



Hiroshima sideboard by Naoto Fukasawa for Maruni Wood Industry, from £3,324, viaduct.co.uk

Minimalist effort

Interiors | Pairing craftsmanship with a designer’s flair is helping rejuvenate the Japanese furniture scene both at home and abroad. By *Tom Morris*

Subtlety has defined Japanese design throughout the 20th century: the household brand Muji prides itself on being unbranded, while *mingei* – one of the most important modern design movements in Japan – celebrated folk art and “the unknown craftsman”. The key tenets of Japanese design known the world over – a keenness for natural materials, pared-back minimalism and an exceptional level of craftsmanship – do not shout nor lend themselves to becoming household names or iconic pieces.

This, however, is changing. With the Tokyo 2020 Olympics on the horizon and Japan House, a series of cultural exhibition centres recently opened in London, Los Angeles and São Paulo, there is a fresh impetus to showcase a broader range of Japanese culture to the world. In its wake stands a dynamic generation of designers who are evolving Japanese style. Last month they were on show at Designart Tokyo, a new annual festival dedicated to highlighting local design and art. Like past breakthrough designers Shiro Kuramata (famous for

wobbly cabinets and a chair made of glass in the 1970s) and Oki Sato of studio Nendo (who, in 2010, created a chair that looks like it floats), they demonstrate the power of fusing Japanese craftsmanship with innovative design.

“I wanted to invent a new style for ‘made in Japan’,” says designer Hitoshi Makino, describing Uscita, the furniture brand that he set up this summer. Makino was senior designer at the Milan design firm Lissoni Associati for seven years, before he returned to Tokyo in 2015. His collection of chairs and tables pairs a sleek aesthetic more typical of Italian design with quality craftsmanship: they are produced by a traditional workshop in the carpentry capital Asahikawa in northern Japan. One chandelier is half-made by gold-leaf craftsmen in Kyoto, while its frame is made in Veneto, Italy. “I wanted to use these techniques in a way that would mix cultures,” says Makino. “We call this *wa*, or harmony.”

Textile designer Yuri Himuro, who won Elle Decor Japan’s annual Young Design Talent 2018 award last month, also bonds craftsmanship with a subtle,



Bloom Blanket by Yuri Himuro, h-m-r.net — Kohsuke Higuchi



Arc table, from ¥65,700 (\$577), and armchair, ¥173,000, by Uscita, uscita.info — Yusuke Kawagoe

confident glamour. Like much of the arts in Japan, her blankets are inspired by the natural world; yet hers are supersized, colourful and decidedly unminimal. They are made in Gifu prefecture, one of the textile capitals of Japan.

Baku Sakashita does the same with his enchanting lighting. He graduated from Swiss design school ECAL last year and creates dangling lanterns out of semi-transparent washi paper and stainless-steel wire on brass bases. The paper lanterns of Isamu Noguchi from the 1950s and the popular brass and glass globe lamps of London-based contemporary designer



CC01 chair by Kensaku Oshiro, from €1,115+VAT, oshiro.it

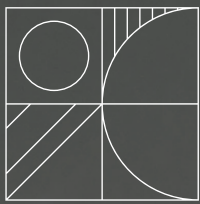
Michael Anastassiades inspire him – Sakashita’s lights are a fusion of the two. “I want something between east and west,” he says.

Sakashita’s pieces have already found a customer base in Europe. However, for some of his peers, stimulating interest in overly showy design back home is a different matter. The furniture and design market is distinct. Japanese homes are typically tiny, so every item of furniture must serve a purpose. People mostly rent, discouraging a culture of home improvement, and they tend

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to not entertain at home. Over time, this has trained a mindset that prefers reliable, functional and perhaps slightly ordinary furniture. It has fostered a subtle, understated approach to interior design compared with how homes are decorated elsewhere in the world. While interiors themselves are traditionally beautiful, with good wood, *tatami* mats and plenty of handcrafted pieces, there is a general disinterest in “design” itself.

Hokuto Ando is a Central Saint Martins-trained designer and co-founder of studio We+, whose pieces sell at Spazio Rossana Orlandi, a major gallery in Milan. “We don’t have much of a market



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