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MOSAIC

CULTURE, TRAVEL, LIFESTYLE

THE HOME MAKERS

WOOD CUTTERS Wealthy yuppies furnishing their luxury homes in Mumbai are looking for exclusive designs that reflect their personality. This is great news for furniture designers, who are finding more work, more chances to explore their creativity



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Six years ago, Mark D'Souza — armed with a master's degree in industrial design from IIT-Bombay — landed a job with a product design firm, only to leave it in less than a year.

D'Souza decided to switch to a more specialised field of design that was beginning to grow lucrative in Mumbai, and which is now a bustling industry in its own right: Furniture.

Fuelled by the boom in the luxury homes segment, scores of high-end designer furniture stores have sprung up in the city over the past decade to cater to a large, upwardly mobile middle- and upper-middle class population that is growing increasingly home-conscious.

Some are stores that sell leading design brands from around the world — such as Giorgetti at Lower Parel and Woodville at Mahalaxmi, which sell Italian luxury brands, and German brand Hacker at Worli; others have their own designers creating furniture.

"Young people who travel the world relate to international design styles and prefer to buy ready-made, designer furniture off the shelf," says D'Souza, 30, who was drawn to the field by the idea of designing furniture specific to the Indian masses.

After five years of working in a home retail company, D'Souza has moved on to a firm designing office furniture. But the expansion of the furniture design industry has shaped



(Above) A sleek chaise lounge designed by Red Blue & Yellow's Paul Rodrigues; (left) a classical wooden arch by Miheer Fyzee and (below) an S-shaped side table by Latika Khosla of Freedom Tree Homestore.

the careers of several young designers in the city, who create sleek armchairs, art deco bookshelves and crystal-encrusted coffee tables for a living.

This change is reflected in the increasing number of students taking an interest in furniture design, which is usually taught as a branch of product or industrial design. At

Ahmedabad's National Institute of Design (NID), which has offered an under-graduate specialisation in furniture design for over a decade, the number of takers has risen from five students in 2005 to packed 15-student batches for the past two years. At Mumbai's Rachna Sansad Academy of Architecture, furniture design has been offered as a

one-year post-diploma course for the past decade and is also a part of a five-year degree in interior design. "In the next two years, we aim to start a full-fledged post-graduate course in furniture design, complete with specialised machines and workshops for woodwork and metal work," says Pradip Amberkar, joint secretary of Rachna Sansad and director of its school of interior design.

"Due to the growth of the home sector and changing needs and tastes, the demand for and interest in the discipline of furniture design is steadily growing," says professor Rama Krishna Rao, head of NID's furniture design department. "It has now become an independent, specialised field of design with great prospects and opportunities."

Gone are the days when a carpenter would spend days sawing wood in the house for a fresh batch of cupboards and beds; homebuyers now want exclusive, ready-made furniture that reflects their personality.

Graphic designer Bina Nayak, for instance, did up her new one-bedroom Powai home in bright reds and blues, scoring an array of designer stores for each handpicked piece. Her latest acquisition is a sleek wooden bookshelf shaped like the Howrah bridge, bought online from eight-month-old Kolkata-based design store Aiza.

"I saw the bookshelf at a Mumbai exhibition and just had to have it," says Nayak, 41. She now plans to have her holiday home in Goa furnished by two German designers. "When I entertain friends at home," she says, "I want each piece to stand out so that people notice."

'I love making the complex look simple'

PAUL RODRIGUES, 36
CO-FOUNDER OF FURNITURE DESIGN STORE RED BLUE & YELLOW

Paul Rodrigues was virtually a pioneer when he launched Red Blue & Yellow in Mumbai 11 years ago. Back then, contemporary design in home furniture was more of a talking point than a décor style. Now, says Rodrigues, it is perhaps the most popular style in furniture, with brands from around the world open-



ing up shop in Mumbai.

Red Blue & Yellow, meanwhile, has steadfastly continued to design, hand-carve and customise all its own furniture, for a growing list of clients that includes everyone from young ad executives to families with holiday homes in Alibaug.

Originally an interior design graduate from Rachna Sansad Academy of Architecture, Rodrigues says he grabbed the first opportunity he got to work on furniture because he wanted to use his creativity and design skills. He soon realised that contemporary design was his true calling.

