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UNTIL RECENTLY THE CUTTING-EDGE DESIGN GALLERY CARWAN WAS A NOMADIC BUSINESS THAT POPPED UP ALL OVER THE WORLD. NOW ITS FOUNDERS HAVE A PHYSICAL SPACE ON THE GROUND FLOOR OF AN ICONIC BEIRUT LANDMARK. BUT FOR HOW LONG?

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Beirut's go-to gallery for contemporary design, Carwan, is keeping alive the tradition of the caravanserais, the ancient trading posts of the East. The gallery offers a platform for exchange and creation, showcasing international designers who work with or are inspired by Middle Eastern crafts. And its contributor list is lengthy and impressive: Michael Anastassiades, India Mahdavi and Lindsey Adelman have all created for Carwan special collections of furniture, lighting and objets d'art.

Like the traders of the old caravanserais, the gallery's founders are relentless travelers, regularly scouting for new designers, discovering old craftsmen and attending a host of design and art fairs. Canadian-born Nicolas Bellavance-Lecompte lived in Berlin, Venice and Milan before discovering Beirut in 2009. His Lebanese partner, Pascale Wakim, grew up in Paris and studied in Barcelona, moving to Lebanon in 2008. The pair, who met through a mutual friend, clicked instantly as professional partners. And, interestingly, both are architects. "It helps," explains Bellavance-Lecompte. "Each project is like a small architectural piece."

Despite the city's socio-economic circumstances, Beirut and the surrounding area is enjoying a boom in real estate, and with it comes an appetite for

contemporary art and design. Numerous pop-up shows across the region (in Dubai, Doha, Abu Dhabi, even Riyadh) led Carwan's founders to realize that a platform for contemporary design was missing in the area. "We created a scene for design," says Bellavance-Lecompte enthusiastically, "and the public was very responsive."

Of course, there have been hurdles. People do not always understand why a piece of contemporary furniture should carry such a hefty price tag. (The craft and quality of Carwan's products are well worth the cost.) And shipping a piece from Beirut to Riyadh can be a logistical headache – contemporary design rarely ticks regular boxes on a customs form (though Wakim showed surprise when a Lebanese official had recently researched a designer online). The conflict in Syria has also had a negative impact, but Carwan has several projects involving Syrian craftsmen in the pipeline. "We go on as much as we can" says Bellavance-Lecompte, and "when the conflict ends, we will be in pole position."

Set up just under four years ago, Carwan held its first show, boldly titled "Milan Does Beirut," at the influential Ventura Lambrate exhibition space during the renowned Milan Design Week in 2011. The exhibition was a mission statement for the nascent itinerant gallery, highlighting

01 Nicolas Bellavance-Lecompte overlooks a site-specific installation at Carwan by the designer Carlo Massoud

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seven international designers who shared a common approach to design and craft. They included Paul Loebach (United States), who produced his Watson table using an impressive wood-bending technique, and Oeuffice (Italy), which presented graceful totem-like architectural structures. The show was a success, capturing the region's growing interest in, and emphasizing an underlying fascination with, crafts in the Middle East.

Carwan's next show, "Contemporary Perspectives in Middle Eastern Crafts," a group exhibition, premiered at Design Days Dubai, a parallel event to the now well-established Art Dubai fair. Among the pieces presented were Adelman's abstract tiles (created with Lebanese tile maker Blatt Chaya), and a wood sideboard by the Austrian studio MischerTraxler's, carved in the typical Arab mashrabiyya style with the help of a Syrian Lebanese woodworker.

Collaborating with the Lebanese Academy of Fine Arts, or ALBA, Carwan then invited the creative Italian laboratory Fabrica to visit Lebanon, organizing visits to the showrooms of designers and esteemed craftsmen like Maison Tarazi, which has been making oriental furniture in the Levant since the mid-1800s. The trip led to the creation of a collaborative Lebanese-inspired collection that included side tables, lanterns and mirrors. It was exhibited at the National Museum of Beirut last December.

Carwan continued its pop-up shows in cities around the world – including London, Miami and Mexico – until late 2013. By then the pair felt it was time to have a proper

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gallery: "We needed a base where we could continue the conversation," explains Bellavance-Lecompte.

For him and his partner, Lebanon and its cosmopolitan population are the entry point to the Middle East. The country's tradition of craft-making in glass, brass, wood and rattan is an additional factor. So is the strong design scene. Many Lebanese designers have studied in prestigious universities abroad, and numerous design programs are offered in Lebanese schools. The scene is led by two women: the Charlotte Perriand-inspired Karen Chekerdjian (who studied at Domus Academy in Milan), and Nada Debs, whose upbringing in Japan was instrumental to her approach to craft and design (she graduated from the Rhode Island School of Design).

