



# Nile STYLE

A lighter touch to Egyptian design

BY SCOTT MACMILLAN

Interior design in Egypt has traditionally meant ornate French antiques and the so-called "ethnic" Egyptian style, which is heavy on blown glass and elaborately wrought wood and metalwork. Just five years ago, local manufacturers of modern design pieces were almost unheard of, but a coterie of leading designers in Cairo is now paving the way for a contemporary style with a distinctly Egyptian flavour. According to Amr Khalil, one of Cairo's most sought-after interior designers, this recent trend combines a sleek minimalism imported from the West with older Egyptian motifs. Browsers with the keenest eye will find most of Cairo's best design shops on the leafy streets of Zamalek, the diplomatic quarter located on an island in the Nile.

At **MAKAN**, in the heart of Zamalek, architect and designer Viktor Sobky experiments with a smattering of moods and styles, drawing from European art deco, early-twentieth-century Egyptian décor, and even pseudo-Arabic kitsch. Catering to several of Cairo's most prominent families, Sobky says he is witnessing a "revolution in taste" among the younger trend-setters, who have abandoned the heavy, baroque ornamentation of the past in favour of lighter and more modern pieces, such as semi-circular dark-wood chairs delicately accented with a hand-painted Turkish motif, EGP839/€110 each (4 Ismail Mohamed; 02/738-2632).

**ALCHEMY**, which opened last year in the posh suburb of Maadi, about 10 kilometres south of Zamalek, deserves a place in the top tier of Cairo's design shops.

Pioneering a sleek aesthetic, Cairo-born Armenian Karim Mekhtigian is one of the few designers in town who sells exclusively modern pieces that are designed and manufactured in Egypt. While in tune with the latest trends from Europe, the pieces at Alchemy also take a fresh approach to minimalist design, often lifting shapes and colours from ancient Egyptian culture. For

instance, leading French designer Christophe Pillet, a former student of Philippe Starck, drew inspiration for the graceful steel curve of the Sezz stool (EGP4,920) from a Pharaonic headrest, while Mekhtigian's own Izi salt and pepper shakers (EGP244 each), made from beech and kotibe wood, mimic the shape and colour of a 3,000-year-old mortar and pestle (15a Street 6, Maadi; 02/359-7774).

The flipside of Alchemy's approach (giving traditional Egyptian style a modern twist) is on display at **ALEF**, Cairo's design shop of choice for the Arab elite. Owner Naguiba Meyassar designs furniture, lighting, and fabrics, using traditional Egyptian elements—ornate, hand-carved wooden furniture, intricate geometric designs on lush, natural fabrics, and colourful blown glasswork—while giving them a modern, playful, and deliberately over-the-top flair. Meyassar has designed rooms for the palaces of **President Hosni Mubarak**. Prices range from EGP4,303 for a glass-covered coffee table to EGP24,605 for an ornate, hand-carved wood sofa (14 Mohamed Anis; 02/735-3690).

Just across the road is **TANIS**, specializing in fine fabrics with original designs. Founder and lead designer Lamia Hassanein borrows liberally from local and regional sources to create hand-woven linens and hand-printed silkscreens that are both chic and traditional. This year's line includes colourful burlap printed with Arabic calligraphy, EGP175–EGP221 a square metre (31 Mohamed Anis; 02/737-2555).

Hassanein and her sister May are partners in the design gallery **EL PATIO**. Specializing in custom-made furniture, the gallery features antique cabinets and wardrobes that have been refurbished and fronted with patterned wood screens called *mashrabeya*—a staple of Egyptian design (77c Street 4, Maadi; 02/359-6654).

At **PHILOSOPHY INTERIORS**, design director Nabil Fahmy teams up with well-known Egyptian painters and sculptors to bring an artful touch to furniture design. Fahmy's glass-top coffee table, made from the dark African hardwood known as wenge, provides a frame for an abstract original by Cairo-based Sudanese painter Hasan Ali (EGP2,967 for the table, EGP1,472–EGP4,920 for the original art), while a custom wenge buffet, also by Fahmy, features a colourful backdrop by the portrait artist Ashraf Al-Zamzamy (40b Mohamed Mazhar Street; 02/738-0163).

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Izi salt and pepper shakers from Alchemy