

Slab Happy

By recruiting young designers working in wood, De La Espada is beginning to lighten up a little.

By Shonquis Moreno



top Big lamp by
Istanbul's Autoban
bottom Chaise Tabouret
by Brussels-based Marina
Bautier



Left Berlin-based Studio Hausen's MauMau bench
below Light table by the U.K.'s Matthew Hilton



EVEN FOR THOSE PAYING ATTENTION, the change has happened quietly. Walk into any of De La Espada's shops in London, New York, or Los Angeles, and you'll find that the manufacturer's subdued, boxy, solid-wood furniture has been joined by pieces enlivened with color and asymmetry. After a decade as a mainstream company working with a traditional material, De La Espada has spent the past few years reinventing itself as an avant-garde boutique brand, scouting and snatching up talent practically just out the door of design school.

Spaniard Fatima De La Espada founded the company in 1993 with Portuguese schoolmate Luis De Oliveira, opening a London flagship three years later. That first shop was filled with the work of an in-house design team, produced by hand in a dedicated Portuguese factory. In black walnut and white oak (from sustainable U.S. forests), the forms referenced such dispersed icons as the Arts & Crafts movement, the work of architects Luis Barragán and Álvaro Siza, and midcentury Scandinavian design. But after a decade in business, as tastes began to grow increasingly eclectic, De Oliveira decided to break with this design language without abandoning the traditional material and methods that defined it.

Starting in 2006, the company established three additional lines: the first, Atlantico, is more affordable. It's anchored by designs from De La Espada's London-based



above Autoban's Double Octopus lamp below Autoban's 2,5 bench



above Autoban's Magnolia lamp below Leif.design-park's Lin Pod bench



left Autoban's Spider lamp opposite page the firm's Kahve chair

creative stable but given wing by carefully selected international youngsters like Brussels-based Marina Bautier, German prodigies Studio Hausen, and the Japanese collective Leif.designpark. De Oliveira scouts for designers who haven't been published a great deal, who are detail-oriented rather than just conceptual, and who have more than one strong idea in their portfolios. "The good thing about this brief," he admits, "is that it reduces dramatically the number of suitable candidates." He selected Leif.designpark, for example, because the firm represents the latest chapter in a long tradition of Japanese woodwork and craft. "Their Tone series used combinations of woods and veneers that simply had not been considered in the West," he explains, "and pieces such as the Lin Pod bench and Tou chair were just quirky and imaginative." Bautier, for her part, is an austere designer who De Oliveira suspects could become a standard-bearer for the next generation of "supernormal" designers.

Using an approach more typical of the fashion industry, the company has also developed two boutique lines designed and art-directed by an individual or studio. Autoban Built By De La Espada debuted at New York's International Contemporary Furniture Fair in 2007, showcasing furniture and lighting that demonstrated the Istanbul studio's dexterous



synthesis of East and West, modernity and tradition. And at this year's Milan Furniture Fair, De La Espada launched a superbly wrought, clean-lined collection of seating and tables by U.K.-based Matthew Hilton. Initially, the company brought in existing pieces by both designers, but the plan is to produce new work. This process will allow the designers to use De La Espada's engineering services, production facilities, master craftsmen, retail network, and, by all accounts, a transparent prototyping and development process in which they'll participate freely. "Collaborations are not really easy for a firm like ours, which is more individualistic than commercial," says Seyhan Ozdemir of Autoban. "But collaborating with De La Espada helps us keep our minds fresh for design without ignoring sales."

In turn, the collaborations give De La Espada a new capacity to surprise. While many producers of solid-wood furniture hawk earnestly historical styles or bland low-cost "classics," De La Espada's additions flout convention. Each piece conforms with the company's trademark use of wood, while revitalizing the thick, boxy slab form on which De La Espada has long relied. Hilton whittled the slab down into long, cool facets, while Bautier—who unveiled a separate collection of wood furniture with the Japanese company Idée late last year—offered Atlantico her witty chaise-table, a seat with a removable side table lodged underneath, that will debut at Portugal's Oporto furniture fair this month. Leif.designpark's upholstered Lin Pod wood bench for Atlantico, which cantilevers at one end to hold a potted plant, will likewise be introduced at Oporto. Autoban's various departures from the slab have included the spindly-legged Box sofa, the wood-frame Bergère lounge, and a one-armed seat that looks like an off-kilter version of a classic schoolhouse chair, with all of its angles smartly deconstructed.

"Autoban loves wood like we do, but they also want to make people smile, remind them of the familiar, or evoke memories of things past," De Oliveira says. "That ability to look at pieces from an emotional point of view was new for people at De La Espada, who are accustomed to working strictly within the rules of proportion and construction. Emotion was considered superfluous, but it isn't."

The new pieces possess a liveliness that De La Espada's more conventional work never aspired to. De Oliveira wants his company to become one of the most prolific high-end, small-run niche furniture makers of today, the antithesis of the monolithic brand, and he believes that, yes, he can reach that goal with hand-crafted solid wood. Sure, wood furniture has always sold well—each plank contains its own warm story—but it hasn't always been the material of choice for iconoclasts. "The general public doesn't usually associate innovation with wood," De Oliveira says. But what he means is: It will. And soon. ★

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