

## Furniture: A New Cultural Ambassador for Egypt

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By Dorothea Köhler | Photos courtesy of EFEC

The vital role of design in industry and its importance in an international framework were highlighted at the last Egypt Design and Industry Workshop in December 2008. The topic was discussed in four sections; brainstorming, preliminary sketching, final designs and prototyping sections. The project was funded by the Industrial Modernization Centre (IMC) and co-managed by Rhimal design and IED Centro Ricerche in Milan. In this workshop a group of seven leading designers from Japan, US, Europe and Egypt developed new product ideas together with a group of 20 young Egyptian designers and 20 Egyptian furniture manufacturers. Each of the following international designers Lita Albuquerque, Daniel Dendra, Harry and Camila, Karim Mekhtigian, Tarek Naga, Shinichiro Ogata and Frans Schrofer led a group.



The object was to create products that show the influence of Egyptian traditional design and translate this influence into new forms of design. To recover a lost creative identity and to create a new “design from Egypt,” was the goal of the workshop. Outstanding new trends in Egyptian design were produced in this workshop and were showcased at Salone Internazionale del Mobile in Milan from April 22-27, 2009 at the KYME Stand. The country, however, served as a model to create new innovations. The Egyptian Furniture Export Council (EFEC) describes the source of inspiration of design from Egypt: “The emerging ideas are inspired by the apparent chaos that characterizes the rich setting that is Egypt. The multiplicity of this country’s cultural layers has been building pressure through the ages. The designers sought to channel the ensuing streams of energy to build the pillars of a new identity that touches the world.” The emerging designs can be traced back to a common source: Egypt’s morphology, nature, local stories as well as its past, present and future and it is possible to single out the aspects of Egypt they stem from. The outcomes of this workshop will also be showcased in Egypt itself at the Furnex International Fair June 4-8, 2009 in Cairo.

EFEC is very aware of the quality and future of the Egyptian furniture industry and is therefore supporting this sector in a significant way. The commitment of EFEC bears possibilities for Egyptian furniture designers and industry to better position them on an international level. Yet EFEC is very aware of the quality of Egyptian design it facilitates its members to gain more business possibilities on the international furniture market. Its main goal is to open up new ways for the Egyptian furniture industry to reach a leading position for Egyptian furniture design in this sector.

Expressed in figures, the aims of EFEC are to increase the Egyptian furniture exports to USD 1 billion. Egyptian furniture exports grew from USD 87 million in 2005 to USD 307 million in 2008; a further 28% increase is the outcome of the first quarter of 2009, which indicates an increasingly prevailing position in the international markets. Besides the increase of the furniture exports and as its logical consequence EFEC also seeks to increase furniture production from USD 1 billion to USD 2 billion in five years.

The Egyptian furniture industry currently employs almost 1 million persons (600,000 direct and 400,000 indirect labour) within 200,000 establishments. Damietta City – dubbed by some “Zero Unemployment City” – is considered one of the most significant centers of handcrafted furniture globally with a long history in classical furniture and 32,000 workshops and 130 factories.

The Egyptian furniture industry has a broad scope in styles, sizes and capacities that help accommodate the needs of the international markets from major projects to small retailers. With two technology and testing centers accredited by FIRA of UK and CATAS of Italy, the Egyptian furniture industry now is in line with European quality standards and specifications; another step on the way to international credibility.

As the Egyptian furniture sector is known as one of the fastest growing and one of the most promising industries of the country, it is vital that there should be a council that dedicates itself exclusively to the needs of this sector. EFEC was established by a ministerial decree in 1999 as an independent body to support the furniture sector.

So far EFEC has elaborated a strategy that gives its members better access to the international market, EFEC supports its members with all what they need; in terms of information on the sector in Egypt or advising and problem-solving consultancy, exporting opportunities and matchmaking, updates on all trade agreements or ministerial decrees; as well as links to all other export service providers.

EFEC activities also focus on offering facilities to improve communicative aspects of the furniture trade. Therefore EFEC offers assistance to join international exhibitions along with the Egyptian Exporters Association (Expolink) in organizing those exhibitions, in addition to conferences, workshops and training sessions.

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