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PIECE SEEKERS

A growing desire by design-literate consumers for one-of-a-kind pieces is shining a spotlight on an elite band of gallerists who nurture new talent creating individual, narrative-led furniture. Lucia van der Post reports. Portrait by Jude Edginton

I am sitting in the house of a talented young jewellery designer and her Iranian financier husband. It is a remarkable place, not just because of its splendid classical proportions, but because of the vivid sense it gives of the tastes and interests of the couple. As I gaze around, I realise that scarcely any object, piece of furniture or lighting has been bought from a conventional store. No sofas from George Smith. No lighting from John Cullen or tables from the pantheon of established, classic names. Instead, these pieces seem to be quite unlike any other. When I press the owners about their provenance, though, it seems that I am wrong, because a few things have come from traditional sources: dotted about the house there are designs by

Hans Wegner and Eames, Frank Lloyd Wright and Marc Newson. But, in general, it has all been furnished with one-off works, either bought directly from the designers themselves or from the small, elite band of galleries that specialise in supporting emerging talents.

The sofas, upholstered in variously coloured wools, were made specially for the room by Barber Osgerby, while the coffee table is a limited edition by the same company. The dining table is by Zaha Hadid and came from Established & Sons, while marching all down its middle is an array of vintage copper moulds. Designer Paola Petrobelli is a friend of the owners and almost every light has been made by her specifically for the house.

When asked why she and her husband decorate their home as they do, the jewellery designer says, "I didn't want to live in a house that was furnished the way my father [a well-known art dealer] would



Valerio Capo (left) and Sam Pratt, co-directors of Gallery Fumi, with (from left) Enrique Perezalba Red lacquered Chaste stoneware, £4,000, Faye Toogood bronze Spade chair, £14,400, Rowan Mersh dentalium shell Pithvava Female wall installation, £19,000, and Studio Markunpoika steel Engineering Temporality cabinet, £19,000. All from Gallery Fumi







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have done it. It's not that he didn't have incredible taste; it's that I wanted to buy from furniture makers of my own generation. I grew up opinionated. I've always been interested in the creative world and it's more fun when you have a mix. I always go to Aram for beds, but otherwise I want things that are really different. I wouldn't dream of going into most high-street stores to fit out the house – I'd sooner go to Ikea."

It seems more and more of the well-heeled – the sort of people who 20 years ago would have been buying from The Conran Shop – are today turning to small, experimental galleries rather than to conventional shops to satisfy their longing for making their homes personal. These galleries specialise in nurturing up-and-coming talents, with owners who are passionate about design and have educated and sophisticated "eyes" – so they offer not just the chance of finding something innovative, but also the opportunity to buy an early work of somebody who may later become a design superstar.

Sam Pratt, for instance, who co-directs and co-owns Gallery Fumi, alongside Valerio Capo (both pictured on previous pages), thinks that quite often designers' early work is among their best, and you won't find those pieces in the big stores. "The very young designers are still hungry and eager and are usually making things themselves," he says. "They haven't yet got a vast studio and a flotilla of assistants doing the large part of the work – and it's these sort of designs that small galleries discover and then offer to their customers."

He thinks that many of his clients, who are mostly aged somewhere between 30 and 45 and affluent, want their houses to

be different and an expression of how "they've thought out of the box; they also want something of which there are only one or two in the world". He finds that these people are "increasingly sophisticated and usually have done a lot of research before they come to us. The pieces I sell are mostly handcrafted, they usually take two or three months at least to make and they're often in rare or costly materials, so are expensive. But my customers understand that. Then when they get to know a designer's work, they often start to collect and buy something from them every year."

One of the big motivating factors behind this interest in specialised pieces is the narrative behind them. Pratt, for instance, tells me that one of his most beautiful items, the Engineering Temporality cabinet by Studio Markunpoika (£19,000, pictured on previous pages), which comes in an edition of 12, has proved incredibly popular and one of the main reasons is its story. Designer Tuomas Markunpoika's grandmother had Alzheimer's and became a shadow of her former self. This cabinet echoes that process; he uses old wooden cabinets and welds metal rings all over them. He then burns away the wood and is left with just the metal-ring outline. The result is a poetic piece that, says

Pratt, "is perfectly functional – you can open the doors and display things in it". His female customers in particular love it and six have already been sold.

Sarah Griffin, a curator and collector who regularly visits Gallery Fumi, thinks that her generation is seeking out such items because "these days you can buy an Eames chair from John Lewis and mid-20th-century designs

Top: Paul Mathieu hand-cast bronze and horsehair chaise longue, £50,280, made to order, and Abigail Simpson ceramic vessel with copper glaze, £7,600. Right: Christophe Delcourt succupira, ebony and oak KIM bookshelf, £15,167. All from Willer



Anton Alvarez wood and polyester-thread Wrapper's Delight designs, from £900.
Below: Hunting & Narud Copper Mirror Series, from £990.
All from Gallery Libby Sellers



are so ubiquitous that this is a way of removing oneself from the herd". Coming from an arts and design background herself, she also values the "sense of connection with the designers and of being able to collaborate with them that Sam Pratt offers". And she also emphasises that it is the narrative that appeals and makes something all the more special.

