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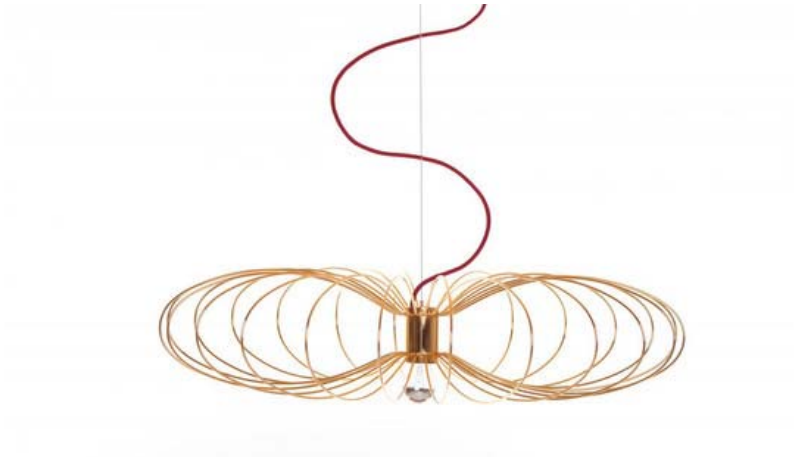
Young Turkish designers seek new ways to reflect their heritage

By Trish Lorenz Author alerts

Growing demand for interior design in the country has prompted creatives and consumers to explore their national identity



Flying Spider pendant, from £594, by Autoban for De La Espada, delaespada.com

The second Istanbul Design Biennial, which starts in November, is taking place at a pivotal time for both the city and Turkey more broadly. The country has experienced 10 years of solid economic growth and Istanbul, which is now home to almost 20 per cent of Turkey's population, is increasingly affluent. But, as last month's presidential victory for Recep Erdogan attests, the trend is towards conservatism and waning secularism.

Born in 1923 after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, Turkey is a young nation and the country, which straddles east and west both physically and culturally, is still debating its future direction. "The concept of Turkishness is still very open to interpretation, depending on people's background, religion and where they live. You don't see a unified concept or a single idea of nationhood," says Zoe Ryan, Istanbul Design Biennial's curator.

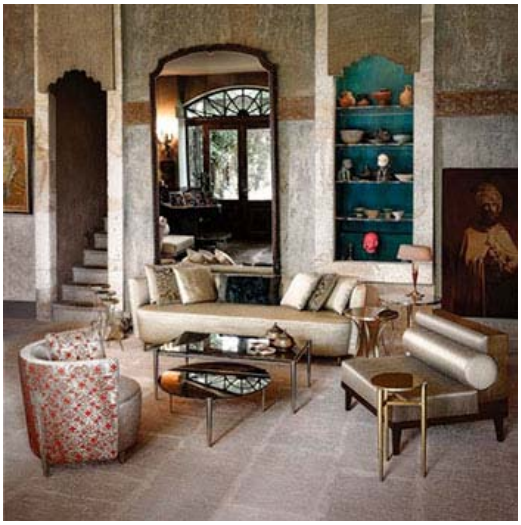
This is also true of the country's designers and architects. For many years the creative industry and its consumers preferred to look to the west for inspiration. Zeynep Fadillioglu (zfdesign.com) is one of Turkey's leading interior designers: in 2009 she was the first woman to design a mosque and her work also encompasses domestic and commercial interiors.

"In my childhood, everyone copied what was happening in the west and tried to live in a western way," she says. "It was only when I studied in London that I recognised my own heritage in the amazing Turkish textiles and objects like the Iznik tiles that I found in museums like the V&A."

It is a theme echoed by Gaye Cevikel, who founded Turkish design brand Gaia & Gino in 2004. "We don't have a history of a strong design culture," says Cevikel. "During the Ottoman period we were very closed; there was no real industrial revolution in the country

and afterwards people looked to the west for inspiration."

But that is changing. There is a growing demand for interior design within the country, and architects, designers and consumers are beginning to explore their national identity in their homes and work.



Kazan armchair (left), £925, Kazan sofa, £2,170, and Sedir armchair (right), from £1,270, all by zeynepfadilliogludesign.com

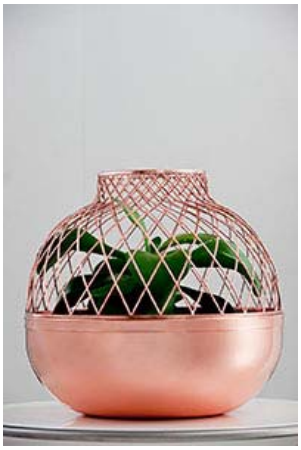
"We are seeing a much greater demand for interior design locally," says Can Sucuoglu of young architecture and graphic design practice Iyiofis. "Economic growth here is being driven by the building industry and there are a lot of new commercial and residential projects."

