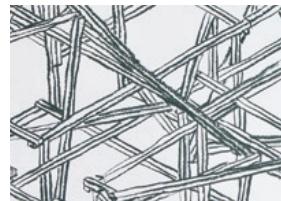


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LUXURY BY DESIGN



JUNE 2011
DISPLAY UNTIL JUNE 20



D E S G N



MAN ON A

AMBASSADOR FOR HIS FAMILY'S LEGENDARY BRAND IN THE USA, ANTOINE ROSET EXPANDS ITS EMPIRE WITH A TRIO OF AMERICAN TALENTS. DAN RUBINSTEIN INQUIRES ABOUT HIS WORK'S RAISON D'ETRE. PORTRAITS BY DEAN KAUFMAN.

MISSION

Each year, at January's IMM Cologne, French furniture legend Ligne Roset displays its new collection before most of the competition. This season alone, dozens of prototypes were shown from designers across the globe, both emerging and established: Jean Nouvel, GamFratesi, Out-ofstock, and the Bouroullecs, to name a few. This winter, however, saw an uptick in talent from a country normally underestimated on the international scene: the USA. While not the first Americans to design for Roset, Brad Ascalon, Stephen Burks, and architect Andre Kikoski all unveiled work spearheaded by Antoine Roset, who leads the U.S. business and is named after his great-great-grandfather who founded the company in 1860. Using New York perhaps as a proving ground, Antoine, the company's heir apparent (under supervision of his uncle Michel, the company's director) has pursued local talent with zeal. Here, the enterprising scion discusses the virtues of native design.

The new collection was well received. Given your role in the company, how do you think it turned out in the end?

It's been quite challenging this year. We have a lot of new models that are innovative and very design-oriented, which means we don't have as many commercial ones. It may make us more attractive for the media and to

people who love design, but for us it's much more challenging because we have to explain the collection more in order to sell the product.

Was it a conscious decision to produce a less commercial offering this year?

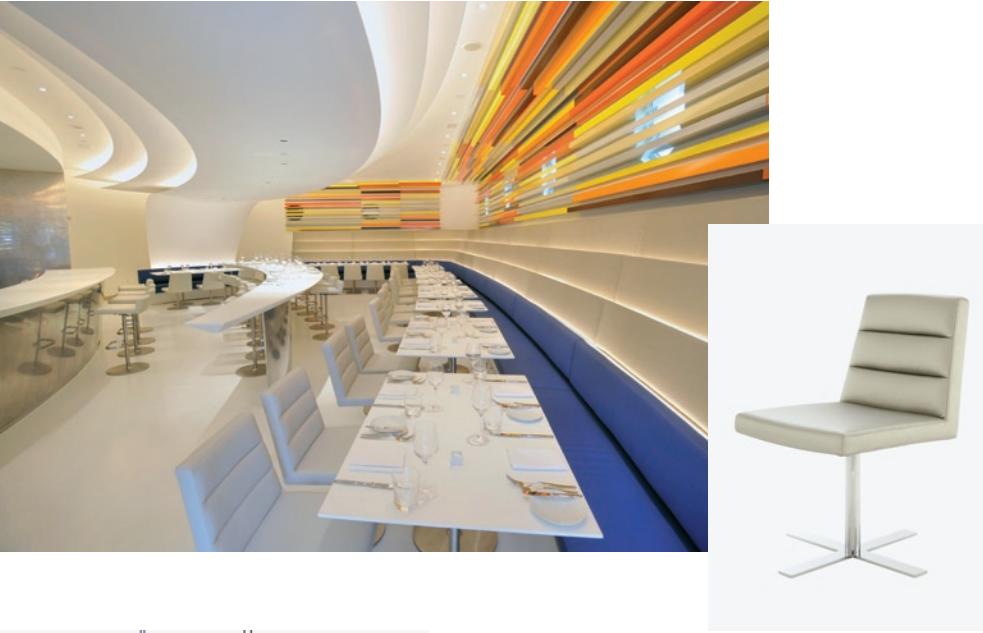
Sometimes you have to take a chance to work with a particular designer or product, and you don't necessarily consider the global collection when presented with the opportunities in each piece. I think the chance to work with the Bouroullecs this year on the Ploum and with Jean Nouvel on sofas was great, but it's not very easy to understand either of their designs. The products are very design-oriented. It's about saying, "Okay, we have one leading designer where you want him to be, on top, and then you have the Bouroullecs and Nouvel in their place." This mix is what makes our collections what they are.

This year you recruited three Americans into the mix. Was this intentional?

I don't know if it's 100-percent related with my arrival in the U.S. four years ago, but truthfully I think there



When building The Wright restaurant at New York's Guggenheim, completed at the end of 2009 (right), architect Andre Kikoski had trouble finding a chair worthy of such a project. The resulting custom seats mirrored the iconic contour of the building's rotunda. After Antoine Roset complimented the chair's comfort at a lunch with Kikoski, a collaboration began to bring it into production. Called the Guggen (far right), it's the first chair from Ligne Roset by a non-French designer and will soon be expanded into a full line of seating. Not bad for Kikoski's first-ever production piece. "Their work has a sense of whimsy, sophistication, and scale without being pretentious or tongue-in-cheek," he says.



