

DAMN^o 48

JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2015

A MAGAZINE ON CONTEMPORARY CULTURE

10 yrs
DAMN^o

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MADE IN MADAGASCAR

Giulio Vinaccia: Designing for the real world

Through his work on projects that use design as a development tool, Giulio Vinaccia collaborates with different organisations and international institutions like the United Nations Development Agency, the World Tourism Organisation, and the United Nations Industrial Development Programme. In a recent project in Madagascar that resulted in the production of a varied collection of furniture, home décor, and fashion bags, Vinaccia demonstrated how perfectly the concept works in the local community, providing enrichment in every way. Meanwhile, the designer applies the same methodology to his projects in Italy, finding it equally successful. DAMN° spoke with Vinaccia about how he came to do what he does.

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Farafangana artisan pausing from dyeing raffia (top)
Giulio Vinaccia (above)



Venezuelan-Italian product designer Giulio Vinaccia has just arrived back from Madagascar, where after a year of intensive work with local artisan communities, he presented, together with the craftspeople and supported by the United Nations, the TSARA collection in the Queen's Palace in the capital city of Antananarivo. "A small miracle!"



Today, Giulio Vinaccia uses design as a development tool, all over the world. According to him, he "was born a product designer", working with big brands in the fields of electronics, sports equipment, and lighting. One day, everything changed. "On the 10th of September 2001, I found myself completely immersed in a discussion about which colour red Vespa's new helmet should have – burgundy or vermillion? The next day, this whole discussion appeared to me so very futile... 9/11 changed my life. I decided to start creating 'development' with my work as a designer. When I explained my new insights and engagements at an international conference, two women from Brazil invited me to work with them on projects with local craftspeople. And thus began my second life as a designer who uses his work to create tools for other people." Even though Vinaccia still has a design studio, most of his work is in 'social design'; he's active in about 20 countries, even more so since the UN picked him up five years ago.

The freshly launched TSARA collection (meaning beautiful in Malagasy) is the result of three artisan communities joining talents: the Farafangana women who live in the southeast of Madagascar,



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Raffia harvest in Farafangana (1)

Farafangana artisans weaving raffia (2/3)



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specialised in weaving natural fibres to create bags, hats, and mats; disabled people from the Dieudonné community who live on the outskirts of the capital and who use sheet metal from old barrels to make chairs and tabletops; and the Ha, who are living in the poorest neighbourhood of Antananarivo, whose men produce tubular metal frames for chairs and tables, while the women weave recycled plastic for tabletops, seats, and backrests. Vinaccia worked with each of these communities. The result is a very



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event, this was a kind of social and gender revolt, with outcasts as the protagonists in the palace of the ruling ethnic groups." Splendid. But what exactly makes this project different from other social design projects? "It's important to notice the difference between projects developed in London or Milan, which are implemented top-down in local communities – those sorts of projects are excellent for showing-off and for winning prizes with, but they're nothing other than charity, which in the end keeps everything as it was. Projects like TSARA happen



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Straw hut façade in the Dieudonné community (1)

Weaving of raffia and plastic strips (2/4)

Raffia pouch for Air Madagascar business class passengers (3)

diverse collection in which natural fibres (such as raffia and straw) intersect with strips of recycled plastic combined with perforated metal sheet or iron tubing, and are then woven to create the Hybrid bag, the Out & Indoor collection of furniture and accessories, and the series of clutch bags for Air Madagascar business-class passengers, a partner in the TSARA project.

MEANINGFUL METHOD

"The collection was launched at the beginning of December, which was quite a challenge, as the government initially refused to allow us to set-up an accompanying exhibition with large pictures of the Farafangana women in the Queen's Palace. In Madagascar, black people are the lowest ranked in society, and the government didn't want them to use their elitist palace. But they finally surrendered, and the presentation was a success. More than a design



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with the people who should benefit from them. You have to be there, feel the situation, and work with the people. This project enables the individuals in these communities to establish their own economy, based on their own skills. Thus, it's a tool for improving living conditions and enabling empowerment, as the occasion in the Queen's Palace shows."

Giulio Vinaccia, who uses the same methodology when working with companies in Italy that are in trouble because of the crisis, says this approach also gives him more personal satisfaction as a designer. "In the past, I could see that what I did had been a success because the owner of the company got a new car, but the workers were stuck in the same situation. Of course, what I do is just a drop in the ocean of problems, but I believe in small revolutions. Designers have a social responsibility! For too long, design was something like fashion: only for the happy few and very superficial. Designers were stylists. This has all changed – now, to an increasing extent,

designers are engaged as consultants specialised in finding solutions for everyday life. We are catalysts and problem-solvers, and are well-placed for this, since we have a foot in production, in marketing, and in developing things of beauty. Today, designers increasingly design for the real world."

A curious toilet in the Dieudonné community (1)

Artisans at work in the Dieudonné community (2/3)

Recycled iron used to make a sheet-metal chair in the Dieudonné community (4)

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