

# identity<sup>®</sup>

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LA nesting: Bird's-eye view  
Shedding light on the subject  
Everlasting design: the new green  
Golf + go: the ultimate play + stay

DHS 15



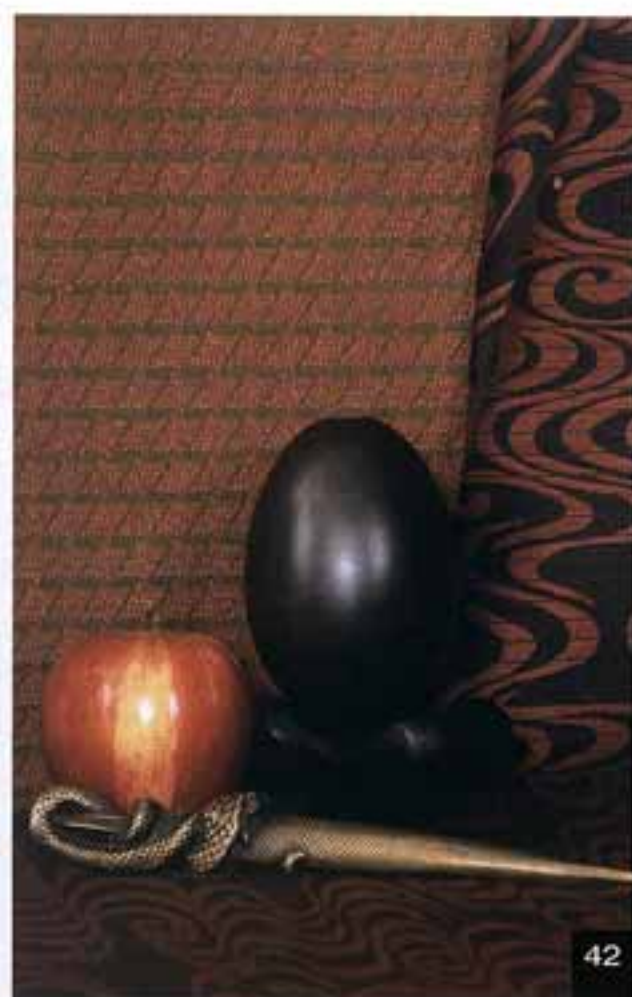
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## identity



Cover: John Edward Linden



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Vero by Christian Biecher

## Design incubator

Promoting enduring projects is the goal of one American furniture manufacturer who searches the world for new designers and marketable, yet, comfortable, ideas. TEXT: DOROTHY WALDMAN



**Simplicity and familiarity.** According to Jerry Helling, Creative Director of Bernhardt Designs, this is what makes design timeless. "You feel comfortable and familiar with it. It is not fashion. It is not 'of-the-moment,'" he says.

"It does not have to be new. It has to be quiet — like a cashmere sweater," the Colorado native continues. "How new is that? But it is something everyone loves, a casual V-neck cashmere sweater. They loved them 60 years ago. If they are really good quality, you don't know when you bought it. It's not new and it's not old. It's not dated."

The pure, clean lines in designs by such international talent as Shin Azumi (London), Yves Behar (San Francisco), Christian Biecher (Paris), Jeffrey Bennett (New York), Peanorloyd (London) and CudeSac (Valencia) illustrate this concept in the American company's first collection to be launched in the European market.

In partnership with Danerka, a Danish manufacturer, the 12 pieces in Global Edition were inspired by the quest to create individual pieces that transcended any specific style category, origin or time, while retaining a unique, memorable quality.

Respected international architecture and design studios were presented the same design brief: to reduce a specific enduring product to its timeless, essence and create something new. This led to, among others, the Aro stool by Lievore Altherr Molina, which has a rotating wooden seat floating above a series of suspended stainless steel rings, and two Arik Levy (Paris) designs — the *Pisano* table, formed by polished aluminium legs with complex faces supporting a variety of tops, and the *Mix*, an elegant sculpted geometric form that can be configured to be a chair, loveseat or sofa, available in a number of upholstery or leather options.

