

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

with famous names, having ourselves been lucky enough to have had famous designers believe in us when we started in the profession.

Our price range reflects the fact that we work in the high-end sector of the market, but this is justified by the development work that we do and the materials that we use. Nonetheless, our prices are lower than those of well-known, integrated manufacturers. For example, our 'Salute' table, an off-centre metal table-top placed on a column of marble drawn by the star of German design, Sebastian Herkner, costs between 1,200 and 2,500 Euros (according to the materials used). In comparison, Knoll, the famous design firm, has a table which requires the same quantity of marble and the same sort of craftsmanship, but costs about 4,300 Euros. Knoll's volumes and production prices are, surprisingly, out of all proportion with ours.



'Salute' tables, Sebastian Herkner

High-quality collaboration

In order to put together a network of manufacturers, we met with people throughout Europe who had the necessary know-how. We needed to blow glass so we first went to Murano, but the costs there were high, and we did not find this industry very dynamic or innovative. In the end, we found a partner in Bohemia, like most other design editors. To meet our requirements for wood, we work with Italian manufacturers in the so-called 'Chair Valley', a region near the Slovenian border where there is a concentration of craftspeople in the chair-seat manufacturing process (who specialise in seat structures, padding, packaging, certification, and so on). In Lithuania, we found a terrific partner, a family-owned carpentry business specialising in the manufacture of stairs and sculptured tops of balustrades, objects which are quite precise and technical. The young son in this family business wanted to diversify, and decided to remodel hotels abroad. We met him by chance, and we have embarked on a collaborative and enthusiastic relationship with him. When his workers saw our stools (which are statuesque and disconcerting) for the first time, it did not make sense to them. Today, they are attached to these pieces of furniture which are more than just objects, they are everyday sculptures. Portugal is our third major manufacturing site for upholstered pieces and pieces in marble.

Because we are a small company – only six people – and the large amount of time which we allocate to the development of a product in the course of numerous trips, we can only work with enthusiastic manufacturers who are very keen about design and who want to reinvent furniture. It would be impossible for us to work with a producer who was only motivated by money or a producer where there was a battle for power.

Influenced distribution

Our pieces of furniture are sometimes puzzling and disconcerting. Our name suggests this: our coloured, dazzling, statuesque articles are the unexpected element inside a home, the so-called 'chance factor' which adds life and modernity. To sell these extraordinary objects, we need ambassadors, interior designers and architects. These people are familiar with the world of design who know our aesthetic references, and are able to explain them to

their clients and in so doing enable them to overcome their initial apprehension and become attached to the pieces.

Our products are almost exclusively distributed by prescribers. Nearly 70% of our turnover is generated in specialised shops which are mainly used by professionals; nearly 10% from the general public; and the rest from architects. International sales account for 74% of our turnover (more than 50% outside Europe). Our markets in south-east Asia, the United Arab Emirates and Australia are particularly dynamic. In Australia, we have a very enthusiastic partner who is a very good brand ambassador. The American clientele is more difficult to handle because these clients find our delivery times too long. Our sales in France are increasing, but it has taken us a long time to bring the population round to our style of design. Even though France is a mature market with well-known brands, French consumers have a less pronounced culture for furniture compared to their Italian or Scandinavian counterparts. French people know the names of fashion designers, but virtually no names of furniture designers. Furthermore, they tend to call on interior designers or architects less than the British or Americans.

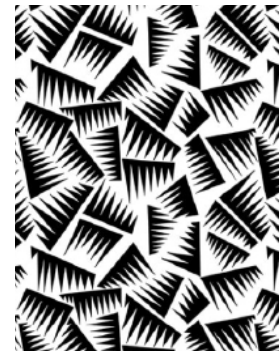
Integration and modernity of French design

Our furniture is influenced by the Art Deco movement and the Memphis Group of the 1980s. Our theatrical approach demonstrates a French tradition and is unlike any stripped-down Asian lines, or flamboyant Italian, conceptual Dutch and industrial English styles. We have become well integrated and appreciated in French society, as has our name. 'Chance' both in French and English makes one think of a positive and incontrollable force which suits us. 'La' adds a French tone. Our Internet site, www.lachance.paris, informs a foreign public about us, and we hope that we convince them to buy our furniture.

