

ROOTED IN *Africa*



Industrial designer Jomo Tariku is rewriting the rulebook for African design in the western context. Vaishnavi Nayel Talawadekar finds out more

Growing up in Ethiopia in the 1970s, Jomo Tariku was always surrounded by beautiful things. His father—a US-educated colonel in the Ethiopian army, designated the first military attaché to Kenya—collected glassware, furniture, rugs, and objets d’art, acquired on his travels in Africa and beyond. “I believe that left a lasting impression on me and what I do now for a living,” says the industrial designer, who was born in Nairobi and is now based in Virginia. At the behest of his father (who wanted to keep his two sons out of trouble), Tariku did a summer apprenticeship with a local furniture builder in Addis Ababa before moving to the US in 1987 to pursue a degree in industrial design at the University of Kansas. While he was completing his thesis on contemporary African furniture, he began developing his own design practice. But it took 30 years for the world to take notice.

“In 1992, I knew I had the daunting task of trying to change an industry that mostly celebrated the western ideals of design, or defined works from Africa as those meeting only stereotypical definitions: animal prints, leopard skins, masks,” Tariku says. At the time, he adds, African design was treated as a novelty, “like that one mask or stool you could put in the corner as a signature piece”, rather than a concept to apply across a full interior. Today, the output of his company, Jomo Furniture, borrows not from westernized tropes, but his cultural heritage—often East Africa, specifically. The MeQuamya chair evokes a T-shaped prayer staff used in Ethiopian Orthodox church ceremonies, while the Boraatii stool reimagines the wooden headrest often found in the Oromia region, used to preserve intricate hairstyles (*boraati* in Oromiffaa means “tomorrow-you”). The shape of the Nyala chair is an homage to the East African mountain antelope, and the Mukecha stool is inspired by a mortar and pestle.

Though contemporary in its aesthetic, Tariku’s visual cues often reflect the traditions of anonymous artisans from Africa, who make homeware for their communities. “They are my unsung heroes,” he says. “They dissociate with the western sense of branding, so I can’t attach a name to their creations.” In contrast, naming his pieces after things that inspire him is a way for him to encourage future owners to learn more about the story behind the designs, beyond his own interpretation. The Ashanti stool, for example, is named after the ancient Ashanti Kingdom of Ghana. “Maybe they will gain knowledge I did not communicate or simply don’t know,” says Tariku.

When a furniture-making enterprise that Tariku started in 2005 did not take off, he segued temporarily into a full-time job as a data scientist at the World Bank, all the while sketching and modeling in his spare time. His watershed moment came when a dozen of his Watatu stools were ordered for the set of *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever*, Marvel Studios’ 2022 superhero sequel set in a fictional sub-Saharan country. Marvel



Left: Jomo Tariku’s Nyala chair in the online exhibition *Provenanced*, curated by New York design brand TRNK in 2020; Above: The Qwanta Totem Chair



clearly found Tariku's pieces a fitting addition to the Afrofuturist aesthetic developed by production designer Hannah Beachler, the first African-American woman to win an Oscar in her category. The studio later included the black Nyala chair and Mukecha stool.

The movie catapulted him into the limelight but, even then, Tariku was troubled. For years he'd suspected that his slow rise to success was due to being a person of color. In 2019, he decided to test this theory by calculating the number of Black designers being licensed and branded by the 150-plus most prominent furniture companies in the US. Of the 4,417 collections he considered, only 14 were by Black designers—less than 1%. In late 2018, he co-founded the Black Artists and Designers Guild, a non-profit organization devoted to advancing a community of Black makers in creative industries, as a reaction to the lack of minority-led design in the west. This enterprise led his work to gain wider currency, and left him confident enough to work on Jomo Furniture full-time.

Tariku's focus now is on designing functional, artistic seating and, though artisanal heritage is key, his work has a sleek modernity. He uses computer modeling to finesse concepts, a practice underscored in *Craft In The Laboratory* at the Mint Museum, North Carolina, in which he appears. "3D modeling helps get the first prototype right," says the designer, who is represented by Wexler Gallery. His work is also on show as part of the Metropolitan Museum of Art's display *Before Yesterday We Could Fly: An Afrofuturist Period Room*, co-curated by Beachler. The exhibit is a fictional room owned by an imagined African-American resident of Seneca Village, a predominantly Black neighborhood that was razed in 1857 to create Central Park. It represents how the room may have looked in the 19th century, how it might look now, and in a time yet to come.

Tariku's own future looks bright—his work appears in the permanent collections of LACMA, the Denver Art Museum and the Baltimore Museum of Art, with the Philadelphia Museum of Art and Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture to follow this year. He is currently on the hunt for a space to create larger pieces, such as tables and bookcases, after his high-end seating collections were exhibited by Wexler Gallery at Design Miami in December 2022. Every piece sold out. "The attention is well-deserved, and Jomo is definitely a designer to watch," says the gallery's owner, Lewis Wexler, adding: "He is tireless in his pursuit of creating an equal playing field for designers of color."

Recent attention has led Tariku to wonder whether his designs might be a passing preoccupation. But more museums are dedicating funds to incorporate Black art and, by extension, Black design into their permanent collections. Tariku is certain that this will improve representation of Black designers and under-served communities on the global stage, as well as encouraging young designers to consider it as a viable career. "If my fears are not realized, I see a day where the western design canon will embrace us as part of the conversation." ◦

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Clockwise from far left: the Meedo Chair; the Mukecha Stool, which appeared in Marvel's *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever* in 2022; the Nyala Chair, which also featured in the movie



Photos: Jomo Tariku; Julia Lehman Photography; Courtesy of Wexler Gallery.