

“The government housing on the reservation was a tool of colonialism and assimilation. It didn’t have anything to do with our culture.” — Chris Cornelius, an architect and member of the Oneida Indian Nation. Page 9

A SPECIAL SECTION

Design

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FINALLY, A SEAT AT THE TABLE

HOW THE
RECENT PUSH
FOR DIVERSITY
IN DESIGN IS
CHANGING THE
WAY THE
WORLD LOOKS



Jean Servais Somian, shown in his atelier in Ivory Coast, is among a group of international designers receiving new recognition. Pages 6 and 7

BIYAMA KADAFIA

THROUGH WALLPAPER
AND TEXTILE
PATTERNS, SOME
DESIGN FIRMS ARE
DELIVERING COMPLEX
CULTURAL MESSAGES
TO OUR HOMES.

BY AILEEN KWUN | PAGE 4



JENNA FLETCHER, THE
LONDON-BASED
FOUNDER OF THE
ONLINE OSWALDE SHOP,
IS IN THE VANGUARD OF
YOUNG BLACK
TASTEMAKERS.

BY CHARLENE PREMPEH | PAGE 11

RECOGNITION

Names to Know

Jomo Tariku, a furniture designer, celebrates 9 colleagues from the African diaspora.

By JULIE LASKY

In 2020, Jomo Tariku, a furniture designer who was born in Kenya and raised in Ethiopia and who had a second career as a data scientist with the World Bank, was preparing to give a lecture at Princeton University. Combing through the websites of 161 international furniture companies, he found that of the 4,399 designers that these companies employed, by his reckoning, only 14, or 0.03 percent, were Black.

It was a statistic heard round the world. Black Lives Matter activism had been catalyzing efforts to diversify design. After decades of designing handmade furniture in Springfield, Va., near Washington, and struggling for notice from manufacturers that could put the designs into production, Mr. Tariku suddenly became a star.

His Meedo chair, modeled on a hair pick, was acquired by the Metropolitan Museum of Art. His three-legged Nyala chair, inspired by an antelope, is among the five pieces he contributed to the film sets of “Black Panther: Wakanda Forever.” Recently, he arranged his first licensing deal.

“It took me 30 years to get here,” said Mr. Tariku, 54, “and I don’t want it to die with me.” He said he is intent on boosting the careers of other Black designers, like those in the Black Artists + Designers Guild, a nonprofit platform and mentorship organization that he helped to get off the ground in 2018.

“We keep saying design is a global language. Well, it did not include us,” he said. “What’s the global part?”

The New York Times asked Mr. Tariku about the names he would like to see on those furniture company websites. From a compiled list of more than 80 designers, he chose nine, which are featured here.

His choices ranged across generations, styles, materials and geographical points in the African diaspora. Many of the designers have not received formal training. What they have in common, he said, is a powerful and inspiring spirit of self-fulfillment.

Michael Puryear

Working in the studio craft tradition from a barn in New York’s Hudson Valley, Mr. Puryear, 75, is part of a generation that has given creative and emotional sustenance to younger Black designers, Mr. Tariku said. He has been widely recognized for furniture that combines Shaker and East Asian influences with references to his African ancestry. “He teaches everybody,” Mr. Tariku said. “I think there’s a lot to emulate from what he’s accomplished.”

Michael Puryear, who works from a barn in New York’s Hudson Valley.



VIA MICHAEL PURYEAR



VIA CHERYL RILEY

Cheryl R. Riley, known for the multilayered nature of her products.

Cheryl R. Riley

A San Francisco-based artist, Ms. Riley, 70, has blazed a distinctive trail in furniture design. What especially sets her apart, Mr. Tariku said, is the multilayered nature of her objects, crammed with overt allusions to European and African art but also embedded with personal meaning. For example, her “Zulu Renaissance Writing Table for a Lady,” in the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art’s collection, is supported by six carved sculptures of African women bearing the weight of the piece on their heads. The top is rimmed with painted eyes from Renaissance portraits, and the glass-covered compartments are filled with the artist’s mementos. “I selected her to pay homage,” Mr. Tariku said.



