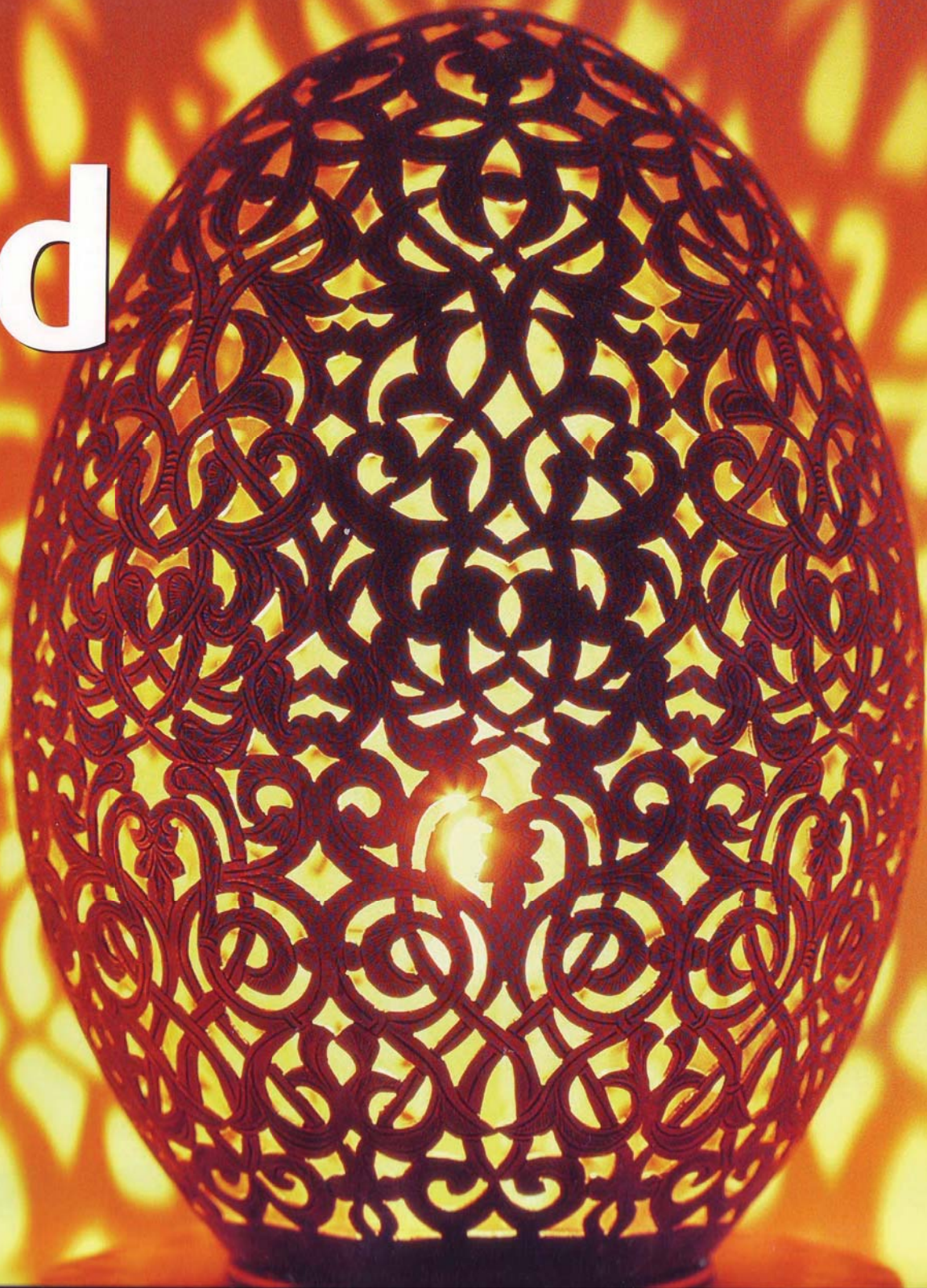


Saudi Aramco
world



Design 2008: "Contemporary Oriental"

WRITTEN BY NADIA KHOURI-DAGHER

At Restaurant Liza, near the former Stock Exchange in Paris, the tabletops are brass trays familiar from Arab cafés—but oversize and turned upside-down. Instead of curtains, there are panels like *mashrabiyyahs*, but not of traditional turned-wood latticework: These are translucent Plexiglas inlaid with mother-of-pearl. The countertop is made of beige sea pebbles in a pattern inspired by Roman mosaics, and the whites and blues throughout hint at the Mediterranean. It's at once Middle Eastern and confidently contemporary.

