

a world of **HER OWN**

In Milan all roads lead to the Nilufar galleries, one of Elie Saab's favourite design havens. Meet the woman behind it

Words **TAHEREH SARIBAN**

When asked why her father chose to move to Italy in the early 1960s, Nina Yashar tells the story of a man travelling extensively throughout Europe and settling in northern Italy “because culturally, it felt the closest to his native Iran”. The antique and modern rug emporium he started there

would become the springboard for Yashar’s stellar ascension into the highest spheres of design. “It’s true, I started working for my father. But him and I had very different tastes and after a year, I came to him and asked him to support me as I opened my own space.” That was in the early 1980s, and the gallery she started on via Bigli (which moved to via Della Spiga in 1989) was named Nilufar. “My father helped me get started with pieces from his own collection but also told me that after one year, I had to pay the rent myself,” Yashar laughs candidly as she recalls the memory.

She spent those early formative years treading the Milanese cobblestone, learning from the window displays of the highest names in Italian design and antiques dealers. But mostly, she learnt to trust her instinct. Yashar brought gabbehs – primitive, shaggy tribal rugs from the Iranian plains.

“Yashar spent years building a stand-alone brand of design redefined, achieved through a simple formula: a constant eye for beauty in diversity”

She brought dark wood Tibetan cabinets, modernist Italian furniture and Scandinavian weaves. And she began pairing. This was the age of the “total look” – whether antique or contemporary, Milanese houses tended to go for a single, unbroken style. “Even today, many galleries still focus on one style – be it Scandinavian or say, Jean Prouvé,” Yashar notes. Not so for herself. Training her innate cross-cultural, cross-genre approach to interiors, pairing design pieces from different styles, eras and geographies (Crossings was the name of her first catalogue). Yashar spent years building a stand-alone brand of design redefined, achieved through a simple formula: a constant eye for beauty in diversity.

Fast-forward to 2015 and Yashar has inaugurated Nilufar Depot, a 1,500 square metre warehouse-turned-showroom under the expert guidance of Massimiliano Locatelli, a Milan-based architect and product designer. “I never thought it would turn out like this,” Yashar confesses of the three levels of cleverly-designed, modular logias inspired by Milan’s Teatro alla Scala, articulated around a main atrium. “The renovation project was supposed to make the warehouse easier to use. There is such a stock of objects here to navigate. But Massimiliano’s work ended up being so practical and beautiful that after the inauguration dinner, people from all sides – friends, clients and the press – encouraged me to keep the space as a showroom. I now have a gallery, a permanent showroom and a warehouse, which meant I had to go searching for somewhere else!”

An elegant armchair designed by Lebanese architect Claude Missir





The Nilufar Depot, one of the two spaces Yashar owns in Milan. Below: a piece from Hicham Ghandour's Lapiz collection

"I have high admiration for Nina, she is not only a talented gallerist and curator but also helps young talents reach their full potential"

ELIE SAAB



Yashar's laugh rings again, so sincerely, as if all these years of success have only made her younger and more curious.

Whether curating a show, putting together a catalogue or discovering new talents in design, Yashar is driven by a simple thread: the object itself. Her style – if it can be resumed – is a subtle blend of antique and contemporary, honed through decades of looking at objects and appreciating their purpose. When asked how she turned her eclecticism in design from a fringe attitude into a mainstream, internationally-acclaimed genre, Yashar responds "My first clients were mostly Italian. But slowly, it caught on. Novelty is exciting for everyone. My language was new, my gallery windows innovative. I guess I've been successful in stoking people's desire for the new!" And when it comes to pairing Arne Jacobsen chairs with 16th century Italian tapestries and a Martino Gamper screen, Yashar explains: "When objects are functional, they take on a special beauty, and functional objects have existed throughout periods and styles. I'm selective and find pieces that converse with each other."

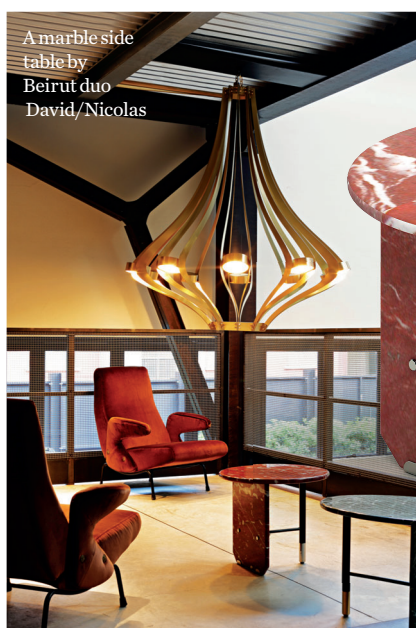
A signature Yashar interior is thus one where pieces share the space, echoing each other's beauty and purpose but also highlighting each other's quirky sides. "Once people are surprised, you can open up the educative side of design. Above and beyond selling, my obsession is to show people something new and educate about design," she adds.

Yashar remains committed to her

roots and is still a firm advocate of her debut dealing in Oriental rugs: "I never abandoned carpets. They are the single most important element connecting an entire room together." Which brings us to the Middle East and Yashar's collaboration with artists from this region: the discovery of Lebanese pair David/Nicolas three years ago in Beirut, whose launch as designers was operated by Nilufar, the artisan Hicham Ghandour and the architect/product designer Claude Missir, both presented exclusively through Nilufar at the 2016 Salone del Mobile.

Her latest project is SQUAT, a pop-up open to the public that explores a new way of showing design, art and architecture, occurring in empty apartments around the world. Orchestrated by Yashar, SQUAT invites artists, gallerist and designers to imagine fictional private living spaces, challenging themselves to question the status of the objects in display and pushing the viewer to experience art and design 360 degrees.

When asked about any plans for the UAE, Yashar's voice lifts: "I would love to bring SQUAT to the UAE! Any city with a design angle should be fostering spontaneous conversations around design, studio visits of contemporary designers, collaborations between galleries and designers. Organising SQUAT in Dubai would be a dream." The grande dame of design has spoken.



A marble side table by Beirut duo David/Nicolas