DOMINIC BUETTNER

Charles O. Job

Born in Lagos, Nigeria, Mr. Job, 62, was educated in architecture and urban planning and has lived, worked and taught for many years in Switzerland. Mr. Tariku, who studied industrial design at the University of Kansas, said he was enamored of his deceptively simple pieces, like the easy-to-assemble Sketch chair that was now in the Vitra Design Museum. Seeing the curves makes his hands ache with the memory of turning clamps to bend his own veneer. “I appreciate him the way I admire people like Eames,” Mr. Tariku said.

Charles O. Job seated in his Assemblage chair in stained hardwood.



CLAUDIA JOHNSTONE/DASFOTOHAUS

Paul Jeffrey

“A bookcase is a bookcase because it has to hold a book, and how many ways can you approach it?” Mr. Tariku said of a specialty of Mr. Jeffrey, 54, a custom furniture maker in Phoenix. He produces library shelving that might flow functionally along a diagonal as it wraps around a wall, and sculptural desks that mix luxurious materials, among other unique pieces. His career took him from the armed forces to automobile design to a stressful period of low employment before he found his footing with his furniture company, Paul Rene. In 2021, he was one of seven people appearing on Ellen DeGeneres’s HBO Max series “Next Great Designer.”

Paul Jeffrey, the founder of Paul Rene Furniture, with his chair inspired by a lyre.



RECOGNITION



Jean Servais Somian's totemlike cabinets are made from coconut palms.

Jean Servais Somian

Based near Abidjan, the capital of Ivory Coast, Mr. Somian, 51, makes sculptural pieces from palm trunks and other local woods. They are “not the easiest or most popular” materials, Mr. Tariku said. But Mr. Somian, who studied his craft in

Ivory Coast and Switzerland, has learned how to process the wood to exploit its beauty, including the unusual grain patterns that are one of his signatures. Mr. Tariku said he particularly admired his totemic cabinets.



ARMAND DA SILVA

Mimi Shodeinde, the principal of Minimat Designs in London.

Mimi Shodeinde

Born and raised in London, Ms. Shodeinde is the founder of Minimat, an interior and product design studio. The 28-year-old is equally comfortable in the language of Brutalism or of an Art Nouveau-suggestive organic style, embodied by her three-legged Omi D-3 chair. (She has a Nigerian background, and omi is the Yoruba word for “water.”) Mr. Tariku declared himself “always obsessed with three-legged chairs,” having designed a much-admired one himself. “When I see someone else executing it very well, I celebrate it,” he said.



MELISSA TOWNSEND

BOA, the founder of OI Studio.

BOA

A self-taught product designer with a background in graphic design and contemporary furniture sales (she spent five years as an account executive at Design Within Reach), BOA is the Caribbean-born founder of OI Studio, in Los Angeles. “She is an attention-to-detail person,” Mr. Tariku said about the matched patterns of her Drop daybed, which was covered in fabric by the Haitian textile company Yaël & Valérie. “But her true focus is sustainability.”



Andile Dyalvane

A 43-year-old ceramics artist based in Cape Town, Mr. Dyalvane is known for pieces that honor his Xhosa heritage. “He is using a material that you rarely associate with furniture and making it work,” Mr. Tariku said, pointing out the unwieldiness of shaping and firing huge portions of clay. Embodying a dream language that



ADRIAN LOUW

Andile Dyalvane in Cape Town.

is unique to the artist in a substance he is gifted in manipulating, Mr. Dyalvane’s designs will never be confused with anyone else’s, Mr. Tariku said. “And I love that approach because I really believe this is where Africa shines,” he added. “It does not have to be an update of a pre-existing piece of furniture.”



Hamed Ouattara

Metal gasoline drums painted in bright, eroded colors represent a starting point for Mr. Ouattara in his design studio in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso. Mr. Ouattara, 51, supervises the transformation of the vernacular drums into cabinets, chairs and tables while ensuring that each piece maintains its origin story, down to the peeling surfaces. He is relentlessly creative despite the shortage of tools, the frequency of power outages and the disruptions of civil war. “He contributes a lot within his community,” Mr. Tariku said. The shop is also a classroom, where Mr. Ouattara imparts his lessons of authenticity to young apprentices.



SOPHIE GARCIA

Hamed Ouattara in his studio in Ouagadougou, Kadiogo, Burkina Faso.