"The whole concept was to show a new 'oriental' design," says 32-year-old owner Liza Soughayar, who founded the restaurant in 2005. "The idea was to create a place in Paris which represents contemporary Lebanon, a country moving with the times." To do this, Soughayar collaborated with four young designers, all Lebanese: Karen Chekerdjian did the tables, Nada Debs did the "mashrabiyyah" panels, Annabelle Kassar did the lighting and Hubert Fattal guided the overall concept.

But it's not just in Paris, and it's not coming just from Lebanon: In London, Beirut, Dubai, Istanbul, Riyadh, Manama, Lahore, Marrakech and many other places, restaurants, hotels, offices and homes are embracing a globalized, "contemporary oriental" design image. A new generation of designers is emerging who mix tradition and modernity to produce objects and spaces with fresh appeal to international eyes. You can see them at professional shows such as *Maison & Objet* in Paris or *Design Frankfurt*, in Dubai malls and concept stores, and in such western magazines as *Trend & Design*, *AD*, *The World of Interiors*, *Marie-Claire Maison* and *Elle Décoration*. Some of these designers work for companies such as Alessi in Italy and Vitra in Switzerland, and more than a few are winning international prizes. Since the 1990's, interior design magazines have emerged



that are dedicated to the Arab regions, including *Gulf Interiors*, *Maisons du Maroc*, *Byzance* and the "Design" department of Dubai-based *Canvas*, all of which showcase new talent. Academic conferences such as Tasmeeem ("Design"), held annually in Doha since 2005, and the International Design Forum this year in Dubai have lent intellectual stimulus to what Yvonne Courtney, editor of *Gulf Interiors*, calls "definitely a trend toward contemporary design in the Arab region today."

"'Contemporary' does not necessarily mean 'western,'" cautions architect Said Berrada of Morocco. "It can also mean 'oriental.' The word 'contemporary' does not belong to only one culture." Berrada has just designed a new table: a square cedar base with an inlaid square copper plate. He has also redesigned the traditional *pouf* (Ottoman), changing it from round to conical and covering it with a bright red woollen material imported from Sweden.

"Our creations are inspired by our traditions, and we take them to every part of the world by using this universal language—modernity," explains Memet Güreli, founder of Ethnicon, an Istanbul company that is extending the flat-woven *kilim* tradition into new colors and modular designs.

For many of these young designers, objects for the home come first, particularly furniture and accessories for the kitchen and dining room. Even Zaha Hadid, the Iraqi-born architectural superstar, has designed tea accessories for Sawaya & Moroni, the Milan-based company co-founded by William Sawaya of Lebanon. In Tunisia, Tarak Kamoun, who was trained on Murano, the glassmakers' island of Venice, is using colored glass to revisit *keskas* (the traditional pot to cook couscous) and other Tunisian kitchen items, and Khédija Kilani is producing copper plates and bowls whose pure lines distinguish them from their heavier ancestors.

"We belong to two cultures, so we take our inspiration from two cultures," explains Berrada, who, like nearly all of these young designers, has lived and been educated in both Arab lands and the West, and travels frequently between them.

"These designers are managing to break free from geographical contextualization. They are no longer seen as 'Middle Eastern designers' but as 'designers.' Some of them now receive international recognition, which is still not the case for visual artists from the region," observes Lisa Ball-Lechgar, editor of *Canvas*. (See page 2.) The designers' clientele shows this: Arabs, Europeans, Iranians, Americans, Japanese, Scandinavians and more are all buying. For example, Nada Debs's best-selling furniture work, "Pebble" table, fetches a cool \$8000 in New York.

