

DESIGN

Out of Africa

A new appreciation of handmade objects has fuelled a resurgence of interest in the African

The Modernist movement's great master, Pablo Picasso, knew that things don't have to be pretty to be beautiful. When he painted African mask faces in works such as *Les Femmes d'Alger*, he was part of the so-called primitivist movement in art, which saw a powerful abstraction in the rough-hewn simplicity of handmade works.

In the world of interior design, the craving for patina and authenticity is spurring a renewed interest in handmade pieces. But those traditional pieces are getting a new spin. A new show opening June 7 at Toronto's Roseland Art Gallery (www.roselandgallery.com) features the Riggu stool, based on the traditional Asante stool, but welded from recycled steel drums instead of wood.

They are made at Senegal's Rufisque Centre, which was started by the late Baay Xaaly Sene, who taught more than 100 disadvantaged teenagers how to use industrial design techniques to make the traditionally shaped pieces. Rust, old paint, dents and the patina of a tough life give each piece its distinctive colouring and character. Gallery owner Dante Larcade says their appeal is multilayered.

"The materials are being given a second life. The people making them are learning to be creative with what they have," Larcade says. "And people who buy them love them because they are not just design for design's sake. They are connected with the ground, with what is real."

Just as modernism's clean-lined minimalism grew out of an early 20th-century reaction to Victorian clutter, today's disillusionment with *fin de siècle* consumerism is fuelling a desire for simple beauty and



JIM ROSS FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL

traditional techniques.

Toronto furniture designer Patty Johnson is introducing her new designs into countries where Old World skills thrive, cross-pollinating the past with the present. Her North South Project (www.northsouthproject.com) is a collaboration with artisans in Botswana and Guyana. Their skills and sensibilities are applied to furniture designed for contemporary Western taste. Each piece is sustainable environmentally, economically and culturally.

The beautifully crafted Mabeo Windsor chair is part of a 10-piece furniture collection that is a collaboration between Johnson and Peter Mabeo, the small Botswana furniture manufacturer who first sought Johnson out and encouraged her to bring her talents to Africa. Johnson's pieces got so much buzz at last year's International Contemporary Furni-

ture Fair that she launched a new Mabeo collection at this year's show.

Much of the new work coming from Africa involves a collaboration between North American companies and people at risk. L.A.-based Artecnic, which has design projects in Central and South America, has just launched its multi-functional TaTu table, handwoven from wire by artisans in South Africa (www.artecnicainc.com).

The breadth and sophistication of contemporary African design is nowhere more evident than at this weekend's interior design show, SIDIM, in Montreal (www.sidim.com). After last year's success, Design Africa (www.designafrica.ca), is back and bigger, showcasing furniture, ceramic, textiles and tablewares from 19 companies in five countries.

The exhibition will include

pieces by Mali artist Cheick Diallo, who lives and studied architecture in France, but uses traditional weaving techniques and salvaged materials in his African Remix tables and chairs. He also acts as a design adviser to some of the small artisanal companies in his native country. (Toronto retailers and distributors can see the work on May 28 and 29 at the Richmond, 416-368-2801).

Katherine Holland, Design Africa's marketing consultant, says one-of-a-kind pieces like these play to Africa's strengths. "The time is really right for this," Holland says. "People are wanting unique and different and socially responsible products. These pieces are organic. The companies all practise fair-trade principles. The work is not curious. It is unbelievably sophisticated."

In Ethiopia alone, there are