

# What

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FEBRUARY 2023

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# Jomo Tariku

By Anne Flynn Wear



## AT A GLANCE:

### What was your first paying job?

I was a janitor in college at a small Christian school called Mid-American Nazarene college in Olathe, Kansas.

### What book are you currently reading?

I really enjoy reading books about collectible design, it helps bring back memories from my childhood.

### What are the most enjoyable places your work has taken you?

Florence, Italy and the city of Accra in Ghana, West Africa

### What is the one thing you wish you could do better?

I wish I could manage my time better. I have a scattered mind, so I am always doing 10 things at a time. I wish I was more well organized.



The Qwanta Totem chair designed by Jomo Tariku

The goal for furniture designer Jomo Tariku is to redefine modern African-themed furniture. As a young man growing up in Ethiopia, he was drawn to the eclectic art, souvenirs and furniture pieces that his father, a diplomat, collected during his travels throughout Africa and the world. Tariku developed craftsman skills while spending two summers working with a local furniture builder in Addis Ababa and went on to study industrial design at the University of Kansas. His furniture includes a portfolio of artistic designs that synthesize his experience of the African continent.

### This is really your year with the showings at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in NYC, the Los Angeles Contemporary Museum of Art and the Baltimore Museum of Art. How does it feel to have reached this point?

I feel very honored. These are institutions that most artists and designers hold in high regard. It is good to know that I've contributed enough that the work is part of their collection. It is the highest form of appreciation when they decide to collect your work.

I have been doing furniture design on and off for 30 years. My approach to design incorporates my African heritage. I attended the University of Kansas in the early 90s, so 2022 marks 30 years.

Most of the acquisitions started happening at those museums over the last four to five years where I'm getting a decent amount of recognition. Either I am a late bloomer or my style of work and having access to outlets has been limited. I attribute some of these issues to a representation issue. I have been to many trade fairs, not only in New York, but I have had a chance to go to Milan for the Design Week. It's a consistent theme. There are not many Black designers. It costs a lot of money to become an independent designer and maker. And you need to be in the right social circles to get into galleries and have licensing deals. For me it took time. And now my works are being acquired. The Nyala chair has been around since 2018, so it's not something totally new. These are the things that have caused me to struggle. But while I am excited about all the exposure, I can never forget the struggles.

### Do you have additional art museum showings planned?

Yes, we are working on several upcoming museum shows but can't announce them until later this year.

### Tell us about the four new pieces you designed with the Wexler Gallery in Philadelphia.

There are four pieces which include three exclusive designs of pre-existing work and one new design. The new one is called the Qwanta Totem Chair. You can pull out the back rest and exchange it for a different one. You can then display the extra back rests as totems. I have always named my pieces after where the influence came from. The thinking is that this might make people curious enough to find the relationship and influence behind the design.

The Qwanta Totem chair is the first one I collaborated on with Wexler. I have been playing around with it since 2016 when I presented it at Dubai Design Week. I got a decent amount of traffic when the crowd was there. I really wanted to get back into creating more furniture. But I thought this piece was too experimental and people would not get it. But this new version with Wexler solved problems of the original version. I added a notch, so the back rest

does not slide back. It looks very simple, but it has 20 layers of veneer and a cantilevered shape of the base. I am now collaborating with other artists to carve new shapes into the backrest. The possibilities are limitless. It is a new way of thinking when it comes to chairs. I personally have not seen anything similar to the Qwanta Totem chair.

The other three pieces are black versions of limited edition preexisting designs that only the Wexler Gallery carries at the moment. One of them has eight circular holes in the back. The idea is to put your African scarf, a colorful scarf, through the holes as a new decorative element.

### I understand you had several pieces featured in the new Black Panther movie. How did that opportunity come about?

My pieces are in two different scenes, but they are hard to see since the action moves quickly. One of the pieces comes during the flooding scene towards the end of the movie. One thing to know is that the Marvel Cinematic Universe is extremely secretive. They sent me a simple email and I didn't know it was the *Black Panther* movie. The email didn't say who the request was from. I receive similar requests from TV shows fairly often. I mentioned it to my wife and son, and he said that MCU represented the new *Wakanda Forever* movie. That gave me some 'cool dad' points for sure.

### How and when did you first get interested in art and furniture design?

Looking back on my childhood, I can remember things that contributed to becoming a furniture designer. I didn't realize that was a career choice. I knew I could be a carpenter. When I was bored as a kid, I created sketches of things around the house. My dad had a habit of collecting things from Africa and other places and he curated our living room. His tastes were very eclectic with no defined style. He had a sofa and tables from Indonesia that included tiny, beautiful hand-crafted parts and pieces. It was made in the late 60s or early 70s. We had several Persian rugs and ivory carved ornaments that he was given in Kenya as a gift. My parents lived in Kenya and received gifts from other diplomats and state officials. We had all of those things in the house including glassware from Czechoslovakia and dinnerware from Norway. It was a mishmash of things. For me as a boy it was exciting to sit down and sketch those items.

I was especially fascinated with objects and tools from different parts of Africa. I drew them in different ways. Then, when I got to Kansas University, I went into Industrial Design and I fell in love with it right away. I needed something for my thesis, so I decided to reproduce the furniture from my homeland. This also helped address the lack of design representation from sub-Saharan Africa. I didn't see any modern African pieces and I realized there was a huge gap that could be fulfilled in the market by incorporating African heritage into the furniture pieces that I created using a modern interpretation.

We are being given a leg up at the moment with the new focus on Black designers. But a few of us have been at it for a long while. I always try to promote my work and that of other African artists. Museums tend to acquire items from well known designers, but I encourage them to look into others. At some point, my hope is that these types of furnishings will saturate the market. ■