

Little luxuries

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Minimalux, the company newly founded by Mark Holmes, produces dining and deskware plated in silver or 24-carat gold

If 2009 is all about downsizing – job cuts, smaller mortgages and houses, modest holidays and compact cars – what are the designers and manufacturers of big-ticket furniture to do? Taking a cue from fashion houses, which rely on sales of fragrances and handbags to boost profits, many are going small themselves. Big companies are expanding home accessory collections, specialists already in the category are upping the ante with high-profile commissions and upstarts are launching new ranges of bijou items.

“No one will buy a home accessory just because it’s cheaper than a sofa,” says Gaye Cevikel of Istanbul-based accessories company Gaia & Gino. “But they will buy it because it’s a good way to give a fresh and sophisticated new look to a home at a time when they can’t change the furniture. We’re all going through a financially difficult period but good design and quality will be the winners in the long run.”

This year Cevikel has added Jaime Hayon, Constantin Boym and Harry Allen to a roster of designers that includes Arik Levy, Karim Rashid and Andrée Putman. At the Paris trade show *Maison et Objet* in January, visitors seemed enthralled with Hayon’s copper Grid vases, Levy’s ceramic Galactica fruit bowl, metal Balance vases and candle-holders (hand-crafted by Turkish artisans) and Boym’s colourful Skyscraper vases. (They will soon be available at department stores and boutiques from New York and London to Hong Kong and Kuwait.)

Designer Mark Holmes agrees that small is becoming increasingly beautiful. Having recently left British furniture brand Established & Sons, which he co-founded, he will launch a new home accessories company, Minimalux, at Milan’s Salone del Mobile in April. Between the two ventures, he took a three-month holiday in Greece, which he says “freed [his] mind and acted as a catalyst for ideas”.

“I began to ‘think small’ and about simple but effective manufacturing processes. I realised that combining minimal scale and form with premium materials and finishes was what I wanted to do next.”

His initial collection includes 15 pieces of dining and desk-ware: salt and pepper pots, a condiment pot with spatula, egg cups, paperweights, pen holders, pen rests and paperclip pots. Each piece is made in solid brass, then plated in silver or 24-carat gold in the Royal Warrant-holding factory in London that made Prince Charles's crown. Holmes describes it as "a marriage of extremes – simple, primary forms with a precious finish". The shapes are perhaps too simplistic and look best when two or three are grouped together but they are pleasantly weighty and do have presence.

The worst economic environment since the Great Depression seems like a terrible time to be starting a new company but Holmes thinks his timing is perfect. He is conscious of keeping prices relatively accessible for luxury goods – the pieces will sell for £150-£400 each – and is streamlining his operation by selling online and through design-led retailers rather than opening his own outlet. These are production pieces that are made to look like jewels. "Little luxuries cheer people up in bleak times," he says.

Simone Rossi, a managing director at Alessi, the Italian homewares behemoth, confirms that its business is showing resilience, with UK turnover expected to hit £9m this year, up from £8m in 2008. Interestingly, the company's most exclusive brand, Officina Alessi, has seen the most recent growth. "Home accessories can change the look and feel of an interior space without the need for major changes or spend," Rossi says. But she acknowledges that even comparatively inexpensive purchases must offer long-lasting, functional design, which is why Alessi has asked acclaimed British architects Zaha Hadid and David Chipperfield to design pieces this year. "Companies who will flourish provide value at their core, particularly in this difficult economic period."

Although specialist accessory companies hope to dominate the market with their expertise, that hasn't stopped furniture brands from getting in on the act. Take French furniture manufacturer Ligne Roset, which introduced home accessories in 1998 with 20 designs. Within two years, the category represented 3 per cent of the company's turnover and today, with 64 items in the collection, it accounts for 15 per cent.

"Accessories can be changed seasonally to reflect design and fashion trends," says Bruno Allard, Ligne Roset's UK director. The company insists on the same "function, design, technology and beautiful materials" required in its sofas and chairs but can be more adventurous with smaller products because "we are not restricted by customers' expectations", he adds. "Our designers include sculptors, fine artists and interior designers [who create] a collective mix of hand-crafted pieces in interesting, quirky designs. We can produce unusual pieces for people to collect."

New for 2009 is a stainless steel magazine rack from Japanese designer Shigeichiro Takeuchi and a ceramic vase by Parisian interior designer Noé Duchaufour-Lawrance. Peter Maly's curvaceous Origami vases have three layers of different coloured glass, while Carmen Stallbaumer, an artist-designer based in Germany, has created minimally styled Slat vases made from solid American walnut with glass inserts.



Carmen Stallbaumer's Slat vases are made from walnut and glass for Ligne Roset

Roche Bobois, another big French furniture company, also introduced nine "own label" accessories in 1998 and today launches two new collections a year. Now with 400 pieces, including ceramics, rugs, lamps, linens and decorative items, the range accounts for 10 per cent of turnover. Martin Gleize, UK managing director, says: "They're a good entry to the Roche Bobois lifestyle and a natural way of introducing customers to our ... creativity and quality."

There's clearly cross-fertilisation with the company's core products. Lelievre bedlinens, for example, are made exclusively for Roche Bobois's Vanity bed. And, although the company offers fabrics and cushions created in collaboration with outside brands such as Kenzo Maison and Missoni Home, some of its most successful accessories have come from its furniture designers. Cedric Ragot's Ghost collection of sculptural, enamelled ceramics was last year's best-selling range.

B&B Italia is another big manufacturer increasing its range of small products. Having started

with 15 in 2005, it now has commissions from names such as Marcel Wanders, Naoto Fukasawa, Jean-Marie Massaud, Jakob Wagner and Johanna Grawunder. "Accessories are impulse-buy products," says Fiorella Villa, communications manager at the company.

"They raise the frequency of purchases. Upholstery and furniture has a long life and is not replaced that often. So we have to find new ways to attract potential customers."

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Details

www.gaiagino.com
www.minimalux.com
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