

Designing Dubai

Cyril Zammit's passion for design is infectious. As the director of Design Days Dubai swipes excitedly through one incredible design image after another on his iPad, describing each in fascinating detail, I find myself mentally calculating if I can afford a table piece created in Taipei from a brick wall.

It is easy to understand why the exuberant French man is excited. The pieces due to be exhibited at this year's fair, which takes place between March 18 and 21, are consistently impressive: from a floor lamp made of 20,000 hand-painted toothpicks to the avant-garde 1950s genius of revered French designer John Royère. Antique and contemporary designs from 29 galleries spanning six continents make Design Days Dubai the most culturally diverse event of its kind in the world.

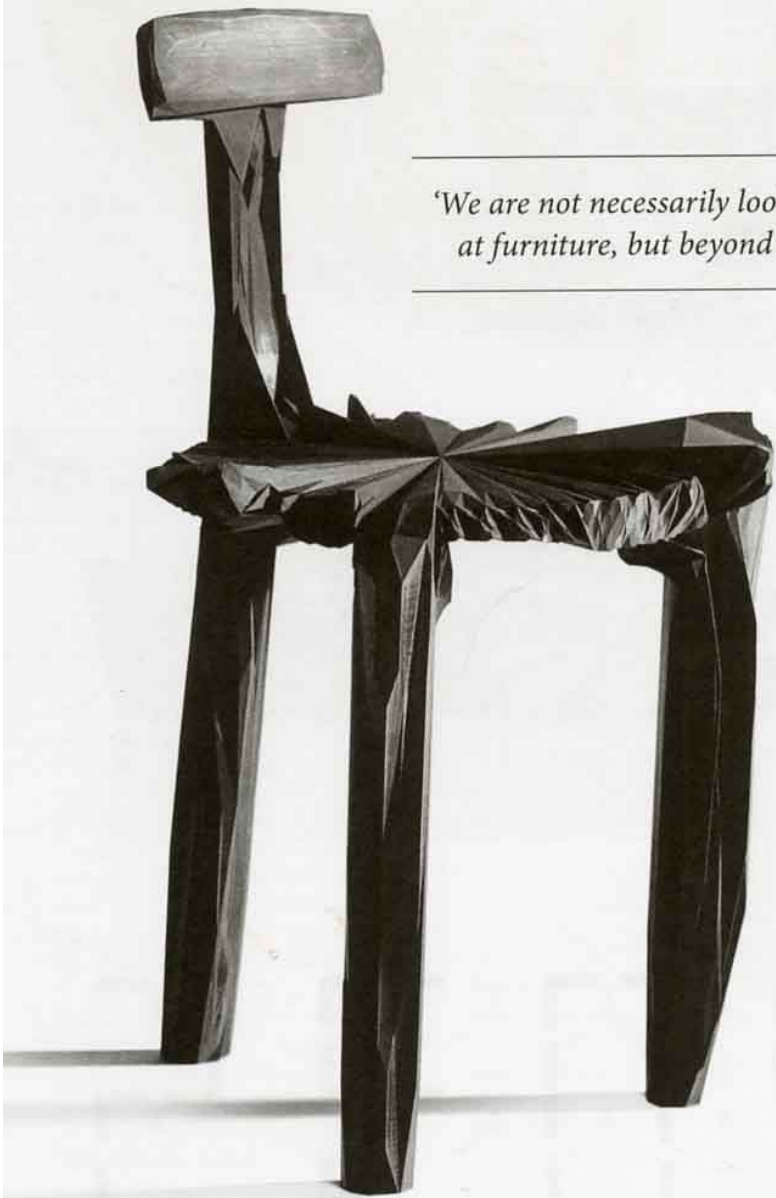
"Never has any fair before had galleries from all six continents represented," Zammit explained proudly. "Normally, it's Europe and America. We have Sao Paolo, Mexico, Australia, Korea, nine galleries from the Middle East..."

Design Days Dubai launched last year in parallel with Art Dubai: a natural progression for a maturing Middle East art scene, it followed six successful art events that have helped place Dubai at the heart of a new market.