Fadillioglu was one of the first Turkish designers to incorporate traditional materials and styles within a more contemporary framework. Her residential interiors employ layers of colours, textiles and textures to create a distinctly Turkish feel. In her own home, a palette of gold, pale pink, deep red and vibrant orange is complemented by low furniture, rugs and wall hangings, with occasional silver and gold objects to lift the level of opulence.

Fadillioglu has also released a range of products that reference Ottoman design cues, including the gold-legged Tulip side table (from £675), leather or metal Sini tables (from £680), and the Sedir chair, which uses marquetry for detail (£1,270, zeynepfadilliogludesign.com).

"We're not really able to say yet that there is a specifically Turkish design aesthetic but I think we are beginning to see a kind of language emerging," she says. "The younger generation is more conscious of their heritage and is exploring ways to come up with ideas that reflect that."

One of those younger designers is Seyhan Ozdemir, who co-founded Autoban with Sefer Caglar in 2003. Autoban is the most influential group to emerge from Turkey in the past decade and has become a formidable force. The group is designing the airport in Baku, Azerbaijan, and three restaurants in London, including Alan Yau's Duck and Rice, scheduled to open on Berwick Street this autumn.



Copper vessel by Jaime Hayon, from €445, esensualliving.com

Autoban also has a furniture range, which includes the Box Sofa, £5,670, made from leather and wood; and the gold and brass Pill wall lamp from £714 (both delaespada.com). The range has clear modernist influences with clean lines, natural materials and a simple, architectural feel. However, a Turkish signature is also visible in the use of materials, which includes copper, gold and marble, and in the handmade feel of the pieces.

Istanbul remains home to a large population of craftsmen and skilled tradesmen and it is easy for designers to tap into this pool of talent. Ozdemir believes the emerging Turkish aesthetic is in part defined by this focus on material and craft. "We are seeing people begin to work with traditional materials and techniques in a contemporary way."

Cevikel is one example. At Gaia & Gino she works with international designers including Karim Rashid, Jaime Hayon and Yves Béhar, along with local designers such as Ali Tayar and Defne Koz. Istanbul is the point of inspiration for the collection and most of the pieces are handmade. Hayon's hookah design for the company, Hookhayon, (from €1,500, gaiagino.com) is a case in point. Using sandblown glass and oak and with a curvaceous, almost feminine form, Hayon gives this traditional Turkish symbol a strong contemporary feel.

For Fadillioglu, Cevikel and Autoban, the market remains largely international – the US, Europe and the Middle East are the primary audience, with China and Asia becoming increasingly important. But younger designers are finding local audiences for their contemporary interpretations of a Turkish aesthetic. "There is still some preference for a kitsch, Ottoman style that references the Middle East but a more minimal style is now in evidence too," says Sucuoglu.

A more political discourse is also beginning to emerge. Meric Canatan, 26, (mericcanatan.com) is a textile and fashion designer. She says her heritage is pivotal to her work. "I try to reflect the complexity of the country, those sharp contrasts we see every day."


Zeynep Fadillioglu bathroom

Canatan's project for the Biennale sees her cover gas masks and other military objects with feathers, an idea that emerged from the Gezi Park anti-government protests in Istanbul last year. "I want to explore if objects of protest can become everyday objects. During the protests we always carried gas masks in our bags. It was weird and scary but maybe after a while an object like that can also become an accessory like any other."

Istanbul Design Biennial

The theme of the second Istanbul Design Biennial is "The Future Is Not What It Used To Be". Curator Zoe Ryan says: "Turkey is really emerging at the moment. Socially and politically, this is a special moment for the country. Designers are looking at where they have come from and to what lies ahead, too."

Ryan has chosen 75 projects for inclusion in the Biennial. International designers are well represented, with work by US and European groups sitting alongside projects by Turkish designers.

One piece, by the Istanbul collective Architecture for All, documents the furniture and ad-hoc living spaces that sprang up during the Gezi Park political protests in the city last year. Other projects include design firm Iyiofis's plans to design spaces that give people greater access to Istanbul's urban coastline, and "LEPSIS: The Art of Growing Grasshoppers", by Mansour Ourasanah from San Francisco, which looks at whether a growing population and global food shortage can be addressed through the cultivation of grasshoppers for human consumption.

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