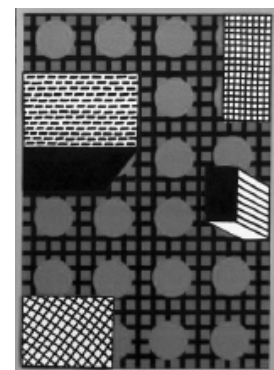
Our sculptural pieces of furniture do not go unnoticed. They make their mark aesthetically, for example, using a combination of materials; accumulating, juxtapositioning and associating both fine and solid elements; and making structures (which are never hidden) appear like ornamental elements. Even though they are quite complex, our objects can be understood straightaway. No concept is hidden, even specialised assembly techniques. The piece of furniture's specificity is self-explanatory. This is characteristic of French Art Deco and, in particular, the work of Jacques-Émile Ruhlmann whose designs Louise Breguet and I consider as a 'golden age'. Apart from the aesthetics, we identify with the collaborative and open values of this movement. It was in the 1920s that the status of 'designer' emerged as the person who designed the object, but used a third party to manufacture it. Until then, it was the designer who made the piece of furniture. Since they did not have to deal with the manufacture, designers could concentrate on multiple forms of expression. At the 1926 Salon des Arts Décoratifs, Jacques-Émile Ruhlmann presented a 'perfect house', demonstrating a multitude of know-how and highlighting the work of specialists in paper, sculpture, lacquers (especially those by Jean Dunand who drew his inspiration from Asia), and so on. This open-mindedness and collaborative spirit closely reflect the way in which we see our profession as design editor.

Like Art Deco, the Memphis Group, another of La Chance's references, plays on the accumulation and juxtaposition to produce statuesque pieces with different materials, for example the Memphis Group uses egg and tortoise shells, and it substitutes usual melamine colours with melamine which has striking colours.

To illustrate our influences from Art Deco and the Memphis Group and thereby explain, justify and establish our brand, we made two Jacques-Émile Ruhlmann articles, wallpaper and a mirror, both of which are very modern, and we asked Nathalie du Pasquier, one of the founding members of the Memphis Group, to create a rug.



Wallpaper and the 'Lalou' mirror, Jacques-Émile Ruhlmann



The 'Tapigri' rug, Nathalie du Pasquier

Often furniture design editors claim to be both creative and integrated. The highly innovative Spanish company, Barcelona Design, sells objects which clearly reflect contemporary design, but also produces pieces inspired by Antoni Gaudi and Salvador Dali. ClassiCon uses specialised designers, but also produces furniture by Eileen Gray from her interwar period. This demonstrates the characteristic rigour behind this German company.

How can one help the boom in design?

What prompted an architect and a banker to create a design edition house for furniture? Louise Breguet began her career as an architect, working for luxury goods shops at Beijing airport, before designing homes in Spain, on the French Côte d'Azur and even in Haiti. She wanted to down-scale and focus on details of objects where one can impart a strong identity.

As far as I am concerned, after I graduated from business school, I started working in banking, but still managed to find the time to redesign the future offices and renew the furniture of the bank where I worked in London, and to revise the graphic design of the investment fund which I joined afterwards. I hoped that I would be able to exert my creativity in the strategy department of PPR (Pinault-Printemps-Redoute), but in fact it was more administrative than creative. When I met Louise, I was 26 and she was 27 years old. We thought a great deal about what we wanted to do professionally. Were we going to design furniture? Would we have a gallery, or would we focus on mass production? The profession of design editor seemed like a good compromise in the light of our ambitions to start a business involving mass production – Louise still has ideas about owning a factory –, to adopt a comprehensive sales approach, and to focus on international development.

