

# French design's 'spring'

by

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## Overview

They are called 'Moustache', 'Petite friture', and 'TH Manufacture', and for the past ten years or so, a new generation of French design editors have been making a name for themselves in the design world. They have achieved recognition, for example, by showing their work in New York's Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), winning a Wallpaper Design Award, being on display at Paris' Bon Marché department store, and showcasing the talents they have brought to light. An example of one of these new design editors is La Chance which was created in 2012 by two thirty-year-olds, Jean-Baptiste Souletie and Louise Breguet. It resembles a start-up because of its culture and flexibility, has made a distinct position for itself in terms of its style, and targeted the international market straightaway. This emerging, dynamic profession can draw on support from both professional organisations and public authorities. This joint action helps to implement a strategy to encourage growth in this sector.

Report by Sophie Jacolin • Translation by Rachel Marlin

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**Jean-Baptiste Souletie:** In 2012, on the margins of the key Milan Furniture Fair and with the unexpected help from the award-winning designer Tom Dixon, La Chance presented its very first collection, and attracted widespread press attention. My associate, Louise Breguet, and I were not natural-born designers, but we did share a passion for design and wanted it to be our professional future. It was perhaps pure luck that a few months before the Milan Fair our paths crossed with Tom Dixon: he offered us an exhibition space which we would have been unable to afford otherwise. Luck was also on our side on another occasion when a well-known designer, Luca Nichetto, agreed to design a table for our relatively unknown design house. Perhaps the decisive and strong choices we made as well as our meticulous vigilance for emerging talent helped luck to come our way. In any case, we are keen to give all young designers who share our artistic tastes the same luck and opportunities which we have had.

### Design editor: choosing the interface

Louise Breguet and I chose to become furniture designer editors in order to pursue our interest in design. This activity brings together two factors which we considered were equally important, namely the opportunity to develop an aesthetic vision, and the possibility of building a company.

We could have achieved this in other ways. The furniture market covers three key professions. Firstly, there are the integrated manufacturers who design their objects themselves and produce them in their own factories. The products tend to be distributed throughout a network of exclusive shops which are either privately owned or franchises. This is the most traditional and capitalistic model, and is the one used by the leading companies in this sector. Their clients' purchase choice is motivated more because of a specific brand than because of the designer behind the product. Ligne Roset, the modern French furniture company, sometimes resorts to well-known designers rather than using its own, in-house designers, but this occurs relatively infrequently and essentially for publicity purposes.

The second profession is the art gallery owners. They work with designers to create pieces in very small series – five or ten examples at most – which can still be classified as works of art in legal terms. This market, where a desk may cost 50,000 Euros, is similar to the contemporary art market. There is an event specifically for modern and vintage furniture called Design Miami, and it takes place at the same time as Art Basel Miami Beach Fair.

Finally, there are the design editors who, like gallery owners, outsource the creation and manufacture of their furniture. They have neither a designated design team nor their own means of production nor their own distribution channels. Their economic constraints, however, are very different from those of the galleries because they sell large series of pieces of furniture.

The role of a furniture design editor is similar to that of a music producer who gets a rather unfinished template, organises a quality recording in a studio, and then sells the finished product to a retailer, such as the Fnac. Some furniture editors, like La Chance, contact designers themselves, whereas others prefer to receive spontaneous suggestions which they are sent. The editor ensures the artistic direction of the project. Working with the designer, he fine-tunes the vision of the object according to its technical characteristics and the appropriate market, chooses the manufacturers, and organises the production which respects aesthetic criteria and price requirements. He then ensures the product promotion and sells the products to architects and distributors.

Unlike an integrated producer, such as Ligne Roset which owns factories and has its own distribution network, the only 'capital' a design editor possesses is his panel of designers and his catalogue of exclusive models.

## The art of assembly

By definition, the design editor does not have an in-house creative team. He promotes outside designers. His talent lies in his ability to create a coherent catalogue of objects which have been dreamed up by a multitude of designers, allowing each one to express his creative vision while simultaneously conveying the identity of the brand. The designers with whom we work also have orders from other design editor houses. Their talent is their ability to adapt themselves to the style and the constraints of each of these houses while bringing their own identity to the fore. An object they create for one editor might be totally inappropriate for another.

### *Creation under productive constraint*

Rather than working on pre-existing projects which they refer to us, we tend to request that our designers adhere to a brief which differentiates three components: the type of object which we think the market needs or wants; the technical production constraints; and, finally, the brand's specific artistic direction. Some design editors specialise in a product, such as coffee tables or light fixtures. We prefer to create a world in which the same spirit and style can be applied to different types of objects. For example, we may ask a designer to work on designing a table (because our range does not have many tables) which has precise dimensions (those which sell the best) and is made from given materials and satisfies certain technical constraints which are specific to our manufacturers. We have to identify a precise need which corresponds to production requirements, the market and our brand image. The object has to solve a complicated equation, namely that it is totally new, but easy to adopt, and exclusive, but at a reasonable market price.

Given this brief, the designer gives us a drawing, an initial proposal which is far from the finished product. On this basis, we then start a 'joint creation' process, firstly with the designer in order to refine his idea, and then with the manufacturer who will produce the piece. The designer may be reluctant to compromise on elements which he considers to be essential, but they will have to be corrected in order to make the project economically viable. We transform the initial idea in numerous ways, given the production conditions, but also aspects which may appear secondary to the creator, such as the packaging, the variety of products packed in a box in order to avoid breakage during transportation, the size of the hoisting pallet, and so on. This reflects the reality of the product environment. Our pieces of furniture are for everyday use. They are not articles displayed in galleries.

This product development may take as long as a year. Importantly – and this is the advantage of work which constantly goes backwards and forwards – each new constraint forces the designer to reconsider, and to adopt a different perspective with regards to his creation. Sometimes we end up with a perfect product, but at an unrealistic price. We then have to come to a compromise which necessarily has repercussions on other aspects, and so we embark on a new direction. The more precise and binding the framework, the more the designer devises imaginative and unexpected solutions, and these qualities are those we specifically look for. The final product is an accurate representation of the initial idea, but diverges in its realisation.

For example, one of our chairs comes from a study project taken from the blog of a student at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts. Its shape conforms to the initial drawing, but its design, geometry, manufacture and the materials used are very different. Constraints regarding ergonomics and mass production forced us to reconsider the curve of the back of the chair which was carved in a block of marble by a digitally operated five-axis machine. The greater the angle, the greater the need for a large block of marble. Had we conformed to the original drawing, the price of the chair would have doubled. This type of detail only appears in this refining phase. This is where the design editor can bring his know-how to the fore. Six years after we created our company, we are now more capable of identifying these sorts of constraints earlier on in the design and manufacturing process. In the past, we launched projects which, at the very least, were ambitious, if not suicidal.

The panel of designers whom we choose are largely responsible for La Chance's brand image. They come from very different backgrounds. Some of them are 'big' names, well-established in their careers like Noé Duchaufour-Lawrance or Luca Nichetto, whereas others are completely unknown. We hold this principle dear, and it explains the *raison d'être* of our name, that we give budding designers the chance to associate themselves