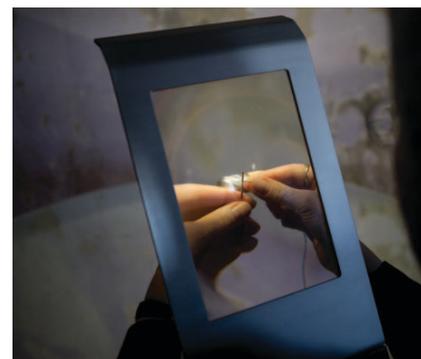


“It almost seems as if choice is eliminated from our lives once we hit 65 years of age,” Wai says. “Why should age disrupt our rituals?”

Mature Aesthetic

The up-and-coming designer duo Lanzavecchia+Wai sets out to make aging stylish.



Let's face it: the notion of aging hasn't aged well. Even though people are living longer, growing old still doesn't have much brand equity. Like the medical profession with its dearth of physicians specializing in geriatrics, the design industry suffers from a lack of elderly-friendly practitioners, too.

Enter Francesca Lanzavecchia and Hunn Wai of the Milan- and Singapore-based studio Lanzavecchia+Wai, who launched a collection called *No Country for Old Men* in Milan last April that made growing older look not just enjoyable, but stylish. *No Country* includes the Monolight that's both a lamp and magnifying glass; the Assunta chair that uses the sitter's own body weight, applied to a foot bar, to tilt the seat forward and help her stand; and three dual-purpose Together Canes—a T-cane with integrated tea tray, a U-cane doubling as a storage unit and an I-cane reimagined as an iPad desktop—with the tagline, “Walking aids for living, not just mobility.”

“We try to make a statement by showing how one could desire these objects as one would any other piece of contemporary design,” Wai says. Indeed, the objects look so good that they could be aids for any of us, no matter our age. And they certainly didn't look out of place at the last Milan Furniture Fair.

Lanzavecchia works primarily in Milan, where she studied product design at the Politecnico di Milano, while Wai mans the studio in Singapore, where he grew up and studied industrial design. The two met at the Design Academy Eindhoven while it was still under the direction of Gijs Bakker, and have collaborated since 2009. Their work, and the way it is presented, has a material lightness—blond wood, bright upholstery, and soft edges that recall Scandinavian design—as well as a lightheartedness. The designers are aware that it is through strong, appealing imagery that their message of inclusivity and busting biases will spread. **continued on page 34**

The Together Canes (left) were inspired by Lanzavecchia's grandmother's daily rituals. A magnifying lamp (top, right), and a chair that makes up for loss in muscle strength (above, right), round out the *No Country for Old Men* collection.

“We leverage our differences in culture, values, and insights to inform our practice as richly as possible,” Wai says.



This type of savvy may be why, in spite of operating in different time zones and relying on digital communication tools and photos of prototypes, the two insist that maintaining two studios keeps their products globally relevant. The Milan office will head up a project with Alcantara for the MAXXI in Rome, for instance, while the Singapore office is working on a Chinese project and has taken charge of producing prototypes more cost-effectively in Singapore. “Thankfully, a lot of correspondence with our clients, some of whom we have yet to meet face-to-face, can be done via Skype,” Wai says. “We leverage our differences in culture, values, and insights to inform our practice as richly as possible.”

No Country was born out of personal experience. When Lanzavecchia’s grandmother began to use a walker, she could no longer bring her husband the afternoon coffee and biscuits that were a beloved daily habit, striking a small but deep blow to their quality of life. These observations of the details that make up a mature existence led to an investigation into tools that are used out of necessity, not choice. “It almost seems as if choice is eliminated from our lives once we hit 65 years of age,” Wai points out. “Why should age disrupt our rituals?”



The Milan-based Lanzavecchia and the Singapore-based Wai (far left) met at the Design Academy Eindhoven. The Spaziale series of furniture (left) was one of their early collaborations.

As with every other product created for the general public, the key issue in designing for mature users is function. But Lanzavecchia and Wai realized that they must generate an aesthetic that not only intuitively tells a user with particular needs how to use an object, but that is also of its time. The elderly, as we all do, deserve products that work well, look tasteful, and foster an attachment that makes using them feel natural and pleasurable. Beauty serves a function, inducing emotion, Wai explains, “something that a cold piece of aluminum tubing with bits of plastic stuck to it does not encourage.”

At the moment the No Country pieces remain prototypes, but the designers are talking to interested producers—both furniture brands and companies that produce medical aids. Sadly, like any prejudice, ageism has a long life expectancy. “In this picture-perfect world of blemish-free, high-gloss youthfulness, as portrayed in the media, age is still taboo. We’re asking: ‘Why is this? Isn’t aging natural?’” Wai says. “It really is quite peculiar when you think about it.” ■