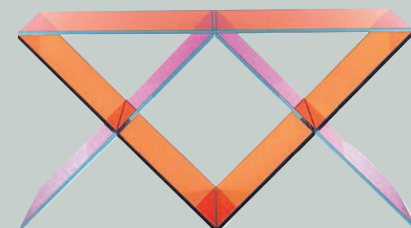


hottalent

California-born Johanna Grawunder leaves us gaping with her vivid, clear tables for Glas Italia: they upend the idea of glass as minimalist and look especially beautiful with sunlight dancing through them



High design to high street

Thanks to new technology and perceptive retailers, affordable great design is reaching the shops faster than ever, writes **Manisha G Harkins**

It's all very nice to gaze longingly at the tagliatelli-like folds of Karim Rashid's Kink table or the gorgeous goose-quill plumes of Heike Buchfelder's Kubus K3 lamp. But can you afford them? If you're one of the fortunate ones, you might as well take your credit card straight to Atmosphere, Aati or even Milan.

The rest of us, design savvy though we may be, will be looking for far more affordable options – not copies, not fakes – but pieces that are inspired by the greats of design.

Fortunately, high design is winding its way to the mid-market shop floor quicker than ever before. In home décor, just as in fashion, we can safely bet on finding – not so very long after the design media have called the year's trends and directions – desirable, contemporary items, from floaty lights to way-out wallpaper, in myriad high street shops, ranging from the super-affordable to the upper end of mid-market.

Helen Howat, the Dubai-based retailer and Middle East representative of Kas Australia, explains, "You absorb the influences of the high designs for a commercial, everyday market. The trend books are out long before the big, international shows and people are designing way ahead of the game these days. The shows confirm you're on the right wavelength."

What has changed to make all of this possible? Globally, we are more connected than ever before, with laptops, Blackberries, easy travel and, of course, the media feeding us at a different level from the way it did a decade ago. We have become immensely more style-aware and design-literate. As a result, in every aspect of our lives we expect more and better – especially on the home front.

Additionally, many middle market retailers commission leading, multi-disciplined designers (from industrial to fashion) to produce special home product lines. Think of Debenhams, where you can find Ben de Lisi's chic, vividly coloured tableware, John Rocha's dreamy bed linen, Jasper Conran's metallic-glazed vases and Betty Jackson's elegant glassware. At Ikea you will find rich textiles by Kazuyo Nomura and handmade glassware by Gunnel Sahlin; at John Lewis, Nick Munro's furniture, Neisha Crosland's soft furnishings or Sebastian Conran's sustainable bamboo kitchenware; at Habitat, Orla Kiely's wonderful wallpaper.

And then there's Michael Graves: the acclaimed American architect has designed best-selling pieces for the Italian company, Alessi (2,000,000 tea kettles and counting) and for the US retail giant, Target (from can openers to coffee makers).

Cool, modern design has become more readily available and fairly priced – just as haute couture eventually filters down to prêt-à-porter and thence to the likes of Topshop – although the turnaround time differs. Whereas fast fashion takes four to six weeks to hit the shop floor, home décor takes six to 15 months. Yet as in fashion, so in home – and the two fields are merging ever closer.

Thomas Lundgren, the founder of The One, explains, "In Coco Chanel's heyday anything called fashion was expensive; the masses couldn't afford it. Then somewhere along the line, big shops opened up, an evolution occurred and companies started offering better pricing, from H&M to Zara. From the catwalk it takes 13 seconds before someone has sketched something in that sort of direction and off it goes to the factory where they work on a dress.

"The same is true in our business – which I call home fashion, by the way – even though it's slightly more difficult. But today you can reach factories and customers more easily – with a direct line through the internet. [Like] the gap that was big in fashion – in home design, people like me are narrowing that gap."

With its fashion and home collections the Spanish phenomenon Zara is one of the best examples of that agility and speed in bringing fresh and fashionable ideas to the mass market – marrying good quality and



Clockwise from top left, Debenhams' designer collections include pieces from Betty Jackson, who is known for her glassware; cushions and mugs by Ben de Lisi; and Purity bed linen by John Rocha.

sensible prices in the process.

According to Søren Jørgensen, the franchise and expansion manager of Denmark-based ID Design, (which has 16 stores in the Middle East), "The biggest change is the necessity to be more viable and inspiring, altering suppliers' attitudes in the process. Ten years ago customers visited furniture stores only with the intention of buying. Today 'lifestyle' shops are a source of inspiration for home decoration. Customers visit us far more frequently, which means we renew ourselves several times a year to remain trendy."

So, just as we might get our fashion fix from Zara rather than Marc Jacobs, we can buy The One's glossy, canary yellow, limited-edition U-magino stool at a fraction of the cost of, say, a Zaha Hadid or Cappellini icon. At ID Design we can find Kokka garden chairs in primary-coloured retro plastic. Bo Concept beguiles with the geometric Amari room divider-cum-storage unit.