And Helling readily admits that his method for selecting designers to participate in projects such as this is completely unscientific.

"Typically, I like something they have done in the past, whether it is a watch, a car or a piece of clothing. We'll talk about ideas and we'll have a certain chemistry and I'll ask them if they are interested in doing something," he says.

One thing Helling does not do is work with people who come to him with completed designs as he is very involved in the process as well as the end result. "We start with everything from a very detailed drawing to napkin

sketches and we go through many series. For one of the products [the *Whisper* chair by CuldeSac] in the first Global Editions, we went through 14 distinct iterations before we finally got it right.\*

Next spring in Milan, the results of the second Global Edition challenge will be unveiled. The challenge this time is to use a different point of view to look at a specific product from the past to determine what about it is essential and timeless and recapture that essence. The result does not necessarily have to have the same function, but it must have the same aesthetics – and it must be marketable.

All of the designers selected to participate work independently, without knowing who any of the others involved are, however, participants in Global Edition 2009 include someone from Mumbai and a young couple from El Salvador.

Nurturing new talent is a passion of Helling's and has been the impetus for the creation of two programmes sponsored by Bernhardt Design. One is a two-semester course at the world-renowned Art Center College of Design in Pasadena (California, US), where students experience the entire process of what it is like to work for a company from the beginning inception of an idea to the final product.



*Alp Maitim* collection for Winkraft, Bernhardt textiles.



Clockwise from top left: Series Two collection for Winkraft, Bernhardt textiles; Jerry Helling; *Fly* table by Yves Behar; *Calyz* by Shawn Littrell; *Loft* chair by Shelly Shelly; *Prisma* by Arik Levy; *Remy* by Jeffrey Bennett; *Linc* by Chase Wills.



"At the end of the process, we manufacture their work and pay them royalties just like we would Philippe Stark," Helling says.

This year, at NeoCon in Chicago, one student, Shelly Shelly – a name to watch in the future – won the award for the best seating of 2008 with *Loft*, a wood lounge chair that had the mimimalistic look of being hand carved.

Knowing that it can be very difficult for new graduates to show their work and attract manufacturers and buyers, Helling also started the ICFF Studio. Unlike much of the conceptual designs encouraged in academic settings, the criteria for this competition is that the design must be for a real product that is marketable and manufacturable.

Bernhardt exhibits the winners so that manufacturers and retailers can see their work and ideally advance their careers. "We are getting ready to go into our fourth edition [of ICFF Studio] in May," Helling says, adding that about half of the entries come from outside the United States.

Although Bernhardt sponsors the ICFF Studio, it does not just pick the best designs for themselves, but instead provides a showcase so young designers can obtain their own representation.

Right now Helling believes design is at a crossroads. "We have pushed the envelope so much with new materials, man-made materials and have created things we couldn't create before," he says. "In the immediate future I see a big swing back to the appreciation of craft and natural things."

This is especially true of the European designers he works with for Global Edition who are, for the most part, interested in using wood – this, of course, is of great interest to Bernhardt because of its heritage.

"When you are truly working with sustainable woods, it is probably one of the most ecological products you can work with. There are so many polluting elements in working with metals and so many problems with plastics," Helling says.

Of course, the best way to be ecologically aware is to build something that will last, rather than making something that must be recycled every few years. "I think the biggest challenge for this industry is it's too much about fashion – all about what's the loudest, what's in the moment," Helling states.

"If you buy a whole room full of furniture, you are not going to have a relationship with any one piece and when you move, you'll probably throw it away rather than taking it with you and then buy a new roomful when you get there.

"How much furniture do you think is going to end up being antiques and handed down to children? Not so much."

Helling readily admits that this attitude of creating designs that last and the programs to nurture new designers do not help Bernhardt's bottom line directly, but is quick to add: "Everything that is done to promote design, at the end of the day, helps us. "We are trying to show people that quality and design are important and that they should care. Any time there is a dialogue about design and people are reading or hearing about it, it helps us." ■