

OUT OF AFRICA

FROM A GARAGE WORKSHOP IN A SUBURB OF WASHINGTON DC, ETHIOPIAN-BORN **JOMO TARIKU** IS WORKING TO PUT MODERN AFRICAN FURNITURE DESIGN ON THE WORLD MAP

One word sums up Jomo Tariku's inspiration and design influence: Africa. 'I consume anything about Africa and see how it can inspire and influence me,' Jomo tells *F&C*. 'I look beyond furniture for inspiration, including to various household objects, tools, architecture, hairstyles and braids, facial and body paintings and scarifications, wildlife, and more.' 'As far as I can remember, I have been fascinated with traditional stools that my parents had in our living room,' Jomo recalls. 'They were part of a palette of sketches I would do out of boredom during summer breaks, as I was not much of a reader. Our childhood home was also filled with items collected from travels through different parts of Africa. Eventually all of them

ended as sketches in my notebooks and sketchpads. I rarely drew people or buildings. Rather, I gravitated towards mostly objects within our home. As my design skills matured and developed, I learned to appreciate the imprinting of my African culture even more, and understood its intrinsic value. As I continue to explore and expand my knowledge of the continent, I incorporate and imprint my learnings into modern furniture.'

Jomo wants to see modern African design take its place among recognised styles such as Scandinavian, Italian and Japanese design. 'There has been an awakening and interest in African design and Black design in the past few years,' he says. 'As a designer contributing to the body of Black design work,

I am often asked and quoted on the topic. Over time these cultural contexts enter the popular culture and become a widely accepted genre. It is my view that, in the next few years, the idea of African and Black design will be viewed in the same way [as Scandinavian, Italian or Japanese design].

GROWING REPRESENTATION

'For this to happen we need more African and Black designers represented in design schools and industry. While practising design over three decades and attending my share of exciting events on three continents, I am

constantly surprised by the absence of Black designers. The inclusion of Black designers' **inputs and perspective** will make the design world wholesome.'

Jomo was born in Kenya to **Ethiopian** parents and his love of woodworking was first sparked in an apprenticeship in Addis Ababa. 'I saw early on what is possible,' he recalls. 'Over a two-year period, I witnessed how a small shop with limited tools could produce a wide assortment of home goods, ranging from large bedroom sets to buttons for sweaters. In contrast, my university studio class had a shop 10 times the size of the one I was accustomed to. I had a steep learning curve before I could start my woodworking projects. As an apprentice the owner of the shop did not allow us to use any power tools but let me and my younger brother do only painting, sanding and finishing.' He adds: 'An added benefit was that the shop owner was an accomplished painter, and generous to share drawing and watercolouring tips and tricks, which I picked up on.'

He then went on to the Industrial Design programme at the University of Kansas, which he says took his development as a craftsman and designer to the next level. 'I was able to combine my conceptual skills with the theory and language of design. My studio classes also gave me both physical and intellectual space to conceive and explore my modern African furniture concept.'

THE ROAD LESS TRAVELLED

Jomo started out designing and building pieces for his home, including chairs, stools, tables and lampshades, before winning his first commission – to design and manufacture bespoke lampshades for a restaurant in 1996. 'Very early in my career I realised there was a very narrow licensing opportunity for my work, since the industry was focused on broader market trends. My options were to either change my focus or pursue production of my line of modern African furniture as a solo project. I chose the least travelled path,' he says.

He sees his professional journey in three phases, starting in autumn 1992 when he set up a small woodworking shop in a rented garage with his younger brother. 'Over the next several years I had the opportunity to develop my design style while building custom furniture for clients,' he recalls. 'After evaluating the scope of our commercial success in the Midwest, I connected with a few friends and raised capital in 2000 to open a design studio in Washington, DC.

'For the next eight years I ran the studio, which had a major portion of its clients focused on web and graphic design services. The change in location, while attracting more viewers of my work, did not gain major traction at design shows or within the industry. At the same time I had started a family and decided to step away from woodworking and furniture design.

'Then in 2017 three of my designs – the Axum chair, "theDukaStack" and "theEnserra" stools, were published in *Contemporary African Design* by Tapiwa Matensed, leading to invitations to a couple of design festivals. The response from the general public towards my work was overwhelmingly positive. After reevaluating my options, I decided to reboot my design work and make it the focus of my career. As you can imagine, starting a new furniture design business has a lot of risks. However, it has been a very exhilarating journey.'

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I think high-level craftsmanship requires a dialogue between the designer and expert builder. If this works out, I hope some of my designs will be fabricated in Africa – after all, the continent and my heritage is the inspiration for my work.'

