Doshi Levien, Meet Fame
(Introducing the latest pack of emerging designers)
Although the building that houses the Milan Furniture Fair sprawls over 7.5 million square feet, one corner of one stand—belonging to the Italian manufacturer Moroso—attracted a disproportionate amount of attention this year. Peering through the clusters of visitors, one found neither bead boxes nor complimentary iPads nor Marcel Wanders’s girlfriend swinging from a chandelier in the nude (yet again). Instead, there were daybeds and large floor cushions in brilliantly colored fabrics with quirky embroidery and appliqué.

The crowds couldn’t keep their hands off. “They were hugging the cushions!” exclaims Nipa Doshi, 35, who designed the pieces with her partner, Jonathan Levien, 34, of the rising London-based studio Doshi Levien. The daybeds, or Charpoys (Hindi for “four legs”), featured a mattress of cotton and silk embroidered with a checkered game board. The cushions, called “Tools for Inspiration,” were decorated with self-referential motifs: One depicted the instruments, such as chalk and hand-forged scissors, used by the textile workers.

No Rest for the Worldly
What a difference a daybed makes—just ask Doshi Levien.
who made them; others showed objects from the designers’ own studio, including a computer fan, Italian staplers, and Ford's Boonie's Tram Glass vases made of recycled bottles.

"I knew the project was interesting," says Patrizia Moroso, the company’s creative director, on the phone from Udine, Italy, "but I didn't expect this response." Once the fair was over, the grassy prototypes were marched to the cleaners to get rid of all the handsprints. The pieces were installed in Moroso’s New York showroom, where the Chappoys were selling for $4,100 and the custom-made cushions for considerably more. They were also displayed in the Great Hall of the city’s Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum this past summer, the first in a series of "Quick Takes" exhibitions featuring innovative products before they are widely known.

"The tactility, beauty, and light-heartedness were welcome refugees," says the Cooper-Hewitt’s deputy curatorial director, Matilda McQuaid, explaining why, among the Milan fair’s vast bounty, she and chief curator Cara McCarty picked Doshi Levien’s designs to inaugurate the series.

Doshi Levien have worked as a team since 2000. They met at London’s Royal College of Art, where both studied product design, graduating in 1997. Together, they have created any number of credible goods—cutlery for Habitat, cookware for Tefal—and some inspiring exhibitions: Now it seems they have met their creative godmother in Moroso, an enterprising famous for putting Boonie’s woodland romanticism on the map. "I was reading about them in a magazine, and I thought, I want to know these lovely people," Moroso says.

What attracted Moroso, as well as hand-nosed design critics and hard-to-please buyers in Milan, was Doshi Levien’s cultural cross-pollination with a contemporary edge. There is no sentimentality in these products, which are an amalgamation of fine Indian craftsmanship (the textile work is done in Doshi’s aunt’s factory in Ahmedabad; each piece is signed in thread by the artisans who made it) and the best of Italian production. As in all their previous projects, Doshi’s love of craft and narrative combines with Levien’s industrial precision. The result is objects with local values and universal appeal. The Chappoys, for example, is an Indian furniture archetype (the chess-like game of changra, seen in ancient paintings, is notorious for having inspired the epic mythological war called the Mahabharata when a ruler gambled away his wife and kingdom), but its finely turned Italian legs belit a European drawing room.
This is not just a design match, however. The two married in 2000 in London's Chelsea Town Hall, and Levene himself says "creativity and love come from the same place." Patrizia Moroso, too, talks about their work being "a fusion underpinned by love." Tom Dixon, the British designer for whom both have worked, says, "They have literally married two diverse cultures. I wouldn't have put them together, probably, when I knew them separately. But couples are strange things, aren't they?" Even their live-work space (built in 1830, it has served as both a print factory and a banana warehouse) sits on the border between the new city finance buildings that are eroding Spitalfields' history and the Brick Lane area that is home to much of London's Bangladeshi community. Like a further metaphor for the pair's cultural elision.

Nipa Doshi was brought up in Delhi and educated at the prestigious National Institute of Design in Ahmedabad, where she met and Bhatia values of form and function were still being heavily enforced in the 1990s. Levene, born in Scotland, had attended the furniture course at Bucks College in High Wycombe, where he learned his love of precision and problem-solving. His uncle Robin Levene, a highly respected British industrial designer, encouraged him to go to the RCA. Doshi was advised to apply by Jasper Morrison when she visited him in London as a starstruck graduate. "I'd left his exact address at home," she recalls. "So I had to guess which house was his in the street. It was the one without net curtains."

Doshi and Levene didn't date at college, but they sat next to each other. "One day she said to me, I can't be your friend if I don't respect your work," Levene remembers. Now their closeness allows a continual editing of one another's ideas.

"You can be brutally honest when you work as a couple. It's not a hindrance. And you develop a similar sensibility," he says. Doshi, always more pragmatic, says that if design now is about creating more human and layered work, then this combination of masculinity and femininity is a way to achieve it.

The couple have not been distracted from their ideals by this year's success. While they are developing a now "office landscape" for Herman Miller, they are also working closer to home on a project with umbrella manufacturer T Fors. Established in 1668 by Samuel Fors, creator of the world's first steel-frame model, the company proclaims its presence with a landmark neon sign on London Wall, just streets away from the couple's studio. "The British Council in India asked us to create something for them, and we wanted to produce an umbrella to fit the biggest now happening in India," says Doshi. "The umbrella is about personality and identity and unites industrial and textile design, and fashion and utility," continues Levene. "And most of our clients are in India or Italy, or the US, so we thought, let's go local."

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