We managed to present our first collection using limited funds that we were able to raise from a close circle of friends and family. However, the launch and development of the brand were only possible because we found partners – designers, manufacturers and distributors – who were extremely motivated, and wanted to promote a creative project which they found interesting and promising. Today we do not have the capacity to handle all the orders we receive. We lack the financial means to move forward in our growth phase.

Jennifer Thiault: In 2015, the Ministry of Culture considered the possibility of including design in the activities funded by the IFCIC (Institut pour le financement du cinéma et des industries culturelles: Institute for financing the cinema and cultural activities). This establishment was created in 1983 by the Ministry of Industry and the Ministry of Culture to find a solution for small companies in the cultural sector (such as producers, editors, publishers and broadcasters) which found it difficult to borrow money. These sorts of situations threatened the stability of the system and made it less likely that creative people could emerge and develop their businesses. French banks own 51% of the IFCIC; the rest is owned by the State and Bpifrance (a public investment bank serving to help finance and develop companies). It grants repayable advances and bank guarantees to very small and medium-sized cultural companies which have been created recently. Most recently, it has financed cinemas, video games, bookshops, music, art galleries and fashion. Would it be appropriate to fund design? And if so, which link in the value chain of this sector would most benefit from receiving funds or bank guarantees? After we consulted representatives in the design profession, including those who were members of the VIA (*Valorisation de l'innovation dans l'ameublement*: Valorisation of innovation in furnishings) association, we thought it would be wise to allocate funds to design editors. Unlike designers, they have the greatest need for cash. As well as this, they are the means by which both young designers and French brands can become known in France and internationally. They also have a very positive leverage effect on French creation.

After these initial consultations, we carried out an investigation among about sixty small French furniture design editors who were new and dynamic. They are often very small businesses, employing less than ten people, and their turnover rarely exceeds 500,000 Euros. Most of them were able to start their businesses with loans from family and friends. Half of them needed finance from banks, but most had neither access to tax credit nor to Bpifrance, crowdfunding or business angels. Many of them struggle to go beyond a turning point in their development. We noted a number of reasons why the IFCIC should grant them money. We hope that the scheme will be in place before the end of 2017. The Ministry of Culture raised 700,000 Euros to finance this.

Jean-Paul Bath: The French furniture market represents 12 billion Euros. The sixty or so furniture editors make up a small part of this, with an average turnover of 500,000 Euros. The largest one has a turnover of 8 million Euros. These figures are tiny in comparison with editors in Scandinavia or the UK and the US. Tom Dixon (UK) has a turnover of about 30 million Euros; Gubi (Denmark), 26 million; and Carl Hansen (Denmark), 70 million.

Even the definition of furniture editor is ambiguous. In Italy, any company which manufactures a relatively large amount of furniture calls itself an editor. Consequently, Ligne Roset and Cinna could be called editors because they call on designers to create furniture. In France, there are designers who manufacture their pieces themselves, and conversely, manufacturers (carpentry companies in particular) which try their hand at design can also call themselves design editors. There are also 'pure' editors who outsource design and production. Today, we are targeting small structures which are actively promoting a revival in French furniture, and we are beginning with designers rather than manufacturers. Petite Friture (whose 'Vertigo' ceiling light by Constance Guisset is a best seller), Bibelo, Hârto, Le point D, Drugeot Labo (which was created by two brothers who took over a family carpentry business and employed designers), Moustache, and ¿adónde? are just some examples of the design editors we are helping. Each one has its own personal touch, the desire to create its own specific products, and its own brand. These editors are a tremendous asset which our industry, which is traditionally remote from the general public, should take advantage of in order to work towards the dissemination and influence of design and French creation abroad.