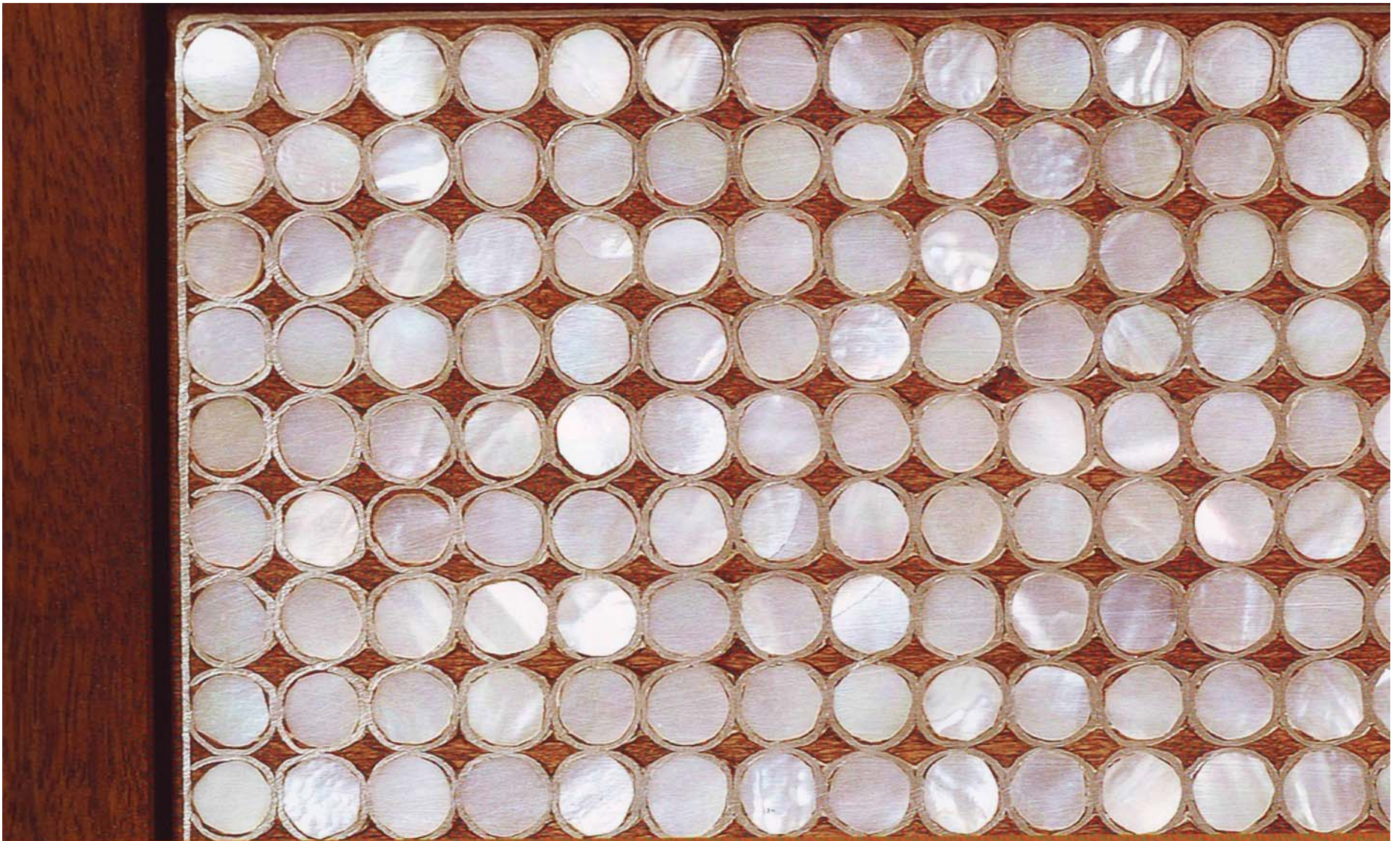
But perhaps more important for the future, these designers also are influencing the craft traditions of their countries of origin. From Morocco to Indonesia, "traditional" artisans are increasingly taking inspiration from modern creations and, in response to the new demand for contemporary design, turning out new products, from *tagines* in bright pink to teak furniture that acknowledges Zen, Bauhaus or a bit of both. Some governments are beginning to lend official support: "Design is central to Malaysian furniture development strategies," says that country's industry minister, Datuk Peter Chin Fah Kui. Similarly, Morocco is inviting top designers to meet with local craftsmen to promote new designs, and recently remodeled its Paris tourism office along "contemporary oriental" lines.

By melding the best of both of these worlds, this emerging style offers tangible evidence that modernity and tradition are not contradictory; rather, they are the seeds of our future, wherever we live. ☉

Nadia Khouri-Dagher (www.nadia-khouri-dagher.com) is a Lebanese free-lance writer, now based in Paris, who specializes in Arab cultures. She has a Ph.D. in development economics and is the author or co-author of a dozen books.



Above: Collaboration among four artists created the "contemporary oriental" decor of Liza Soughayar's eponymous restaurant. Photo courtesy of Liza Soughayar. ① www.restaurant-liza.com.
Cover: Now living in Marrakech, London-born Yahya is a self-taught designer whose lamps of cut metal fill smooth modern shapes with traditional arabesque and vegetal patterns. This year's *Maison & Objet* show in Paris showcased his work, including this "Egg" lamp. Photo courtesy of Yahya Creation. ① www.yahyacreation.com.



Saudi Aramco
world 2008

Nada Debs is a furniture and interior designer of Lebanese descent who grew up in Japan and graduated from the Rhode Island School of Design. In her "Console" tables, she blends Japanese minimalism with the Middle Eastern tradition of mother-of-pearl inlay. "When handmade patterns are added to the contemporary furniture, the creations start to evoke emotions in people," she says. Photo courtesy of Nada Debs. © www.nadadebs.com