



The Johnny Farah leather design studio in Beirut.



The team also visited the Beiteddine Palace.

# International design teams seek Lebanese inspiration

FABRICA designers to produce collection based on local crafts and traditions

By Olivia Alabaster  
The Daily Star

BEIRUT: Having spent a week in Lebanon visiting traditional artisans, an international team of designers has now returned to Italy, where they will work on creating a collection inspired by their experiences here.

The FABRICA team was invited by Beirut's Carwan Gallery and ALBA, the Academie Libanaise des Beaux-Arts, to create a series of original, limited-edition objects in collaboration with local craftsmen.

Established originally as the first pop-up gallery in the Middle East, Carwan was founded in 2010 by architects Pascale Wakim and Nicolas Bellavance-Lecompte and this latest collaboration is part of the gallery's ongoing project, "Contemporary Perspectives in Middle Eastern Craft."

A statement from the Italian Embassy in Beirut, which participated in the launch of the "FABRICA goes Lebanese" program last week, said that "each designer's work encapsulates the re-imagining of a distinct, time-honored craft, where the specialized technique of the artisan has formed the basis for the designer's creations."

The FABRICA team of 13 designers comes from all over the world, and constitutes a "melting pot," Wakim says, so their collection will no doubt be influenced by both their myriad backgrounds and their experiences in Lebanon.

"They will build a collection which expresses their feelings and emotions traveling through Lebanon," she says. The range of items, which is expected to be launched at the end of summer 2013, will take their "new emotions and translate these things into a collection."

The team traveled around Lebanon visiting different artisans and craft workshops, from the boutiques and workshops of hipster Mar Mikhael in Beirut to further afield.

In the capital, they visited leather designer Johnny Farah in Saifi Village, ceramic designer Marilyn Massoud, jewelry designer Cynthia Raffoul, the Guillaume Credo atelier and Karage.

They also visited the Beiteddine Palace and nearby Deir al-Qamar, the picturesque Mount Lebanon village complete with red-roofed houses and the Fakhreddine mosque, dating back to the 15th century.

In Broummana, the team visited Maison Tarazi. Established in 1862, it now has branches across the region, and the Lebanese workshop collates designers from both Syria and Lebanon, working in a range of diverse Middle Eastern craft techniques, from furniture to interior design. The house famously did the interiors for the Ottoman salon in the French ambassadorial residence in Beirut, the Residence des Pins.

They also visited graphic designer Rana Salem and the Sursock Palace in



The entrance to the Blatt Chaya tile workshop.



Each object in the collection will be based on a craft technique from Lebanon.

Beirut, where Lady Yvonne Cochrane Sursock gave the team a guided tour, and the tile factory, Blatt Chaya.

One of the FABRICA designers is

Lebanese David Raffoul, and he initiated the collaboration after discovering Carwan gallery while in Beirut.

"The collaboration with Carwan

gallery was spontaneous and harmonious because of their philosophy, which works directly with crafts in the Middle East," he says.

Students from ALBA accompanied the team on their visits, but will not be directly involved in the design process, but, as Raffoul says, "By involving

ALBA in the project, it was the best way to promote the design school, which in my opinion has great potential."

Having the opportunity to show his co-designers around his country was an honor for Raffoul, he says.

"The week was full of discoveries and surprises, even for myself. We had the chance to visit so many places and artisans. ... The incredible hospitality and sense of a family everywhere we visited was a highlight.

"I was so proud of my country, realizing throughout that Lebanon has so much to offer, especially in the design and art field. I would love for Beirut to be a city where visitors from around the world come back time after time, to always be updated on what is happening in Lebanon, just like a Lebanese has interest in traveling to Paris or other cosmopolitan cities."

FABRICA is the Italian brand Benetton's communication research center, defining itself not as a school, advertising agency or university but as "an applied creativity laboratory, a talent incubator, in which young, modern artists come from all over the world to develop innovative projects and explore new directions in communication, from design, music and film to photography, publishing and the internet."

Carwan, along with FABRICA's art director Sam Baron, will help direct the design process until the launch of the collection later in the year, but Raffoul is guarded about what surprises will be in store:

"The materials are still to be decided but the concepts look very exciting. At present we cannot say that much as we would like to keep some surprises. By working closely with Carwan we hope to bring a new perspective of design in the Middle East and also internationally."



Inside the Blatt Chaya tile workshop.



The FABRICA team brainstorming design ideas.