Discussion



Behind the artists: the managers

A speaker: *In the development of your company, do the management aspects take up as much of your time as questions related to design?*

Jean-Baptiste Souletie: The reason we chose to be editors is because we wanted to create a company and make it grow. We have tried hard to structure our company and to consider how we are going to finance its development. Every year we launch improvement programmes, like the new, recent Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) system we set up which analyses the initial contact with the client up to the accountancy stage, and is capable of providing performance indicators including post-sales customer service and transportation costs for each product.

Similarly, we have reorganised our team so that it is no longer just a group of people who have been added because of a function they perform. Instead we want a real cohort of people who are driven by the same desire. Some people left the company, and in 2017 we welcomed a salesperson, who is an enthusiastic representative of the brand, and a graphic designer. The salesperson had previously created a brand of cushions made in India, and the graphic designer works for La Chance and her father's sawmill where she produced a collection of assembly elements which are distributed by the DIY retailer Leroy Merlin. One of our collaborators (who trained as an engineer) is in charge of the pre-production phase of the pieces and the interface between the designers and the manufacturers. A fourth person is in charge of logistics, organisation of production and inventory management. He was previously in charge of the manufacture of pieces produced by an artist. He graduated from a fashion school and designs wedding dresses as well as working for us.

We work in a very interconnected way. We all discuss the propositions put forward by designers and the choice of materials. Each person contributes to the creative process, brings his/her ideas, but also starts to carry out their own project. Louise and I are progressively delegating more tasks, especially with regard to sales, in order to concentrate more on developing the brand.

S.: *Initially, you did not want to handle the distribution and production yourselves and you outsourced the design. Was this a deliberate decision on your part or a choice by default? If you had the means, would you do things differently?*

J.-B. S.: We might reconsider our decision to outsource manufacture. When a range of products includes a best seller which has a large number of regular sales, it is more profitable to integrate part of the production and thereby increase one's margins. In the long term, it would make sense to have a site where we can present our entire collection: currently, we do this only two or three times a year, at fairs. What I think we do need is a flagship site rather than our own distribution network. A first step towards this will be the opening of our 120 m² shop in Dubai.

S.: *Do you intend to launch other activities apart from furniture, such as interior design?*

J.-B. S.: We already carry out interior design but we do not have the time to devote ourselves to it fully. We have been artistic directors for restaurant projects, and we would like to do more in that field and maybe even design a hotel. Following the example of editors such as Tom Dixon or Marcel Wanders (the founder of Moooi), we would like to have an emblematic studio where we can install all our products such as light fittings, furniture, wallpaper, rugs, our textile products, and so on.

The glass ceiling for small editors

S.: *In what field would financial support from public authorities be the most useful?*

J.-B. S.: In the last few years, our turnover increased from 50 % to 100 %. After two attempts to raise funds from our close circle of family and friends, we had to deal with a very tight cash situation. Our financial reserves are five to six times less than the norm for the sector. Our turnover at the end of 2017 is down because a very important order from the United Arab Emirates was put back eight months. The result is that we lack the necessary cash, and therefore we pay our manufacturers late and are having to extend our delivery times. It is not possible to keep stocks of products which are half-finished (the structures of customisable sofas, for example) as this penalises our delivery times. If a hotel requests fifty pieces in a relatively short space of time, I cannot satisfy their demand because I am not able to finance the production, and my production times will be too long, as well as the fact that I lack the intermediate parts. If we had more financial means, we could have sped up our development earlier.

Our profession does not attract banks because there is a lack of collateral. It would be quite a different matter if La Chance owned a factory. Our turnover, which is close to 1 million Euros, is too small to interest venture capitalists. Curiously enough, I have to refuse numerous orders, including projects worth 200,000 Euros. This is proof that La Chance could easily double its turnover. Business angels have worked with us, but they have only invested small amounts and, up until now, Bpifrance struggled to finance innovation projects which were not technological. However, its position is changing.

In our profession, the fixed costs (fairs, sales team and showrooms) are very difficult for a small company to absorb, but when one's turnover exceeds a certain amount, they become insignificant. Furniture edition companies which have a turnover of 10 million Euros have a sizeable EBITDA (Earnings Before Interest, Taxes, Depreciation and Amortisation) margin – greater than 20 %. Their net income margins are also very high because they have the same costs as companies like La Chance whose turnover is 1 million Euros.