This is not to play down the value of one-off designs, handmade pieces or high tech, cutting-edge manufacturers, for we need them to

produce singular items using innovative materials – allowing design to take us forward, like rocket science.

Yet it's great news that those boundary-bursting technologies have become widely available – with high street retailers coaxing contemporary design into more homes today than ever before.

As the design technology experts Mandy Ward and Daniel Court explain, "Innovative materials have driven phenomenal changes in design – polymers and smart materials, for example. Ten years ago, composite materials like carbon fibre or graphite were cutting-edge; today they are commonplace. Vitality, however, CAD software and computer-aided manufacturing (CAD/CAM) have revolutionised design and manufacturing."

So have rapid prototyping (RP) technologies. At Ikea, according to Lars Dafnäs, the head of product design, "we've been using RP equipment (such as computer-controlled robots "growing" detailed objects out of liquid polymer tanks) for about a decade and other CAM devices to cut plywood into intricate shapes. RP [enables us

to] be more exact when it comes to thickness, comfort, shapes, construction and so on." The PS Slingra chair – made of solid birch, plywood and plastics – is a product of RP.

By embracing such advances, Ikea has won fans even among the luminaries of the high design world, such as Alexander von Vegesack, the director of Vitra Design Museum. "Since it began, Ikea has been very successful in knowing how to dilute the most provocative elements [of a design or trend], without compromising the true design values of the object, and then making that good design financially accessible."

Ikea and other companies also employ the robot-like five-axis CNC router – a machine that pivots like a human wrist to cut and shape wood, as in the triangular Occa coffee tables at Bo Concept. Morten Georgsen, one of its furniture designers, explains: "A few years ago designers were building their own moulds and prototypes. Now we can immediately see in a 3D programme whether our design is cutting-edge or not, instead of building a model that takes ages."

All of these advances have played a

significant role in bringing us day-to-day good design.

So, too, does the purchasing power that comes with being a large, multinational company – unlike the brands at the highest end of the market that produce only small batches.

Work from even the most illustrious names can now be affordable. Jill Webb, the brand development director at Conran & Company, says it's down to "manufacturing costs, volume, the use of modern plastics: if you think of manufacturers like Kartell, which produces the phenomenally successful Louis Ghost chair by Philippe Starck, that's very accessible. Vitra produces certain Eames and Ron Arad chairs at very affordable prices because of new technology. A lot of Eames pieces were originally produced in expensive fibreglass but the new versions use injection-moulded plastics. If produced in volume, they're affordable to a wider audience."

The Conran group's own covetable 'Designed by Conran' items, include tablecloth weights and fairy lights for Germany's popular Tchibo stores.

And retail giants like Britain's John Lewis (a limited range of its home products is available at Waitrose in Dubai Mall) and Zara Home, repeatedly draw in middle-market punters for collections that are released, like fashion, for four seasons.

John Lewis has a mix of in-house designers and buying teams, who all work extremely closely. Mockie Harrison, the Home design manager, says that this co-ordinated approach enables progress as much as technology does. "The buying structure has changed dramatically, with much more emphasis on standards and speed to market."

John Lewis has a host of celebrated designers creating exclusive ranges, and it surveys the psychological, economic and trend factors years ahead of time. "Our Home Studio is responsible for creating a vision, identifying what's very different, what is going to be big in terms of colour and look, and this is where high design can influence us," explains Harrison.

Dafnäs at Ikea stresses that affordability and mass manufacturing

needn't mean poor quality. In Ikea's current PS collection, the Maskros pendant light is "a very complicated design. It's made of paper and steel with a specially made plastic film coating. The challenge was to keep the delicate feathery shapes and paper feel, but to make it durable and hardwearing."

A massive cultural shift has also occurred in the past decade, as Tristram Keech, Studio Conran's director of product design points out: "People's wealth has increased, aspirations rising simultaneously; contemporary design is widely publicised and visible; people spend so much time and money on improving the places in which they live and work – and retailers and manufacturers have picked up on that. It's almost like 'premium' has become the new normal."

So if you're still eyeing that Rashid, Thun or Buchfelder object, fear not; chances are that the ideas it embodies will filter down to the high street before long.

@ View more photographs at www.thenational.ae/houseandhome

where to find it

Kas Australia, Mercato Mall, Dubai – www.kasaustralia.com.au

Ikea, Marina Mall, Abu Dhabi and Festival City, Dubai

– www.ikeadubai.com

Debenhams, stores in Abu Dhabi, Dubai and Sharjah

– www.debenhams.com

The One, stores in Abu Dhabi, Dubai and Sharjah

– www.theoneplanet.com

ID Design, Mall of the Emirates and Deira, Dubai, Al Wahda Mall, Abu Dhabi

– www.iddesignuae.com

Kartell, Kart Furniture, Jumeirah Road, Dubai – 04 348 8169

Alessi at Boutique 1, The Walk at JBR, Dubai – www.boutique1.com



Michael Graves' Easy-Fill Teakettle for Target and Gunnel Sahlin's PS Bjuda for Ikea are both practical and pleasing.

