
Luxury goods

The US furniture makers seeking to rival the best of Europe

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When you picture a US furniture maker, you might think: bushy beard, plaid shirt and a softly spoken demeanour. But Hellman-Chang, a Brooklyn-based furniture company founded by childhood friends Eric Chang and Dan Hellman, offers a new take on that stereotype and one that points to a more sophisticated era of design in the US.

Wearing a three-piece bespoke suit by Italian tailor Canali, Chang walks among table saws and swirling sawdust discussing the experiences that brought the pair here — long nights in a shared wood shop in a seedy part of Brooklyn; an early commission from the Four Seasons hotel chain that led to more well-heeled clients.

Call it business acumen or just an all-encompassing sense of style, but the brand is what some might consider

an anomaly among its neighbours who are also producers of handmade furniture. They are members of the culture of handmade-everything that has put Brooklyn on the map. Yet while the demand for locally made products remains high in the US, some, such as Hellman-Chang, are seeking the next chapter in this story.

“We’re bringing the luxury element into it, the credibility of a finely crafted product that could be conceived in Italy or Paris,” says Chang.

US design schools consistently produce talented young designers, but the country is still catching up with centuries of fine European craftsmanship. “We’ve always sought to try to prove to the world that not just the best-designed furniture could be made in America, but also the best-quality furniture can be made in America,” says Chang.

Cultivating (and conquering) the ultra-high-end market still comes down to a love of craftsmanship. Staffed with many graduates of Rhode Island School of Design’s solid wood

furniture programme, the duo's wood shop operates without automated equipment.



A
new

Nola round table with jet black high polish and gold leafing, \$15,250, hellman-chang.com

upholstered line will be launched later this year; the architectural bones of the furniture still apparent beneath soft curves of fabric that would look at home on a Milan fashion runway.

Every piece requires a huge time commitment. For instance, it takes a month to achieve the gloss on Hellman-Chang's Nola round table, which is created by repeated spraying with lacquer and hand-sanding carried out by three people at once.

The gently spiralling bases of its "Z line" furniture range are carved using a spokeshave, a hand tool originally used in the 16th century to make rounded wagon-wheel spokes. Each piece requires at least 40 hours' sculpting.

The reward of this work is the opportunity to carve out a new place in popular culture. At the Design Miami fair last December, Chang spoke on a panel of “disrupters” — visionaries or game-changers in a range of crafts. The talk was hosted in part by the Andy Warhol Museum, and participants were compared with the artist and the impact he had on bringing the art world into popular culture.

Indeed, Hellman-Chang may be one of the first Brooklyn-born contemporary furniture brands to reach pop-icon status. During one episode of *Gossip Girl*, the hit television drama about elite New York prep-school teenagers, one character exclaims when she sees a 10ft dining table: “Is that a Hellman-Chang?” in the same way one might admire a sports car or couture gown.

Designers who make and sell their own pieces often find themselves trying to balance their role as the face of a company with the business of design.

The Brooklyn-based Egg Collective, formed in 2011 by Stephanie Beamer, Crystal Ellis and Hillary Petrie, is another group becoming well-known as makers of high-quality work. The trio emphasise the human element in their work (furniture in their 2014 collection is named after loved ones). “We’re closely related to everything that goes in our products,” says Ellis.

The group takes inspiration from early American furniture and patterns, as well as art-deco forms and shapes and patterns found in nature. A new version of the Wu side table, for example, is made of box elder, a white wood that produces a tannic reaction to the box elder bugs that chew it. The result is a pattern of pink streaks that resemble the strokes of a watercolour brush.



Turner sideboard, \$13,440, and Hangar bookcase, \$14,050, eggcollective.com

Egg Collective produces prototypes and finished work in its shop and uses local artisans working with metal, stone and glass. This spring, the group's new showroom in Brooklyn will allow the trio to meet more collectors in person. "People want to touch something before they spend a large amount of money," says Beamer. "Our products are made by hand and we need clients to be able to connect with us in that way."

Finding a voice in the furniture industry can take decades. After spending 20 years as a master glass-blower and developing a client list that included Tiffany and Barneys, John Pomp relaunched his business in Philadelphia in 2008.

Having spent years gaining the metalworking and electrical skills needed to design and build his own glass-blowing furnaces and kit, he now had the know-how to design furniture and lighting.

Inspired by the ability to control the way light hits his glasswork, Pomp, who learned carpentry from his father, began with a lighting collection and launched a glass-centric furniture

range last year. Pieces are perfectly imperfect, drawing collectors to their hand-wrought appearance.

“My design perspective has always been trying to merge proficiency in craftsmanship with evidence of the hand,” he says.

Gabriel Scott, founded by Canadian duo Gabriel Kakon and Scott Richler in 2012, further exemplifies the trend. Their Lower Manhattan showroom displays their striking line in furniture and statement lighting pieces, all blackened steel, brass and copper finishes.

With today’s interest in high-quality modern furniture, previously dying crafts are now enjoying a renaissance.



Waverly dresser, \$15,950, hellman-chang.com

David Feldman was inspired to begin designing furniture after growing up in his family’s pillow-

making and upholstery shop on Manhattan's Lower East Side. After taking over the business, he would pore over furniture styles ranging from 19th-century French to mid-century modern, learning the anatomy of each piece. The best work required very little maintenance even decades later. Three years ago, he and his wife, Donna, launched Dmitriy & Co in Manhattan, setting up a manufacturing base next door to the showroom. The shop feels more like a tailor's atelier than anything else. Soft tape measures drape over craftsmen's shoulders as they measure and hand-stitch Italian fabric over handmade down cushions.

Underneath, a traditional construction of hand-tied coil springs and horsehair ensures a piece's longevity. The collection mixes modern lines and traditional forms, resulting in flared sofa arms or a club chair with pleating inspired by the hem of a dress. Clients can even come in for a fitting, testing out a chair for the right firmness before the final upholstery is sewn.

“There’s a younger generation that really cares about what’s going in their homes,” says Donna Feldman. As that generation looks for its rising stars, the stories behind the furniture are as important as the pieces themselves.

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