



PRODUCT DESIGN
Cairo, Egypt

The Shisha Table

Blending high design principles with Cairene craftwork, Lina Alorabi is polishing up Egyptian furniture design





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Furniture designer Lina Alorabi finds the inspiration for her work in both the chaotic streets of Cairo and the cosy living rooms in which the city's residents seek sanctuary.

'As a diplomat's kid, I would go to people's houses and see a lot of different things. I was always interested in the cultural relevance of objects, and their effect on people,' she recalls. 'My mother is a crazy antique collector – moving was always a lot of drama. Objects were a big feature of my life.'

Alorabi began paying attention to furniture as a child, making note of how people in different cultures both lived and interacted with various objects.

Growing up between Egypt and capital cities such as London and Washington DC, Alorabi has an unusual outlook on Cairo's aesthetics. Though her pieces embody a certain modern simplicity, subtle references to Egyptian cultural heritage can also be found in both the design and in the techniques used to handcraft each one.

After completing a degree in industrial design at the University for the Creative Arts in Kent, UK, and working for a design house in London, Alorabi returned to Cairo, where she produced commissioned pieces for the Sirocco Gallery in Zamalek before embarking on her first collection.

'I started out in product design, then shifted to focus on

furniture design because it was more relevant to Egypt,' she explains. 'I like the idea of making and building furniture because it affects people's everyday lives.'

Alorabi's first, and perhaps signature, design was 'Shisha' – a table crafted from woodturning solid oak until its base resembles the neck of a shisha pipe. 'It's a light reference to Egyptian style – something very familiar and simple that people can imagine in their homes,' Alorabi explains. 'The central column is lathe, which is also inspired by Egyptian culture because we have a long history of lathe woodworking. The craftsmen here are very skilled.'

Shisha is still a part of Alorabi's repertoire, manufactured at the factory of Hassan and Mohamed Shaaban in Arab Al Maadi, where Alorabi's own mother has been commissioning custom-made furniture for years.

'Shisha was designed to be simple to manufacture,' she says. 'It was one of the first things I ever designed in Cairo, when I wasn't yet sure how to deal with manufacturers, craftsmen, etc. I tried to keep the design and detail work in a central column because I knew woodturning is a very common practice here in Cairo,' she says.

The table is impossible to produce by machine, she explains, and relies on the skill of the woodturners at the Shaaban factory.



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'The design involved playing with geometry,' she says. 'I used CAD software to develop different variations of the column until I was happy with one that had the characteristic curves of a shisha, but would still look elegant as a piece of furniture. They have a very intricate set of curves that have to be made by hand – there is no drill or router bit that can create these complicated curves and tight radii mechanically.'

Alorabi visits the factories where her pieces are in production a few times a week. 'When I moved back to Egypt, I had to change my design process a lot,' she explains. 'It is very hands-on and communication-heavy. A lot of modelmaking is involved as well, so that I can show the craftsmen exactly what I want. The concept of a prototype was new to them.'

'The first collection was a bit of a test run,' she continues. 'I was trying out different things to see what kind of capabilities and resources were available in Egypt, as well as to determine my own stamina.'

As well as Shisha, her first collection also included Afas, a latticework piece built from beechwood that can either function as a table or as part of a shelving unit. The wooden latticework of Afas is reminiscent of mashrabiyyah, an Arab architectural staple.

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LINA ALORABI



03





1
The design – a light reference to the design of shisha – is sketched out in a notebook before being tweaked with CAD software



2
Alorabi takes a model of her design to the woodwork factories of Maadi, choosing planks of solid oak to be carved into the finished product



3
There are, she says, no drills or routers that can create the table's characteristic curves mechanically – each table must be made by hand



4
In order to do so, the wood requires cutting to the desired length before it can be clamped into a lathe and rotated at a slow speed



5
The woodworker uses tools such as gouges, scrapers and skew chisels to carve Alorabi's design into the rotating wood

6
The finished product is then given a lick of varnish in a clean, contemporary hue



‘If I find a good craftsman, I try to challenge them to do something new,’ Alorabi says. ‘Afas was very difficult to make, even though it’s simple. It took a few trials before getting it right.’

‘I try to play with less obvious Egyptian themes,’ she continues, describing her other pieces. ‘For example, my Big Auntie sofa is based on when you have been travelling and you arrive home and get bear hugs from your family. I tried to make a chair that looks like fat rolls, like you are being hugged by a big auntie.’

Alorabi finds herself most frequently designing wooden pieces, due to the long Egyptian tradition of woodwork. ‘People have different specialties. I’ve tried things in different materials, but most of the talent is in woodwork,’ she says.

The Egyptian aptitude for woodworking flourishes in spite of the country’s dearth of trees. ‘We are one of the largest importers of wood so it’s always available,’ she explains. ‘The furniture industry here is based on furniture being made raw in Egypt and then exported to Europe, so there is a huge woodwork industry even though we don’t have wood.’

‘Some of the designs I did in the first run I think I could do better,’ she admits. ‘I want to do things that have a more

functional side to them, as well as pieces that are more on the accessory side. The furniture industry in Egypt is really quite tough. You really have to make something unique.’

One concept Alorabi has in mind for her new collection is to introduce more patternwork. ‘Throughout Egyptian history, we have always used patterns,’ she explains.

‘The ancient Egyptians used hieroglyphs to represent their surroundings, and in the Middle Ages and the Islamic period, geometry and patterns took on a spiritual meaning. Today, if you drive around Cairo, you see, for example, trucks with crazy decals. People use patterns to be individual and stand out in this chaotic city. I’m interested in how patterns are used to communicate.’

By approaching her work in this manner – carefully considering how such themes are employed in Egyptian design throughout history, while creating pieces that are clean, modern and utilitarian – Alorabi’s furniture evokes a sense of familiarity and a cultural understanding that sits well within the contemporary Egyptian home.

‘When you go to the market to buy a piece of furniture, you don’t find anything that references Egypt’s long history,’ says the designer. ‘If you do, then it’s kitschy or cliché – something a tourist might want, but not something that I would want in my home.’