"It comes naturally that high-end, collectable design, both from the 20th century and contemporary design, are to be seen in the same

The director of this year's Design Days Dubai is hoping the culturally diverse pieces on offer will change the way the region perceives design forever...

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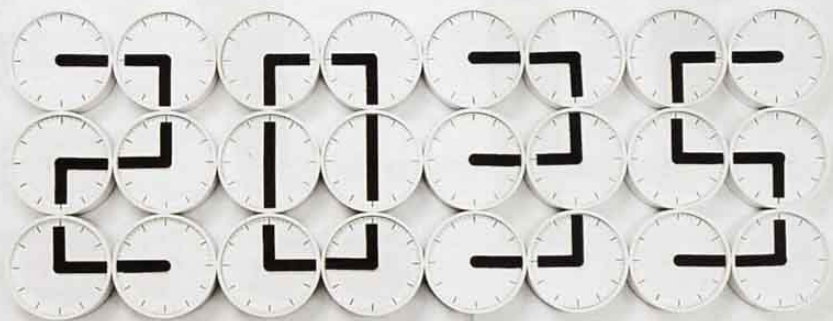
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place, in the same moment," said Zammit. "Art buyers are, more or less, design buyers; though design buyers are not necessarily art buyers."

The response to the inaugural design fair was positive and Zammit is hopeful the array of functional high-end design pieces in this year's fair will attract even more interest.

"Design remains obvious and easy to understand, because it has a functionality aspect," he said. "Of course you can sit on a chair, but you can also decide it's a museum piece and you will never sit on it. That's why it appeals to a large audience.

"Here, people love to have nice furniture for their house. We are not necessarily looking at furniture, but beyond it, because [these pieces may be] a limited edition of eight or ten pieces, or a unique prototype, or a commissioned piece. It's like comparing a little between haute couture and prêt-à-porter: I mean, [the pieces on exhibit are] very strongly bespoke."

Everything on display is available to purchase, and there is also the option to commission bespoke pieces. With prices ranging from US\$2,500 to US\$500,000, Zammit believes there is something for everyone.

"There are a lot of people who are buying expensive furniture unaware that sometimes, for the same price, they could have something made exclusively for them," he said. "I [am hoping this year's fair will encourage] a larger appreciation of design: considering it as a new form of art and also as a nice investment."

Visitors of Design Days Dubai will notice a stronger appreciation of craftsmanship at this year's fair: be it in the pure, architectural lines of Britain's Rick Owens and Korea's Gallery Seomi, or the decorative genius of David Wiseman's crystal and bronze work.

Zammit predicts an interest in new markets, such as the Middle East and Africa, this year - understandable when you see the stunning use of recycled fabrics in The Seven Stages of the Heart by Bokja, at Contemporary Art Platform, Kuwait, for example, or the incredible neon structure in Samsa by Cheick Diallo, of Mali, presented by Perimeter Art+Design Gallery (Paris/London).

Unlike the art market, design remains relatively steady, according to Zammit, making it easier to base purchases on emotional rather than financial instinct. Those with money to invest but unsure where to start can enlist the help of three in-house experts, ready to walk them through the show. But Zammit wants visitors, ultimately, to be ruled by their heart.

"They [the experts] are not there to say, 'Buy this or that', but to explain the material, the designer or the trend, the movement, the historical aspect of a piece," he said.

"If it was an individual show, of course you would need strong advice from a market advisor, but a gallery that is bringing an artist to a fair is a gallery that has invested a lot of money to support this artist prior to the show: paid for the production of the piece, paid for the booth and for the flight. They are investing a lot of money because they believe in the artist.

"So, forget 'Is it safe or unsafe?' just let your heart speak - either you like it, or you don't."



1. 'Noize chair', by Estudio Guto Requena, + Coletivo Amor de Madre Gallery
2. 'Brick Plan', by Rock Wang, HAN Gallery
3. 'Steam 20', by Bae Se Hwa, Gallery Seomi
4. 'Clockclock', by Humans since 1982, Victor Hunt Designart dealer
5. 'Tronchi cabinet', by Andrea Salvetti, TwentyTwentyone Gallery