Libby Sellers' eponymous gallery is well known for providing what she calls "critical and progressive design" – works that are reflective of their time, such as the Copper Mirror Series by Hunting & Narud (from £990, pictured right). She thinks that part of the reason more and more people are seeking out extraordinary pieces is because "our expectation of what role objects should play in our lives has changed. We want so much more than functionality." She cites a brand she represents, Formafantasma, created by two young Italian designers who use design as a conduit to explore geopolitics and our relationship with tradition; in particular they made some beautiful blankets (from £4,000), into which were woven images of the Italian influence on cities in Africa.

"These days discussions about art and design are part of the national conversation and the customers who come to my gallery are familiar with the concept of furniture and interior-design pieces being sold in the same way as works of art," says Sellers. "They know to look beyond the function. The gallery environment does what no high-street store can do – it gives the objects the space, the power and the presence to tell their story. They have a power that goes way beyond function; they have poetry and romance. The people who come to innovative galleries want more from the objects that they surround themselves with than can be found in the average furniture store."

She points out that while there have always been discerning patrons who go directly to craftspeople and artists for one-off designs, the rise of fairs such as Art Basel, Art Miami and PAD have spread the message, and



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galleries like hers are giving a wider platform to these designers. Although her pieces are rare, she says not all her customers are wealthy collectors. Several save up for just one or two special items. "The other day, for instance, an artist came in who had had her eye on one of the thread-wrapped designs by Anton Alvarez [from £900, pictured above], and because she'd just sold a work of her own, she was now treating herself to one of his."

Another part of the draw of these galleries is clearly also the owners themselves, who act as conduits and curators and who customers develop lively relationships with. Sigrid Kirk, who has long been involved in the visual arts, and who buys from Fumi, Libby Sellers and also directly from designers, says that these gallery owners not only discover and promote innovative work, but are also critical in helping to frame the context and flesh out the whole story.

Mint, another small shop-cum-gallery founded by Lina Kanafani, which specialises in promoting young, upcoming talent and features mainly one-offs and limited editions (examples pictured overleaf), says that its clients are well informed about design and are drawn by the excitement of coming upon new concepts. "Our customers are confident and unaffected by trends," says Kanafani. "In fact, they are trendsetters themselves."

Rebecca Willer, whose gallery Willer focuses on exclusive and bespoke design objects, tableware, furniture and lighting, says that people come looking for one-offs, rather than pieces produced by a furniture brand. "It's a way of expressing their creativity and awareness of quality. Most clients want fewer things, but they want each piece to be more special and they want to treasure them and keep them, hoping they will improve and patinate with age. They are definitely not interested in fashion; they are more like connoisseurs." She says it is no accident that two of the furniture designers that she promotes, Paul Mathieu (whose chaise longue, £50,280, is pictured on previous page)



Top from left: Minja Kolehmainen beech and walnut side chair, price on request, De Padova wood, steel and foam Atlante sofa, price on request, Anke Weiss glass, bonsai-tree and epoxy-resin Bonsai table, price on request, and Klára Šumová pine and embossed-paper Love lamp, £1,650. All from Mint Gallery. Left from top: Daniel Woodford glass and brass Suspended Bird light, £8,100, Maarten Baas clay side table, £5,500, and Anabela Chan wood, glass and gold-plated brass Morpho Bloom decorative object, £13,250. All from Mint Gallery

and Christophe Delcourt (whose KIM bookshelf, £15,167, is also pictured on the third page), are French. In that country, she says, "the tradition of named designers of high-quality, beautiful, timeless yet contemporary pieces was never eclipsed by more mass-market offerings".

What is clear is that buying from these carefully curated collections in small galleries offers the customer a richer, more emotional connection with the objects they surround themselves with. It may still be a niche market, but it is one that is growing remarkably fast. ♦

WATCH THIS SPACE

Abigail Simpson, www.abigailozorasimpson.com and see Willer and other stockist. **Anabela Chan**, by appointment only, Earls Court Square, London SW5 (07920-017 990; www.anabelachan.com) and see Mint Gallery and other stockists. **Anke Weiss**, see Mint Gallery. **Anton Alvarez**, see Gallery Libby Sellers. **Christophe Delcourt**, 47 Rue de Babylone, Paris 75007 (+331-4271 3484; www.christophedelcourt.com) and see Willer. **Daniel Woodford**, www.dwoodford.com and see Mint Gallery. **De Padova**, www.depadovali.it and see Mint Gallery and other stockists. **Enrique Perezalba Red**, 07890-571 559; www.enriqueperezalbare.com and see Gallery Fumi. **Faye Toogood**, www.fayetoogood.com and see Gallery Fumi and other stockists. **Gallery Fumi**, 16 Hoxton Square, London N1 (020-7490 2366; www.galleryfumi.com). **Gallery Libby Sellers**, 41-42 Berners Street, London W1 (020-3384 8785; www.libbysellers.com). **Hunting & Narud**, 07909-507 561; www.huntingandnarud.com and see Gallery Libby Sellers and other stockists. **Klára Šumová**, www.klarasumova.com and see Mint Gallery and other stockists. **Maarten Baas**, www.maartenbaas.com and see Mint Gallery and other stockist. **Minja Kolehmainen**, see Mint Gallery. **Mint Gallery**, 2 North Terrace, London SW3 (020-7225 2228; www.mintshop.co.uk). **Paul Mathieu**, see Willer. **Rowan Marsh**, 07949-158 987; www.rowanmarsh.com and see Gallery Fumi. **Studio Markunpoika**, www.markunpoika.com and see Gallery Fumi. **Willer**, 12 Holland Street, London W8 (020-7937 3518; www.willer.co.uk).