

DREAMING IN NUMBERS

Unlike colleagues who dream of exclusive commissions and products on display in museums, Parisian designer Inga Sempé can think of nothing better than making mass-produced objects for daily use.

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Inga Sempé on Canapé Moël, the sofa she designed for Ligne Roset (2007), dreaming of mass-produced objects for everyday use.

When French designer Inga Sempé was four years old, she picked up bits of wood and pieces of glass in the park near her home in Paris and hammered them together to make crosses for her mother. 'I wasn't the least bit religious,' she says, 'just very good with my hands.'

She always wanted to create objects, even before she knew about the profession that would provide an arena for her desire. 'At the time, nobody in France knew the word "designer". They thought the things around them just materialized, like insects,' she says. Eventually she found her way to the École Nationale Supérieure de Création Industrielle in Paris, worked in the studios of Marc Newson and André Putman, was granted a Villa Medici fellowship, won the French capital's Grand Prix de la Création for design in 2003, and was exhibited at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs.

She started freelancing in 1999, working alone in a tiny apartment she shared with her son. Now, at age 40, she has an assistant and much larger quarters, although they are as sparsely furnished as if she were still a student. Until Ligne Roset gave her one of the popular, high-backed Moël sofas that she designed for the company last year, she didn't even have a proper couch. Even though she spends her days designing objects, she chooses to own very little, believing that most people surround themselves with too much junk.

There is, however, a teething ring on her computer. Though one would never guess it from her perfectly slim figure, Sempé gave birth to her second child just a few months ago. Despite this event, her workload has shown no sign of letting up. Current and recent projects include a bottle for French cognac company Hennessy, a hanging lamp for American brand Artecnic, fabric for Sweden's Almedahls, double-access shelves for David Design (also in Sweden), a hanging lamp for Luce Plan, and couches for Edra and Ligne Roset.

She's designed pieces for some of the most prestigious companies around, including Cappellini and Baccarat, yet she sees these high-end commissions as a stepping stone. What Sempé really dreams of mak-

ing are not luxurious chandeliers but the mass-produced stuff of our daily lives: tools, windows, paper products. Her utopia is the corner drugstore or DIY outlet. She practically breaks out in hives when talking about colleagues who design solely for a wealthy elite – or worse, for the sake of posterity, saying, 'People are very proud to be in museums, when it's so bourgeois. I'd rather know that my objects are for sale at Auchan [a French hypermarket chain].'

Her utopia is the corner store of DIY outlet

While many of her products appear simple, in reality they are fairly complex, since Sempé loves to make things that move or transform themselves. 'I'm not sure why – maybe because joints and hinges make an object come alive,' she explains. Perhaps it was the early influence of an articulated lamp by Vico Magistretti, which she recalls being the only modern design element in her childhood home. Today, the kinds of things that fascinate her are umbrellas (though she doesn't own one) and wallets, with their many compartments.

She hates unpacking in hotel rooms, so she has designed a rolling suitcase that becomes a commode, unzipping to separate into three compartments suspended vertically from the central column. There's a gliding stepladder chair whose backrest lifts up to become a safety rail. A table lamp can be adjusted so that light emerges from either top or bottom. And an ingenious dual-system clock features two analogue hands sporting digital numbers. 'People ask me about it every day,' she says of the clock that, like most of her designs, has not yet been produced. Designers learn to live with the frustration of seeing their creations admired without any guarantee that they will ever hit the market. The non-static aspect of many of Sempé's objects makes them even more fragile, expensive and painstaking to manufacture. At the same



Sempé at her desk. Hanging behind her is the original prototype of her paper lamp for Artecnic.

time, her most complicated design yet is the Plissé lamp just released by Luce Plan, an Italian company not averse to technical challenges. It's meant to hang from the ceiling above a dining or meeting table and can adapt to the number of people seated underneath by stretching like an accordion from 60 to 160 cm in length. Sempé worked out the mechanism using a basic double-diamond pantograph system, which the company's engineers perfected.

Her work process is slow and methodical, starting with page after page of sketches on paper. She says the ideas come only when she's seated at her desk drawing. 'I'll start with what works already and then draw ugly, awful things. It gets on my nerves. I fight the desire to do anything else – take a walk or empty the dishwasher – but after 40 pages or so I always find what I'm looking for.' Technical plans are her favourite part of the process, the tinkering after the main ideas have been hammered out.

She's good with a pencil but says she doesn't draw for pleasure, and would never waste her time doing something like a landscape. Art for art's sake doesn't interest her, →



Needle Cross fabric for Almedahls, made with a special technique called 'burn out' (devoré). The pattern appears when certain fibres are eaten away by acid. According to Sempé, 'the bird on top died because of the colours of the fabrics'.

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A 1:10 model of Sempé's Chantilly sofa for Edra (2007), which she says 'is filled with couscous, so I'll always have something to eat in case of emergency'.





which might seem surprising for the child of two successful artists. Sempé grew up with her mother, Danish-born children's book illustrator Mette Ivers, in the posh 6th arrondissement of Paris. Her father is the famous cartoonist Jean-Jacques Sempé.

What Sempé really dreams of creating is the mass-produced stuff of our daily lives: tools, windows, paper products

With her forthright manner and deadpan sense of humour, Inga Sempé has been described in interviews as 'frosty'. When asked about this reputation, she shrugs. 'If I don't agree about something, I say it, and then some journalist writes that I have a bad character. It's even worse for a woman designer who doesn't tell everyone [voice rising to a falsetto], "I love sensual forms. I

want to change the world because it's important for the children.'" Sempé pauses, before adding with a smile, 'That said, I do have a lousy character.' In her line of work, where designers and manufacturers often have competing interests, she explains that it's crucial to stick to one's guns. And even if she doesn't change the world, she might make the corner DIY store look a whole lot better.

- ↖ One of Sempé's many paper experiments for Artecnic. 'The idea is to create a simple lampshade that's as easy to put into any space as the Chinese paper ball,' she says. 'It's made with two striped baskets, one inside the other, which produces a nice optical effect. When you buy the lampshade, it's flat. You have to unfold it.'
- ↑ 'French lace, over a window with a view of Porte Saint Martin,' explains Sempé. 'This paper lace was done for Plaza magazine, which invited several designers to submit views of France.'
- ↗ Cardboard models of LaChapelle tables for David Design (2006). 'They were ready to be smashed and tossed in the bin when this photo was taken,' says Sempé. To the right, on the wall, are Moustaches stickers for Domestic (2006).
- Shown here with Sempé's Lampe à double orientation (Dual-Directional Lamp) for VIA are two tables from her LaChapelle collection for David Design (2006). Sempé's idea for these tables was a visually light base beneath a round top resembling a circle drawn by hand.

