

HARMONIOUS OBJECTS: *From Beirut to Athens*

*Architect, curator and co-founder of Nomad design fair and Beirut's Carwan Gallery
Nicolas Bellavance-Lecompte discusses his move from Beirut to Jeddah,
passing by Siwa and to Athens where he will open a new space for art and design*

When I was asked to write an op-ed about the design scene in the Middle East the first thing I thought about was how my own personal experience in the region has shaped my views on the Middle East throughout the years. It all started ten years ago when I discovered the city of Beirut which then led me to open Carwan Gallery two years later. Carwan was the first gallery presenting collectible design in the region and everything was new, not only to myself, but to the crowd around me, eager to create something fresh and to revolutionise the international design scene. It was through this wave of optimism that everything started to take a definitive shape, creating a space for collectible design in an ever-changing world.

Let's start with the basics: What is collectible design? What does it mean to collect design? That said, these are two most difficult questions to answer yet also the most simple. I've been trying to find the perfect response to these both over multiple design projects I've done in the Middle East, Europe and the US. Design today has many meanings. At its core design is a form of expression. A designer, architect or artist chooses the idea of how an object expresses a concept or personal research in a functional manner.

I consider collectible design to lean towards the idea of functional art - a reference to aesthetic objects that serve utilitarian purposes, encompassing everything from furniture and lighting to ceramics and even books. More and more art collectors have begun to explore design with excitement and they feel, in the realm of design, that there is much less speculation than in the art world.

Collecting design means that you must be a visionary. The reality is that the design market doesn't grow exponentially in terms of value and most of the collectors in this field are doing it primarily for themselves, almost like an act of intellectual snobbism. It's a space to explore a niche where very few people have been, especially in the Middle East. The results, however, are incredible I must say. Once one jumps into the idea of collecting design, it is a life-changing moment. Everyday becomes special because you evolve in a special environment and you understand the meaning of the designers, the craftsmanship and materials involved behind the objects created. One can commission breath-taking objects tailor-made for their own everyday moments. And this could be a larger definition of design: To live in harmony with your environment. This is what makes me so passionate about design. It's not a painting that you revere on a wall, but a true interactive and tactile world that opens up to you.

This has been my mission: starting from Lebanon and expanding out into the world with time. I have been inviting designers from the region and beyond to create and innovate. My desire has been to offer them a platform

here and abroad, in world-renowned art and design fairs, promoting non-stop new talents and incredible productions. My vision to promote design even pushed me to create, along with Giorgio Pace, a new traveling showcase for art and design called NOMAD where both collectible design and contemporary art meet in a unique format.

I have a vision to sustainably deal design, take part in a larger mission to create the foundation of a design educational process. Building a scene out of almost nothing was the greatest challenge over the past few years. Lebanon, just like its political history, had a very quick and qualitative growth for the design world; dozens of new designers opened their own studios with great international success over the past decade in Beirut. Lebanese design became a symbol of research, quality and consistency in part to the efforts of strong platforms like House of Today and other design galleries who opened and closed their doors and Carwan Gallery as well, of course!

But now, Beirut is again in transition. After years of success and big hopes, most of the design realities are slowing down after a very short golden age. The truth is that the Middle East, in general, is going through a period of major instability and I will spare you the details as I am sure you've been reading about it all over the newspapers. What happened to the great hope and wave of optimism across the region? I feel that the only country that managed to keep the appropriate distance from this crisis is Bahrain, with its flourishing and remarkable scene of contemporary architecture and design. What can be a sustainable strategy to continue my activities in the region in this context? Two answers. First, by focusing on the one and only Siwa Oasis in Egypt, I want to create a design residency there along with Mounir Neamatalla - the owner of the eco-lodge Adrere Amellal with whom I am already working on the revitalisation and programming of Shali, the old abandoned town, in line with the idea of regional crafts, with a hint of local

and international creativity. My second answer, and it may sound harsh for my Lebanese fellows - is in time of crisis keep a foot in a safe zone. After a lot of reflection, I have come to the realisation that I need to carve out a space with new fresh energy. Here's the scoop: I am looking forward to introducing you to my new Carwan partner: the architect Quentin Moysé. The gallery will relocate to Athens, opening in a beautiful space with operations within the EU. It's a space that is close enough to still be part of the Middle East. I will continue to use it as a platform for creatives from the region with planned pop-ups everywhere - just like the recent exhibition *WEHE* I curated for Athr Gallery in Jeddah. Finally, I invite you all to join me in Siwa to discover a magical place in the desert and contribute to making it a new place for design and creativity. Here's to hoping and believing that life leads us to greater things and more than we can possibly anticipate. I hope you'll join me in the journey of what's to come. Mashallah. ■



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