving palm leaves, and she plans to release a collection of furniture using the material next year.

“A lot of my design is based on nostalgia and memory,” she says. “Creating an Emirate aesthetic is important to me and I want to work with artisans and craftspeople in the region.”

It is not just Emirati designers who are influenced by the region’s culture. Rand Abdul Jabbar was born in Baghdad and studied in the US, but she grew up in Dubai. Her Forma collection — a limited-edition chair and table — is inspired by the dhow, the traditional Emirati boat. Jabbar collaborated with a dhow builder to create the pieces and says the project is aimed, in part, at shedding light on the rapidly disappearing craft of dhow building.

Saher Oliver Samman is a designer of British-Palestinian descent who is based in Dubai. His debut furniture piece is a hand-stitched, camel-leather hammock. “The colours are inspired by the desert that surrounds the city,” he says. “People tend to think of the desert as bland, but that’s not true.”



Carpenters Workshop Gallery at Design Days Dubai 2015

Designers working in the region face challenges that are typical of an emerging sector — it is difficult to access manufacturers and retailers, for example — but they also have to deal with culturally specific issues.

“Making is not in our culture,” says Shafar. “It’s not like in England where people have workshops in their sheds or garages and it’s normal to make things, even in a casual way. Here, it’s not socially desirable to be a maker; it’s seen as labouring work.”

As a result, at present there are very few studios or creative spaces for designers. Tashkeel is one exception — the not-for-profit organisation offers making facilities and studio spaces and also runs the Tanween mentoring and development programme in which Jabbar, Lootah, Samman and Saeed have all taken part.

Dubai will host the Expo in 2020 and, as a result, a larger-scale focus on the creative industries is now under way. A new 21m sq ft Dubai design district, known as D3, is being constructed by Dubai Holding. It will open in three stages over the next five years and means it is likely that in the future more Emirati designer-makers will find the space to work.

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Some local designers, though, caution against too much haste.

“We are trade-oriented as a culture, and trade is all about numbers and sales and growth. Creativity is not the same thing, and we have to understand that we need more patience if we want to grow Emirati design,” says Shafar. “We can build a design district in one year but we can’t create a community in that time. We need to grow that more organically and more slowly.”

Main photograph: tashkeel.org

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