

Child's play: the limited-edition furniture designed by six-year-olds

A group of French children worked with a design studio to create pieces that will be exhibited in a Paris gallery



An exhibition of the children's work in their village in south-eastern France © Maison Mouton Noir

Ask a child to design a piece of furniture and they might draw a flying sofa or a table made of chocolate; you would not expect practicality to feature. Yet in Paris, a new exhibition showcases five furniture items designed by six- and seven-year-old schoolchildren and brought to life by emerging French design practice Studio BehaghelFoiny.

The limited-edition pieces are confidently functional but still look as if they were born in the minds of children — all bright colours and strange shapes, with a touch of the monstrous. A chunky blue stool boasts hornlike projections; a yellow side table has an outsized zigzag base; a red, wiggling coat stand appears like a cartoon cactus.

The project was dreamt up by Ygaël Attali, co-founder of Galerie Philia, a gallery of contemporary sculptural design and art. Attali was inspired by *art brut*, a label coined in the 1940s by French artist Jean Dubuffet to describe “raw” art created by people who were not considered artists and operated outside of mainstream culture — from children to marginalised communities.

“I’ve always been interested in Dubuffet’s way of seeing art,” says Attali. “The idea [for this project] is to explore different ways of seeing *art brut* through design.”



One of the children's original drawings for a table © Galerie Philia

Titled “Design Brut | Philia & Kids”, this is the first edition of a longer-term project, and each iteration will connect the young creators with local materials. For this, olive trees in the area where the children live — the Roya Valley in south-eastern France — have been used to craft the pieces. “We wanted to show the kids that with their local trees, we can create really interesting artworks,” Attali says. Local flower pigments were also used to stain the pieces.

The choice of location held resonance too: in October 2020, a storm brought heavy rain and flooding to the Roya Valley, destroying buildings and infrastructure, and leading to loss of life. In a context where nature was associated with tragedy, one aim of the project was to reconnect children to their natural environment in positive and creative ways.

The process of working with the 19 children to make the designs into reality involved months of learning and collaboration. It began with workshops held with their teacher, encouraging them to draw their own furniture.

“At the beginning, they didn’t understand that it was possible to make something very different from the chairs and tables they are used to seeing,” says Studio BehaghelFoiny co-founder Alexis Foiny. “When we showed them what is possible, everything changed. Their drawings became so much more colourful and unique.”



The five striking pieces were exhibited in a church in Breil-sur-Roya

No doubt the children were inspired by Studio BehaghelFoiny's own work: a joyous and playful celebration of form, texture and colour. Influenced by radical Italian design, including the Memphis Group, the studio's sculptural pieces harness everyday industrial materials to create characterful, decorative furniture and homeware that toes the line between design and art.

Attali chose the young studio precisely because of this aesthetic. "When I saw their works I instantly thought about this playfulness that you can find in children's minds," he says. "[Their style] is very free, very spontaneous." The designers tend to agree: "When we create something we feel like children, playing with materials," says studio co-founder Antoine Behaghel.

While play was an important part of the project, so was practicality: the pieces had to function as items of furniture. Through workshops, Behaghel and Foiny helped the children learn how to design something that will stand up and not fall over, and took them to watch a carpenter at work to understand the reality of working with a material like olive wood, and how it affects what you can create.

"Once they understood those limits, it gave them even more inspiration," says Attali. "Limits are not only constraints — they are also a new freedom in a way."



Children were taught how to share ideas and adapt their visions

The designers also helped the children understand how to share ideas, adapt their visions and work together: elements from different drawings were combined to create each piece (after all, there were 19 children and five pieces).

The children saw and embraced all the different steps of turning an idea into reality, as well as transforming a tree into a piece of furniture. An exhibition of the results was held in a church in the children's village, Breil-sur-Roya, where parents were brought along for the children to proudly show off their creations. "They were really exhibiting the works as their own," says Attali.

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Ygaël Attali, co-founder of Galerie Philia

In Paris, however, the furniture will be displayed in a gallery frequented more by wealthy collectors than village churchgoers (although it has permanent locations in Geneva, New York, Singapore and Mexico City, Galerie Philia is popping up in the French capital for the show).

The funds raised from the sale of the limited-edition pieces will be reinvested in the project. There are already plans for another iteration in the Dominican Republic.

The experience helped the designers' approach to evolve: "Afterwards, we felt way more free about the shapes that we want to draw," says Behaghel. "It was a way to rethink the habits we have when we make furniture."

It has also hopefully sparked an interest in design for the children, demonstrating the value of their creativity — as well as equipping them with newfound knowledge, skills and agency. We might even be seeing the next generation of French furniture designers emerge.

"DesignBrut | Philia & Kids" is at Espace Meyer Zafra in Paris from November 10 to December 8

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