His favourite – and most challenging – piece so far has been the Nyala chair. 'It is a hand-carved chair and it took quite some time and collaboration with my builder to figure out how to shape and assemble the raw frame, minimise material waste and still deliver on the aesthetics. We built several prototypes before we arrived at a frame and final product that both of us were happy with,' he says. 'It is not fair to be asked which one of your children is your favourite, since all my current works have been deeply satisfying. But if I have to select one, the Nyala chair hits all the right notes on function and art. It consistently evokes similar feelings at galleries and shows, the most common question being "is it a piece of art or a functional chair?" The answer is: yes. It is both, and that was how I intended it to be when I designed it.'

Jomo had hoped that 2020 would be his breakout year, but the Covid-19 pandemic has delayed his appearance at shows. 'At the same time it has given me a bit of time to refine and build relationships with builders and potential catalogues who can carry my work,' he says. 'I will be attending my first show on November 27 in Savannah, Georgia, and I am really looking forward to it.' He also has two new chair designs in the pipeline for this autumn. 'The best thing that happened in 2020 and in 2021 is a couple of museums approaching me to add my work to their permanent collection,' Jomo adds. 'I have always wanted my work to be taken seriously, and it was a delight when a highly celebrated institution approached me to be followed by two more now. I think it says something about my hard work and persistence and how I define my design vision. I have always believed I was doing something that most people are not accustomed to when it came to African furniture design, so I understand why my work stands out.'

GARAGE SET-UP

Jomo's workshop is in the basement of the family home he shares with his wife and two teenage sons in a suburb of Washington DC. 'The amount of space is quite constrained, but adequate for a prototyping shop,' he says. Fabrication and build-outs are done elsewhere by master craftspeople such as David Bohnhoff, who builds his chairs. 'I have been in this garage shop about three years now,' says Jomo. 'I initially did not have that many tools – I was able to move my table saw to the corner and fit in my wife's Honda Accord. Over time though, the shop has taken over the floorspace. I currently have a table saw, drill press, mitresaw, drum sander, 10in bandsaw, router table and a 25 x 36 CNC machine housed behind a sound wall, and a small collection of hand and power tools.'

His current favourite tool is his CNC with indexer. 'I particularly like the ability to plan and plot during weekdays and focus my shop time on the weekends,' he explains. 'Not all my ideas though could be prototyped on a CNC, so I have invested in a planer, additional router for a router table and a small bandsaw for cutting templates. In the fall I will be adding a small wood turner and a 3D printer, filling some of the gaps in my shop. I am investing in these because I will be exiting my day job at the end of August and will finally have the time needed to spend as much

energy as I want visualising my ideas.' An accident during his college days has left him very wary of woodturning machines, but he says he is over that fear now.

Jomo mainly works with hardwoods, veneers, plywood and occasionally acrylic. 'I really want to explore metal and carbon fibre, but I am intentionally staying focused on wood because of space constraints. I also like to paint patterns. The Massai Lounge Chair concept will have interchangeable backrests with carvings and paintings – something to look forward to in 2022.' In terms of finishes, he vacillates between natural, water-based finishes to highlight the grain and natural colour of a material, and ebonised pieces because he loves to see his work in black. 'We recently experimented with bleached wood and the results were stunning. We just completed a Nyala chair using this technique, which looks like it was carved from ivory or bone. Since most of my work is custom there is always flexibility, although I stay away from shiny finishes in general and prefer satin.'

TEAMING AESTHETICS WITH FUNCTION

'When I started my first business I had the vision of doing it all by myself and was thinking very big. I also wanted to control all aspects of the creation process,' Jomo recalls. 'As I matured as a designer and design studio operator, I learned to focus on the part of my business that is high value and cannot be replicated. I also did not want to sacrifice my time with my family.'

'I used to run a studio with a large gallery space. I now run my design venture from my home office, where my wife and two teenage children will pop in to either hang out or watch a movie while I am working on my sketches or computer. I also have a prototyping shop in my garage, where I periodically win the "loudest neighbour on the weekend" award. More importantly, I have partnered with a local master craftsman who is equally passionate about my design and woodworking. I am also always on the lookout for local finishers, woodturners and other crafts experts to work with. I think high-level craftsmanship requires a dialogue between the designer and expert builder. If this works out, I hope some of my designs will be fabricated in Africa – after all, the continent and my heritage is the inspiration for my work.'

Jomo's background in industrial design helps with the ergonomics of fabrication, after his initial idea has begun from an aesthetic exploration. 'I believe there should be a constant feedback between the aesthetics and functionality of created objects to be truly enjoyed in the home,' he says. And he adds: 'I hope my work connects with the public on two levels. When consumers approach their furniture purchase decision, my wish is for modern African to be one of their considerations in parallel with other modern regional design traditions. On a deeper level, I hope my furniture evokes the warmth of belongingness to those connected to Africa, either through lineage or travel.'

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