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Expand And Recline

Fifty years later, Turkish furniture design outfit Casa is broadening its scope.

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PORTRAIT BY AMIN SUWEDI

A resolutely modern, mirrored facade greets visitors to the Casa factory. The name of the company is Italian. The sexy minimalism of its furniture is Italian. Even the creative director of its new daughter label is Italian. But the factory is located in Ankara, the brand is wholly Turkish, and behind its corporate face a commitment to the handmade.

Launched last September, Casa International is the high-end incarnation of Casa, which Hasan Kasan opened a half-century ago as a small workshop. Today it is one of the larger players in the Turkish, Caucasian, Russian, and Middle Eastern design markets. Its contract division—and craftsmen—contribute to high-profile projects like the handsome new Haydar Aliyev Airport in Baku, Azerbaijan, with interiors by Istanbul studio Autoban. Casa International unites creative director Mauro Lipparini's Italian minimalism with forms inspired by Turkey, Mediterranean materials, and the manual know-how of Turkish artisans. This collaboration has borne much fruit, fast: Rooted outside the historic hubs of luxury furniture design, Casa International's huge inaugural col-

lection of 35 pieces grew out of the loam of Kasan's experience in the handcrafted furniture business.

Kasan was born in 1947 and began apprenticing as an upholsterer in 1964 at age 17. By 19, he had hung his own shingle in Ankara's Ulus district, where, in the guild-like clustering still common to Turkey, upholsterers worked in a warren of small shops. Traditional Turkish furnishings have long echoed the ornately carved and lushly patterned confections of old French palaces, but he has always had a modern line. In a black-and-white photograph hung in the factory, Kasan is pictured as a little boy, standing beside a slender, tufted silk, tapered-leg sofa with thread and awl in hand. In another, he has become the young *üsta* (master), posing before a one whose backrest is seamed in an abstract star pattern that appears tailored, like a garment. He is crouched on the ground in front of it, looking up from under his eyebrows into the camera, cockily, having become a master of his own making.

"Upholstery and furniture have always been *in* my life or, rather, they have been my life," says Kasan, whose two sons help run the company today. "The idea behind Casa International is not a coffee table, a sofa, or a sideboard. It is more than the products we make. We wanted to create a lifestyle concept, which is not an easy message to convey with few items."

Kasan brought on Lipparini, who lives and works in Florence, to give Casa comprehensive creative direction. Lipparini did everything from brand development, graphic design, editorial, production and product application, and initial concepts to design and prototyping in less than eight months for the 2015 Milan furniture fair. He chooses photographers; oversees photo shoots; creates the ads, collateral, and catalogs; and designs fair booths and showrooms, having started with spaces in Istanbul, Los Angeles, New York, and Berlin. Lipparini has done interiors for the Ace Hotel in Morioka, Japan, and art direction with industrial design for Italy's Arflex, the Swiss brand de Sede, France's Ligne Roset, and the German company Rolf Benz. His forms are clean, but not austere; his colors strong and textures natural. His is a balanced minimalism. >



Hasan Kasan in front of his childhood portrait at the Casa International factory in Ankara, Turkey. (OPPOSITE) The Alonte chair designed by Mauro Lipparini.



PHOTO: COURTESY CASA INTERNATIONAL



(THIS PAGE, TOP TO BOTTOM)
Rosolina dining table. Torreano Sofa.
Both pieces designed by Lipparini.
(OPPOSITE) Scenes from inside the
Casa International factory.

PHOTOS: COURTESY CASA INTERNATIONAL (OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT) AMIN SUWEDI, COURTESY CASA INTERNATIONAL (3)



"Turkish consumers are sophisticated when it comes to the way they furnish their homes; however, they are very price-sensitive," Kasan says. "So, unfortunately, it is not easy to speak about authentic Turkish design. Most Turkish companies are imitating or knocking off well-known Italian brands in order to offer them at affordable prices. Our collaboration with Mauro is probably the greatest investment made for modern design in the history of the Turkish Republic."

What swayed Lipparini to help launch a furniture label in Turkey in uncertain times? Having long bucked the global financial crisis, Turkey is an "advanced emerging" economy, and Europe's fastest-growing one. Recently, Istanbul has boasted the world's fifth-largest population of billionaires. "Milan isn't even in the ranking," Lipparini points out. "Turkey's cost of labor is significantly lower than Italy's, half the population is below the age of 30, and it has the fourth largest labor force among the EU-27 countries."

Lipparini's first visit to Turkey was in the summer of 1983, when he was 27. He took a ferry from Venice to Izmir with his Honda Goldwing motorcycle and pored over 1,500 miles of the country in a month. "I was fascinated with Turkey's ancient civilizations, from the Stone and Bronze Ages to Byzantium, and its fusion of Eastern Mediterranean, West Asian, Southeastern European, Caucasian, and Central Asian

traditions, all of which are palpable in its culture [today]," he recalls. During the trip, he discovered "a human dimension" that reminded him of the Italy his grandparents had described, but which he had never experienced. Lipparini still sees common ground between the two cultures, as in the "ancestral" materials and craftsmanship handed down through generations: hammered and hairline finish copper, brass, bronze, waxed iron, smooth satin-dipped metals, smoked and bronzed glass, terracotta, muted earth-pigment lacquers, graduated hues and soft, warm tones—all of which will inform the collections.

Casa International's raw materials, foam, down fills, metalwork, solid woods, veneers, fabrics, and leathers are sourced locally and internationally, but they are all processed in-house, Kasan says. He has integrated many typically outsourced service suppliers and artisans into a single two-building, 312,000-square-foot facility replete with a metal workshop, lacquer spraying plant, upholstery division, and woodshop. Behind that gridded, mirrored facade, Turkish craft may see its own face reflected in the exacting handwork of 40 seamstresses, 60 upholsterers, 20 painters, and 45 cabinetmakers. "Craftsmanship is neither dying nor is it thriving in Turkey," Kasan says. "Modern ways of producing furniture are not helping small craftsmen, but the skills that are passed from generation to generation are being neglected, not

forgotten. Casa International is sourcing local artisans, and I'm not sure that is enough for the tradition and the craftsmen to survive, but at least it is a start."

Lipparini feels that this and more set the brand apart from the larger Turkish industry. Like the Italian industry, the heart of Casa consists in its manufacturing strengths and traditions—from engineering, prototyping and industrializing an idea to handmaking a detail—coupled with its commitment to the company's family history. "And our industry requires an innovative, entrepreneurial spirit," Lipparini says, "not just a commitment to timeless quality and superior craftsmanship, both of which Casa has in spades [anyway]."

At this April's Milan furniture fair, Casa International will introduce additions to its collection and announce a lighting collaboration with Istanbul-based accessories label Gaia & Gino. "During these turbulent times, heading a creative mission must be imbued with the missionary's spirit," Lipparini says. "'Missionary' literally means 'one who is to witness across cultures and is, in practice, an individual who believes in a set of principles and converts others while wielding positive influence.' That level of commitment defies politics, it defies even war. Sure, it comes at a price, but we have to create within a fearless sphere. Otherwise, we simply stop creating."