"Contemporary design is where you face challenges in structure and form," says Rodrigues, who aimed to create in an Indian context and using Indian craftsmanship, global designs that would not look out of place anywhere in the world.

"What I really love," he says, "is to create designs that appear simple but are actually very complicated."

'I like bright reds, purples and blues'

LATIKA KHOSLA, 50+
FOUNDER AND HEAD OF FREEDOM TREE HOMESTORE

Latika Khosla's year-old Freedom Tree Homestore is already a household name in furniture design, but her focus, she says, has never been to create luxury products. "It was always creative, but instead of taking up art or painting, which I found to be slightly self-indulgent, I chose design, which uses creativity to solve people's problems," says Khosla.

A graduate from National Institute of Design, Ahmedabad, Khosla began her career with design consultancy firms and co-founded her first home

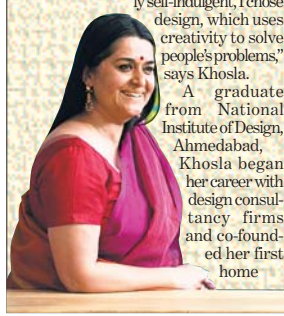
store company, Takete Maluma, in 1996, selling designer furniture across India, Japan, Malaysia and Singapore.

Ten years ago, she returned to her hometown of Mumbai and set up a design consultancy, Freedom Tree, that now includes a homestore brand that offers much-sought-after designer furniture and home accessories in vibrant colours and playful styles.

"Our furniture is light and flexible, uses bright reds, purples and blues, and never has any ostentatious ornamentation on it," says Khosla.

Classy and unique, her mid-level and high-end furniture draws customers of all ages, most of them businessmen and professionals. "Most people now want homes that reflect their personalities," says Khosla.

Sometimes, in fact, that yearning for individualism can become a problem, she adds, laughing. "Some clients want to customise everything — doors, windows... they don't understand that some things come in specific proportions that cannot be changed."



'I want every piece to stand out'

MIHEER FYZEE, 33
FOUNDER AND HEAD OF MIHEER FYZEE CUSTOM FURNITURE

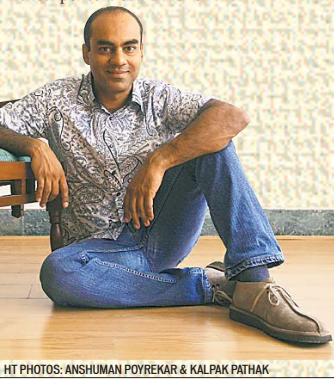
A creative child, Miheer Fyzee's most vivid memories are of watching carpenters saw wood into panels to make furniture at his Mumbai home. As a young man, he opted for mechanical engineering, studied in the US, completed a post-graduate degree in product design at IIT-Bombay, then began his career at a firm designing electronics and kitchen appliances.

"All that while," he says, "all I wanted to do was work with wood." So, in 2008, he quit his job and launched Miheer Fyzee Custom Furniture.

Fyzee says he has no preferred design style, as long as the material is wood.

"Home design is a very personal thing and clients are not always satisfied with what is on offer in stores. I try to understand their individual tastes and give them the perfect piece, whether it is in the contemporary, vintage, art deco or classic Italian style," says Fyzee, who caters to high-end clients and recently began shipping furniture to Bangalore, New York and the Bahamas.

His favourite piece is a classical hardwood arch he created over the stairway of a duplex flat in Prabhadevi. "I aim to create masterpieces," he says, "not cookie-cutter modular shapes that hundreds of carpenters could make."



HT PHOTOS: ANSHUMAN POYREKAR & KALPAK PATHAK

artupdate

a look at what's hot in the art world in the coming weeks

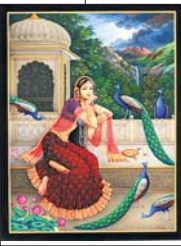


WHAT: Places of Rebirth, a mixed media exhibition. Navin Rawanchaikul, a Thai artist of Punjabi descent, uses sculptures and film poster-style paintings to 'retrace his ancestral memory'.

WHERE: Sakshi Art Gallery, Tanna House, 11, Nathalal Parekh Marg, Colaba

WHEN: Till November 22, 10 am to 7 pm. Sundays closed.

CALL: 66103424



WHAT: Rhythms of Brush and Pigment: Indian Miniatures, a group exhibition of paintings from Rajasthan.

