

## INTERIORS

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Ming dynasty classics are being reinterpreted by furniture designers employing modern materials, writes **Suji Owen**

# What goes around

Western furniture makers have been inspired by Chinese design for centuries, but in modern times furniture dating from the early Ming dynasty (1368-1644) has been particularly influential. Unadorned and visually light, examples of early Ming furniture still seem modern in both construction and appearance.

The simple lines and curves of the era often masked complicated structures such as the perfect curve of a horseshoe back chair, cabinets with concealed hinging or delicately tapered legs under deceptively robust surfaces. Component parts were carefully designed to slot into perfect alignment without the use of nails long before the machine age.

Furniture from the era is very popular with collectors of modern design, and Ming-style reproductions – often painted white or in bright colours – have become commonplace in contemporary settings. For example, the signature item in children's furnishings store J4Kids in Shanghai is a simplified scaled-down horseshoe back chair, lacquered in a range of cheerful hues.

But inventively updated versions are fast gaining ground, fashioned in increasingly hi-tech materials including chrome, clear Lucite and other plastics.

Last year saw a wave of new designs also inspired by the horseback chair, the piece most identified with the Ming aesthetic. One eye-catching example is the Mi Ming Chair, designed by Philippe Starck and Eugeni Quitllet for XO and available from the brand's Hong Kong store. The slender horseshoe

that tops the clear injection-moulded frame is available in silver or red.

Onur Mustak Cobanli, a Turkish designer based in Como, Italy, has also launched a series of chairs inspired by the horseshoe design. "My aim was to interpret traditional Chinese furniture with modern production methods, which means modifying the material but also the function to some extent," he says. "I wondered what would happen if we lifted the limitations imposed by the original material of wood. Reimagining them in plastics and metal led me to smoother and

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Onur Mustak Cobanli, designer

more organic shapes and while traditional chairs are designed for indoor use, the new material meant that I could try some designs for outdoor use too."

Cobanli's first foray into this kind of design, the Ming chair, resulted in a curvy but starkly modern rendering of a folding horseshoe-back chair. Evolving directly from this was Lapis, a pared-down version on four splayed legs.

"I wanted to adapt the first design into something that gives off a feeling of strength and elegance," says Cobanli, who decided to incorporate the new legs for a more

modern look. The delicate form is built on a steel skeleton and covered with leather.

Fafner, Cobanli's third take, was a deconstruction of the original form. "It's an oversimplification of the traditional design, the core concept of the horseshoe chair," he says. With a triangular seat and constructed from welded plates of chrome-plated steel overlaid with geometric shapes in deep red, the Fafner seems worlds away from the seats of ancient huanghuali wood employed during the Ming era. But similarities remain: the horseshoe curve and the vertical backrest and also a precision borne of patient craftsmanship.

The level of craftsmanship is what Cobanli says first drew him to traditional Chinese furniture but exploring the potential of new materials has fuelled his passion for design, just as it had for many influential designers before him.

Mid-century modernist designers such as Eileen Gray, Alvar Aalto and Isamu Noguchi are renowned for their reinterpretations of simple Chinese and Japanese forms and handcrafted design ethic using new materials such as moulded plywood, chrome-plated steel and, later, the first plastics.

Perhaps the best known of these modernist designers was Danish furniture maker Hans Wegner, who created a series of nine chairs inspired by classical portraits of Dutch merchants sitting in horseshoe-back Ming chairs. At a furniture exhibition in 1943, he presented his first prototype, which was based on an antique Chinese chair he had seen at the Danish Museum of Industrial Arts. The next, the China Chair, was a more comfortable version of the solid wood chair that retained the iconic horseshoe rail and narrow backboard. A consistent success over half a century, licensee Fritz Hansen released a slightly more ornamental black version of the China Chair last year with a padded seat.

Of the nine, by far the most successful of Wegner's Chinese-inspired chairs is the Y Chair, also known as the Wishbone Chair. Though daintier in build and finished with a woven fibre seat, the curved backrest and solid proportions of the Wishbone make its Ming lineage unmistakable. The craftsmanship that went into the original 1949 model ensured a high price tag, making it a



Two of Onur Mustak Cobanli's Fafner chairs (top left); a Yi Line chair by Hong Kong designer Johnny Li (top right); Fritz Hansen's black version of Hans Wegner's China Chair with padded seat (left); Shanghai-based J4Kids' simplified scaled-down horseshoe-back chair (below)



rare accent piece in a few European interiors.

With the advent of new woodworking technologies in recent years, however, the high spec Wishbone can now be manufactured more efficiently in larger quantities, leading to its resurging popularity, particularly in Asia, where they are often seen grouped together as dining chairs. According to official licensee Carl Hansen, Japan is the biggest export market for the chairs and China is following close behind with rapidly growing demand, notably in Hong Kong.

