

# VOGUE

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## The Lebanese Design Community Is In a State of Repair

By Lilah Ramzi



A Bokja cushion, embroidered with Lebanon's famed cedar tree, is encircled by the label's colorful fabric masks. Both available at bokja.com. Courtesy of BOKJA.

“Glass has become a rare commodity,” says Huda Baroudi, one of the founders of Beirut-based design studio [Bokja](#), whose ateliers were damaged in the August 4 blast that took more than 190 lives and injured at least 6,000. Baroudi and her cofounder, Maria Hibri, have not yet replaced their shattered storefront windows; their boutique closer to the site of the explosion was rendered uninhabitable. Bokja, which produces lushly embroidered cushions, jackets, robes, and shirts, is not alone. Furniture and homeware purveyors, many of whom were based in badly impacted historic neighborhoods like Mar Mikhaël, where streets feature Levantine archways and telephone wires drape like a canopy overhead, have acutely felt the effects of the disaster.

<https://www.vogue.com/article/lebanese-design-community-state-of-repair>

Despite its reduced capacities, Bokja is back at work; the brand has invited its community to bring in broken furniture for repairs. In a mode that evokes the Japanese art of *kintsugi*—a method of ceramics restoration that marks seams with a golden lacquer—Hibri and Baroudi are using a conspicuous red thread to mend upholstery tears. “We don’t want to forget the wounds,” says Hibri. Beirut has long prided itself on its capacity for reinvention—the city’s mythological symbol is the phoenix—but Hibri wants to remember the city’s suffering: “Let’s not be resilient; let’s mourn properly.”



Bokja's artisans mend furniture with a red stitch, evocative of a medical stitch, to commemorate the injured. Photo: Courtesy of Bokja

The inclination to physically note recent events is shared by others. A few weeks after the blast, [Nada Debs](#), a renowned designer who, earlier this year, launched IKEA’s Ramadan-inspired home collection, [posted an image](#) of herself surrounded by the shattered mirrored walls of her store. (The blast wiped out 60 percent of her inventory.) Behind her, she had spray-painted, our space is destroyed but we are not. Debs says that she plans to keep her scarred walls as they are. She’ll fill the space with a line of furniture made from repurposed doors, shutters, and bits of wood, all forged from the ruins of her neighborhood: “It’s going to be a memorial, an installation space with objects made with the pieces that were broken.” She’s also reprising past designs in black and white. “Eventually we’ll go back to color, but I think it’s time for a little bit of mourning,” she says. Provocative Lebanese interior architect and product designer [Richard Yasmine](#) is also using a stark palette, creating achromatic art-piece chairs and tables. (The collection, *After Ago*, is available at his online shop.) “These layers of black and white represent the emotional alteration between sadness and happiness, madness and sanity, calm and anxiousness. It’s an internal chaos as well because as Lebanese,” he says, “we have this conflict—we want to stay in Lebanon, but we also want to leave.”



Richard Yasmine's After Ago collection is colored in black and white to represent the tensions within his country. Photo: Courtesy of Richard Yasmine

The reconstruction effort is front of mind even to those 14 million Lebanese who make up the diaspora, like luxury tableware designer Nour al Nimer: “I live in New York, but Lebanon is my home.” Since the blast, proceeds from her ceramics label, [Nimerology](#), have gone to [Beb w’ Shebbek](#), a nonprofit working to rebuild Lebanese homes and schools. “They’re trying to preserve the history and heritage of these buildings and heal a community that has experienced so much trauma,” she says. “I feel that the sooner things get fixed, the quicker things can go back to normal.”





A dinner plate from Nimerology, Nour al Nimer's line of tableware. Sales from her website benefit the charity Bebw' Shebbek. Photo: Courtesy of Nimerology

For those living in Lebanon, hope lies in the country's youth. "There was this energy in the days that followed," says Debs. "Young volunteers were walking the streets in cleanup mode, and day by day, they became more professional. By the second or third day, they came with broomsticks and thick gloves so that they could pick up the glass." All the while, there were youth-led protests calling for a government response. (Prime Minister Hassan Diab and his cabinet stepped down days after the explosion.) Baroudi recalls seeing many people at the protests wearing [Bokja masks](#). "It was so moving to see that," she says. "It makes you feel, Okay, we can do this."



A chair from Nada Debs is a tribute to the Lebanese cedar. Its mahogany backrest features a tin inlay of a cedar leaf and [sales benefit](#) the Lebanese Food Bank. Photo: Courtesy of Nada Debs