Today, we must change scale. We will need to have the money to finance several hundreds of thousands of Euros of stock. This is how financial support from the public authorities could make a big difference. It is difficult to find a financier who understands that design edition is a slow business requiring five years of investment, but where a best-selling item can sell for fifteen years.

S.: *How do you explain the Ministry of Culture's renewed interest in design?*

Jennifer Thiault: The Ministry of Culture's interest in design is nothing new. In the beginning of the 1980s, it clearly wanted to support this sector in co-operation with the Ministry of Industry. At that time, design was

integrated with industrial creation. This gave rise, amongst others, to the *École nationale supérieure de création industrielle* (French School for Industrial Creation) and the Agence pour la promotion de la création industrielle (Agency for the promotion of industrial creation).

In 2013, Alain Cadix's report entitled 'Towards a national design policy' recommending the development of a design culture in France or, at least, better knowledge of the designer profession by the industrial environment, revived the Ministry's intention to work in this sector. We launched various operations including the valorisation of public design collections of the CNAP (*Centre national des arts plastiques*: National Centre for visual arts), the Arts Décoratifs, Sèvres, the Mobilier national, the Pompidou Centre, Saint-Étienne; discussions about higher education; the spread of good practices; action to professionalise designers with the Direction générale des entreprises (a government agency intended to develop growth and competitiveness); and so on. The creation of funds allocated for design given by the IFCIC is a result of this work.

Entering the market

S.: *You did not begin your career in the design sector. How did you become accepted in this field? How have you achieved validity?*

J.-B. S.: When I worked for PPR, a group which manages many fashion brands, the creators saw me as a financier, a foil. This is not the case in the design world. The designers we work with know that their ideas cannot materialise without financial means or technical compromises. They do not see me as a person who is going to distort their project, but rather as someone who will make it possible.

I did not study design, but I have always been very enthusiastic about it. I speak the same language as designers. The rest is just a question of meetings and mutual recognition. Take the example of the famous Luca Nichetto who manages projects throughout the world for the most prestigious clients. I met him when he was giving a talk at the 'Maison&Objet' fair. I gave him my visiting card and then sent him an email about La Chance outlining the source of our inspirations, our projects, our values, and the unknown designers who had decided to join our team. Our message struck a chord with him, so much so that in 2012, the year we began, Luca Nichetto produced three pieces for three very prestigious design editors (Cassina, Established & Sons, and De Padova)... and one object for La Chance.

We produced the very first piece of furniture for the Note Design Studio group which has become a star in contemporary Nordic design. We were aware of Note Design because of the Marginal Notes exhibition where Note Design transformed 'doodles' scribbled in the margins of notebooks into a three-dimensional object. When the members of what was then a group of graphic creation saw us order a stool from them, they thought we were mad. This event nonetheless gave rise to one of our best sellers, the 'Bolt' stool which consists of four 'logs' held together by a copper ring. The following year, this piece was awarded the Wallpaper Design Award for the best stool. It is one of the products we presented to Luca Nichetto.

The journalist Cédric Morisset, an active promoter of the spirit of French design, has also supported us. He organised an annual exhibition in Milan which highlighted national creation. We are also making progress thanks to meetings with people who identify with our project and who want to be part of it.



'Bolt' stools, Note Design Studio

S.: *Authors have an exclusive relationship with their publishers, just like musicians with their producers. Separations can sometimes be dramatic. What sort of a relationship do you have with designers? Do they just come and work for La Chance as a 'one off'?*

J.-B. S.: We do not work with designers with whom we think we will have a conflicting relationship. This would harm the collaborative dimension of the development phase. We sign an exclusivity license with the designer for a given piece. This means that he cannot produce another object which is comparable to, or has a similar concept with, another editor. If we stop the production of the piece which is under licence, the designer recovers the rights.