Local architect and furniture designer Johnny Li admits to invoking the "great masters" of traditional Chinese carpentry for his Yi Line collection of furniture but explains that his aptly named Ming Chair was inspired by Wegner's Wishbone chair and not by traditional Ming works, at least not directly.

"Inspired by an inspiration", Li says he wanted to make his version more comfortable and luxurious. "The Wegner is really more like a kitchen chair. But we updated and reworked it, added proper padding and ended up with something more

like an original Ming chair. But it's definitely a hybrid of both."

Although Wegner designed nine basic chair forms inspired by Ming chairs, he created many variations of each.

"When you're designing furniture, there's always a lot of prototypes. You're always tweaking things to see how they are going to hold up in real life," says Li.

Cobanli, who plans to launch his chairs in Hong Kong later this year, takes another approach. Influenced by the practices of his mother, a ceramic artist, he tries out most of his design ideas by shaping them in his hands with plaster rather than by drawing them on a sketchpad first.

"Making little prototypes in three dimensions like that allows me to be very fast," he says. "I can make changes in plaster – stretch it, bend it, curve it – and arrive at a new design in no time. I can see straight away what is likely to work and which materials might be suitable."

The pared-down elegance of an antique Ming chair may be a classic addition to a modern interior, but a host of new alternatives tapping the timeless design in unconventional materials also deserve consideration.

## Customise your colour palette

Nara Schoenberg

We have discovered something to bring what's left of the warm weather inside.

A free online tool at Color Explorer (colorexplorer.com) can turn photos into colour palettes that can be applied, for example, to the walls of your living room.

The site, by the Danish internet innovation agency Port80.biz, does a lot of complex stuff that only a serious designer could fully appreciate, but finding the little photo icon labelled "Import colours from an image" on the left side of the homepage is a snap, as is uploading images.

Our sun-splashed photo of three girls eating ice cream on a bright yellow bench (you could also use a photo of a room you love, if you're looking for a more literal living room translation) quickly resolved into three, 10 and even 50 colours, from buff with the faintest hint of lilac, to peary blues, acid yellows and black shot through with purple.

The three-colour palettes were the most practical; you could really see the roles key colours played in the photo. To turn the colours you like into actual paints you can buy at the store, simply write down the final code number that appears next to each colour. Then plug that number into the "HTML Number Box" on the "RGB to commercial tints" page at Easy RGB (easyrgb.com).

We got options including a dreamy nautical blue and two delicious sorbet purples. The yellow was not as appealing; too olive for our purposes. But we'd probably reached the point where a trip to a bricks-and-mortar paint store was called for anyway, and Color Explorer had given us a great starting point. The site performed equally well with photos of pink ice cream and the blue waters of the Mediterranean.

McClatchy-Tribune

## Hi-res: sound walls

Walk into the Tekk88 showroom and you'll be greeted with an array of esoteric speakers and ergonomically designed audiovisual components lined up like entrants in a beauty contest. But then you hear music drifting towards you, in an area with just an LCD monitor and ... a blank white wall.

Welcome to the world of In-akustik, a German company with an audio pedigree that has graced the living rooms of the rich and famous and the boardrooms of many top multinationals. Where space is a challenge or where an element of surprise is required, In-akustik's AmbienTone sound walls serve their purpose well. They're two-way flat diaphragm loudspeakers based on a bending wave transducer integrated into modified plasterboard panels installed in a dry-lime wall. The signals are controlled via an external crossover. With an output of 40W/40 Ohm impedance and a frequency range of 80Hz to 18kHz, the sound walls can become very loud. The wall at the Tekk88 showroom is devoid of seams or cracks. According to Erik Uebel, the company's managing director, the speakers can be painted or even papered over without any loss to the sound. Although the speakers there were amped up using Sonos and critically acclaimed In-akustik cables, the AmbienTone speakers can be connected to regular amplifiers without any fuss of additional electronics. The speakers are suitable for stereo,



5.1 surround and multi-room configurations, and even mono installations in kitchens or bathrooms.

With a sub-woofer hooked up at the back and having found the sweet spot, we played music ranging from Teddy Thompson to George Benson. The AmbienTone speakers coped amazingly well with good musical depth and warm vocals but it was when we hooked them up to a Blu-ray player with the classical DVD *The Berlin Concert*, featuring Domingo, Netrebko and Villazon, that the speakers really came alive. Netrebko's vocals were lively and the instruments from the orchestra were detailed and precise.

Although they're quite pricey (from HK\$65,000 upwards), these are beautiful speakers to be heard and not seen.

Kieven Yim



The Ming chair is Onur Mustak Cobanli's pared-down version of a classic