But for all the recent talk about design, interest in the field is far from new. Lebanon has a history of nurturing

02 Nicolas Bellavance-Lecompte and Pascale Wakim work on the Massoud installation 03 Totems by Oeuffice are exhibited on the gallery's mezzanine 04 Works by Philippe Malouin are stored in a corner of the gallery 05 Models by Oeuffice sit on gallery shelves 06 Three Arabian Vessels by Lindsey Adelman



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designers from around the world. Enlightened Lebanese once furnished their houses with Mies van der Rohe chairs and Pierre Chareau lamps, while Western architects influenced by the Bauhaus helped bring modernism to Beirut in the 1950s and 1960s. Perhaps the most famous designer was Jean Royère, who worked in Lebanon with his colleague Nadim Majdalani, decorating private homes as well as glamorous hotels like the St-George and the Carlton, now sadly both defunct.

Aware of this heritage, Carwan opened in one of Beirut's modernist landmarks, a building complex, known to locals as the Gefinor, designed by architect Victor Gruen. Near the prestigious American University of Beirut, it links the upscale Clemenceau district to the busier Hamra neighborhood, and its glass facade, marble piazza and striking staircases have made it an icon studied by generations of architecture students. As Hani Asfour, professor of architecture and design at the American University, says, "This is the closest Mies van der Rohe ever got to Beirut." Unfortunately Carwan's stay in the building will be short lived. The Gefinor's owners are planning a revamp following a change in Lebanon's rental laws, forcing Carwan to find a new home. The pair are considering a location in the quieter neighborhood of Badaro, in a building designed by no others than Royère and Majdalani.



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CARWAN GALLERY RÉSUMÉ

- 2010 » Introduced by a mutual friend, Wakim and Bellavance-Lecompte set up Carwan, dubbed "the first pop-up gallery in the Middle East"
- 2011 » Carwan organizes "Milan Does Beirut," their first exhibition, at the influential Ventura Lambrate space in Milan
- 2012 » The gallerists curate "Contemporary Perspectives in Middle Eastern Crafts," which premieres at Design Days Dubai. The show features work by Nada Debs and Karen Chekerdjian, among others
- 2013 » In November Bellavance-Lecompte and Wakim established their first physical space in a ground-floor space in Beirut's iconic Gefinor Center
- 2013 » Carwan collaborates with Fabrica and shows a limited-edition collection of design objects at the National Museum of Beirut



BEHIND THE GEFINOR

The GEFINOR Center, a 55,000-square-meter business complex (and Beirut architectural landmark), was built in the late 1960s by Victor Gruen, an Austrian architect. Gruen, who died in 1980 at the age of 76, is best known as an innovator in the design of shopping malls, of which he created numerous examples while living as an emigre in the United States. (His Los Angeles-based firm was behind the first open-air shopping facility in the United States, near Detroit.) So pioneering was Gruen's approach that writer Malcolm Gladwell has suggested that he "may well have been the most influential architect of the twentieth century."

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07 Bellavance-Lecompte and Wakim stand outside the GEFINOR, a Beirut landmark

When BEYOND toured Carwan, Carlo Massoud (a graduate of ECALE in Lausanne) was installing the last pieces of his burka-clad wooden dolls, poetically titled "Maya, Zeina, Rasha and Yara" after the names of high school friends. He was preparing to show the installation at Carwan during Beirut Design Week, which was to open the following week. Now in its third iteration, the event's organizers created a busy program awash with workshops, pop-up shops and talks. Along with Massoud's sculptures, Carwan planned to present the elegant work of Italian designer Vincenzo de Cotiis, whose brass lighting and furniture pieces resonate with Beirut's retro architecture. De Cotiis was scheduled to fly into Lebanon the following day to participate, hoping to be inspired by his surroundings enough to create a new collection under the encouraging eye of Carwan.

There is no doubt that the gallery, like the increasing number of design showrooms in town, is filling a

gap. As Wakim explains, until recently there was a dearth of places to visit in the city for interesting furniture. "It was a problem for architects who were tasked with furnishing all these new flats," she says. The issue is even more acute in the gulf, which has been one big construction site for the past 15 years. But things are changing. Dubai is now planning a design district in the heart of the city (it will feature a mix of art galleries, designer workshops and shops). Carwan's founders are partners and consultants on the project and will open a second gallery in the area.

Such exposure is bringing more work to the pair. But "we are not about buying objects and selling them," Bellavance-Lecompte insists. "What interests us is new commissions, creating rich and fruitful collaborations. And we want to do this from Beirut, where Carwan was born. This is our identity." //

THE CARWAN GALLERY PORTFOLIO



01 TUBE CHANDELIER, by the London-based designer Michael Anastassiades, was designed in 2008 02 MOBILE CHANDELIER 1, also by Anastassiades, features mouth-blown glass and black patinated plated brass 03 INDIA MAHDAMI'S LANDSCAPE VASES SERIES 1 is handmade in glazed ceramic and has a pure gold interior coating 04 LIVING SPACE III, by Karen Chekerdjian, combines a lounge, coffee table, stool and magazine rack into a single unit 05 WYSSEM NOCHI'S PETAL (LOW) chair is constructed from several bamboo stems bent to form and was upholstered in Alcántara 06 LINDSEY ADELMAN'S HANDBLOWN ARABIAN VESSELS are fitted with delicate brass stoppers 07 OBJECT 03 - X, Y, Z, by Chekerdjian is made from highly polished copper 08 FORT STANDARD'S BOLD CREST BOTTLE OPENERS are cast in solid brass