The fact that a designer is working with different brands is not a problem. On the contrary, his talent is to immerse himself in the identity of a brand and to make the most of it while expressing his own individuality.

S.: *Does the strength which allows you to keep going in this profession come from your capacity to find talented people, the strong vision which you have, or the quality of your development work with manufacturers?*

J.-B. S.: Pre-production is not really our strong point. Our products are not extremely technical even though they require some research and development (R&D) work.

On the other hand, we have an approach which pays off with regard to the designers we choose, since we have no problem asking designers who have just graduated to come to work for us. We survey the crops of emerging designers systematically.

That leaves the prescribers. We made the bold choice to display a strong brand identity which inevitably took more time to establish than a style which is fashionable and can be changed. If we had chosen the norm, it would have been easier to enter the market, but also to be rejected. During our first two years, the architects kept an eye on us. During our third year, they considered working with us. During the fourth year, they made their move to work with us despite the fact that their projects may take two years to come to fruition. It is only today, five years later, that we are starting to see our volumes increase. The market is coming around to our vision. We have always used colour and combined materials in our furniture at times when this was not the mainstream approach. Today, everyone is doing this. It took a long time for our vision to be accepted, but in the long term it has proved to be distinctive and unique. Today our furniture takes up as much space in shops as pieces from Tom Dixon or BD Barcelona Design although our turnover is ten to fifteen times smaller.

S.: *Can brands like Ikea, Habitat and Conran help the general public to gravitate towards more sophisticated design?*

J.-B. S.: Ikea is almost like an editor, admittedly with less creative spirit, because it is no longer the owner of a number of factories which manufacture its products. It gleans its know-how from designers here and there. Even though it is part of the mass market, it still needs to be creative which is why it launches collaborations with Tom Dixon or the Hay brand. It has made a number of links with the design world. Before he launched his own brand, Tom Dixon was Habitat's director of design. He worked with Stéphane Arriubergé, who went on to create the French design editor Moustache.

In a similar way that the influence of *haute couture*, with its handful of clients, has encouraged sales in the *prêt-à-porter* sector, design edition has made it possible for markets to be more accessible. Pieces from Nordic editors are everywhere these days – there is scarcely a new bar opening today without a Gubi chair in it, as was the case for Tom Dixon's lights five years ago – and they are available in styles from manufacturers to the general public.

We are, therefore, in a way, the *haute couture* of the furniture world. The more we promote our design abroad, the more the general public will be attracted by the pieces which convey French identity, even those at the lower end of the range. Abroad, we present La Chance as if it were a French fashion brand and we benefit from the aura this gives. The same Chinese clients who shop at Chanel, buy objects made by Cassina or La Chance. France's reputation is a real asset for the boom in its design.

■ Presentation of the speakers ■

Jean-Baptiste Souletie: co-founder of the furniture editor La Chance with Louise Breguet. He studied in India, worked for a merchant bank in London (where he designed their new offices), before working for an investment fund (where he redevise the graphic chart), and in the strategic department of a luxury goods company in Paris. He returned to his first loves, architecture and furniture, when he founded La Chance in 2012.

■ www.lachance.paris

Jean-Paul Bath: engineer and graduate of the École spéciale des travaux publics. He was awarded an MBA from the Insead Business School. He worked with large international groups (such as Amrep Group, Air Products and Raychem) before becoming administrator of the communications department at the Pompidou Centre. He was later commercial director and editorial director of the Cité des sciences et de l'industrie. In 2001 he founded and managed the events company Art Actuel Communication. In 2015, he was appointed managing director of VIA (Valorisation de l'innovation dans l'ameublement: Valorisation of innovation in furniture).

Jennifer Thiault: graduate of the Ecole Normale Supérieure and the HEC Business School. She is an advisor to the managing director of artistic creation (DGCA) at the Ministry of Culture. She was in charge of design and fashion at the DGCA from 2013 to 2016.

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