WHERE: Cymroza Art Gallery, 72, Bhulabhai Desai Road

WHEN: Till November 13, 11 am to 8 pm. Open on Sunday

CALL: 23671983

Afloat on a reed island in Lake Titicaca

LAND OF THE INCAS Peru is, of course, home to Machu Picchu. But high up in the Andes is a chance to live on artificial islands in an inland lake, alongside descendants of an ancient tribe

traveltales

APARNA SHEKAR ROY

For centuries, Machu Picchu — those magnificent, 15th century Inca ruins in Peru — has drawn luxury travellers and intrepid backpackers alike.

In 2008, my husband and I decided to head there too. For three weeks, we toured Inca land, spending half our time exploring the colossal remains of Machu Picchu, and the other half strolling through the tiny agrarian villages scattered around Sacred Valley, some of which are believed to date back at least 1,000 years.

As we explored, we tasted some of the 4,000 varieties of native potato of which the Peruvians are so proud. We chased llamas and took photographs of little girls who had mastered their poses. We admired traditional, multi-coloured wool and soaked in the smell of the coca leaves that the women always carry with them.

And yet, amidst this overwhelming set that Peru presented, what I remember most is our last weekend, which we spent on a floating island at Lake Titicaca.

Situated 12,500 ft above sea level, on the border of Peru and Bolivia, Titicaca is the highest navigable lake in the world and is still a relatively unvisited region, retaining all its indigenous charm. The name, say some Peruvians, means 'Rock Puma', because the lake is shaped like a puma hunt-



■ For just Rs 1,550 per head, you can spend one night and two days touring the Uros islands on Lake Titicaca, a group of 44 artificial islands built from dried reeds. About 2,000 Uros tribals still live on these floating islands. PHOTO: APARNA SHEKAR ROY

ing a rabbit.

We set up base in Puno, a small hill town that serves as the gateway to Titicaca. Famous for its rather inexpensive Chinese restaurants and its traditional street market, it is also a good pitstop for negotiating tours around Titicaca. For just Rs 1,550 per head, we signed up for a one-night-two-day trip to the Uros islands in Titicaca — a group of 44 artificial

islands built from dried reeds.

Originally meant as hideaways and defence outposts for the Uros tribe, the islands were built to be movable in case of emergency or attack.

The largest of these still houses a watchtower made of dried reeds, and several hundred Uros tribals still live on these drifting islands with their families.

Reaching the nearest small island, we were welcomed by one of the male members of the six families living there.

"Every step taken on the island makes it sink a bit and the art of adding reeds constantly to the top gives the islands a longer life," he explained.

With tourism growing only haltingly here, the 2,000-odd residents of the Uros islands have a hard time making ends meet, relying heavily on fishing for a living.

Some of the children have, nonetheless, picked up various languages as they row tourists about in boats also made of dried reeds. I was astonished to hear our young boatman sing the French nursery rhyme 'Frère Jacques' and became so excited that I stood up to applaud and almost fell over. The guide then stopped to tell us a very strange fact — if someone falls into Lake Titicaca, it is local tradition to not help them, to let them drown as an offering to Earth goddess Pachamama.

I promptly took a seat and waited for the boat to dock.

An unforgettable meal awaited us back on the reed island — trout cooked over an open fire and served with quinoa, a local grain that is a staple here. It was one of the best meals we ate in Peru, though it did leave us wondering how the women had managed to start a fire without setting the entire island ablaze.

We spent that night with a local family at Amantani, one of two large islands that accept tourists as guests.



GETTING THERE

Rates for direct flights to Lima, the capital of Peru, start at Rs 90,000 per head for a return trip. You can reach Puno by taking a flight to Juliaca (Rs 6,000 per head, return) or a bus to Cusco and then to Puno (Rs 2,000 per head, return). The bus is perhaps advisable, though it takes about eight hours, since it will help you acclimatise to the high altitude.

THE UROS LAKE TOURS

- Half-day tour: \$10 per head (About Rs 470)
- Full-day visit: \$14.00 per head (About Rs 650)
- One-day-two-night package: \$33.00 per head (About Rs 1,550)

We slept under the stars and awoke to the sound of locals practicing a traditional folk dance.

It was surreal, dreamy, other-worldly. But then, that's Peru.

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