Brad Ascalon's second design for Ligne Roset after 2008's Spindle table, the Lovey steel side table (lower right) began with a wish, he says, to "portray the sense of austerity and grace through the materiality" and play with the classic rule that the most stable objects touch the ground at three points. "We eventually realized that if one leg kicks off from another leg, then each leg doesn't have to travel but 20 or so inches from the floor to the other side of the table," he explains. "From material to produce two legs, we produced three." Ascalon then, with a touch of humor, tipped the last leg off with walnut as if Roset had run out of steel. "They understand my intentions for a design," Ascalon says of the brand. "My intention and my vision are their vision." Lovey's spirit of precision is seen in his LED Stigma concept (top right) and Martini table and Scribble chair for Hightower (far right).



After experimenting with ready-mades, Stephen Burks came up with Chantal, a configurable table lamp that combines the basic shapes of a vase and bowl. "These are two elements easily recognizable by everyone," he says. "I like products that border on familiarity through basic geometries." The deceptively simple idea—elements of which can be seen at his current solo show "Man Made" (near right) at Harlem's Studio Museum—required numerous prototypes in order to safely incorporate a red-cloth cord, but also gave the project a touch Burks didn't anticipate. "Roset can take a fairly simple product or approach and then bring elegant and precise details to it that makes it their own."



(RIGHT) Roset USA executive vice president Antoine Roset outside his company's store in SoHo. (PREVIOUS PORTAIT, FROM LEFT) Brad Ascalon, Andre Kikoski, Antoine Roset, and Stephen Burks.

are great designers in the U.S. We're lucky to work with them. They have, I think, a very different style.

How would you describe that style?

With Brad Ascalon, we have a young, upcoming designer from New York. Stephen Burks, who is also young, has already done work for the biggest names, such as Cappellini with his Love tables. He's a very ethnic designer. Then you take Andre Kikoski, who is an architect. As you can see, the range is very different, and this is what we like. Their levels of experience are also different, and while they're all from the U.S., they come to the table with different skills. It's great—I'm very happy to push more and more to include Americans in our collection. I think this is a great country for design.

When you pitched these local talents to your counterparts in France, what was their feedback?

We've worked with American designers in the past, but not much, for many reasons. We have worked with Jeffrey Bennett, for example. But he's already a pretty famous designer in the U.S. But why not that much in the past? First of all, French and European design is not only very important, but there is a lot of help from diverse groups and organizations that facilitate our work with young designers, such as the VIA to develop products and prototypes. It's great for us. I think this is what is missing in the U.S. You have great schools, but as soon as students graduate, where do they go? They're going to Brooklyn, they're pursuing the New York world, building their own studios. It's difficult to find them and it takes time. Maybe that's why we work so much with European designers. We're opening up our group of designers more and more, and have a lot of designers coming from Asia, Japan, the U.S. We're willing to work with everyone.

Do you think having American designers in your collection helps you with sales in the U.S.?

I don't know, I hope so! It reminds me of that Chrysler campaign that says "Imported from Detroit." For us, it's like saying we're imported from France but designed by Americans.

If you had to describe these three products in one word, what would that be?

For Andre's chair, its "timeless." Even in 50 years, it's still going to be in style. For Brad, "current." Steven's is much more difficult to describe. I would say ... "homage." It's a very nice shape that we all know from the '60s that he's developed on different scales, with a material that we weren't using in the '60s and '70s—glass—because people were employing a lot of plastic. And working with glass is fairly difficult.

Are you already thinking about whom you'd like to work with next year?

Totally. It's something that we are always doing. We receive 20 or 30 projects a week. On my side in the U.S., I'm already in contact with a few different designers. Will we include Americans again next year? I hope so. I can't answer yet because I don't want to disappoint anyone. We make decisions quickly—in December for IMM in January. There are some very good guys producing great designs. The team of Rich Brilliant Willing is one of them. We're beginning a great relationship with them.

What kind of qualities do you look for in a designer?

To be natural and spontaneous. Don't just try to sell us something. What's important for me is our connection with the designer. It's nice for them to come in with their own

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idea and not try to score more points by delivering exactly what you want. After that, I like designers who think about how they use different finishes, textures, and so on. And flexibility: we should work together, not dictate how they think it should work out. It's about the brand merging with the designer and the designer merging with the brand. It's a sharing of ideas.

Do the submissions you receive from Americans trend in a particular direction?

I think the background of a designer and where they're from makes them unique. The work of Europeans tends to be very sleek sometimes, without going really far into the concept, whereas the Americans back up a bit, bringing a little bit more of American DNA and history into furniture. Remember, in the '50s, you were the best in design. You can feel that today in New York's hotels, restaurants, and so on, which have a much more classic look behind them. But in France or Germany we're using very cold materials. Today, the trendiest place in New York is something like the Ace Hotel, and a few years ago it was Freemans. It's what they call dark nostalgia. It's contemporary, but with a spirit.

Does that way of designing fit the Roset aesthetic?

It can, depending on how you bring it to the collection. If you asked me today to do a classic style sofa, I'd say no. But for some ideas, yes, as long as we can develop it with being modern. ☈

