

The Magazine for  
New Design Culture,  
Creative Visionaries,  
Eco Entrepreneurs &  
Purpose Driven Economy

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KAIA

Artisanal perfection from European specialist manufacturers.  
Sound retro? In fact, it's KAIA's surprisingly up-to-date  
business model, which places origin and sustainability to the fore.

## Timeless design is sustainability for today

Manuela Szewald, Creative and Managing Director of KAIA,  
waxes lyrical over the beauty of hand-crafted products  
and explains why her products are manufactured exclusively in Europe.



# Traditional craftsmanship and timeless designs

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HIVE  
An art installation  
shedding light  
on global insect  
decline,  
in collaboration  
with artist  
Maximilian Prüfer  
and lighting  
designer Sebastian  
Hepting.

Handmade  
by KAIA  
Weltmuseum  
Wien, Vienna

Sustainability is described as the heart of KAIA. Is that your mission?

Manuela Szewald  
Mission, that's a good word. I truly believe that we came together not to start a company, but because we have a common mission ...

What is it?

Manuela Szewald  
KAIA is so much more than a commercial enterprise. Our objective is far more profound. We seek to protect and maintain the cultural heritage of Euro-

pean craftsmanship in a world dominated by globalisation and mass-production. To do this, our studio works exclusively with small companies in Germany and Europe that still celebrate the art of craftsmanship. That's our mission. Many family-led craft businesses, top-class manufacturers, have already vanished. It's very sad.

But isn't that the way business works?

Manuela Szewald  
Yes, that's business, but what's happening is still very sad.

That explains your design language. Your origins are ...

Manuela Szewald  
... in the Vienna Secession. The movement profoundly influenced our founder, Peter Straka, who trained as a metalworker in Vienna and studied industrial design there. Basically, we aim to protect and maintain the craftsmanship that was celebrated in the Wiener Werkstätte design workshop. This tradition is a prominent statement at KAIA. We don't start with the question of how to maximise cost-effectiveness; instead, we ensure the design language and the craftsmanship are aligned. That means exploring what we can do with it in our studio, or in collaboration with external craftspeople. Then we blend the design ideas with cutting-edge technology such as gesture control.

And you combine traditional materials, too.

Manuela Szewald  
Yes, that's right, from papier-mâché to marble and glass. They are our basis for developing designs and projects, a fusion of light and state-of-the-art technology, but also with a certain romantic touch. We build close relationships, almost friendships, with our designers. Developing a product for a company as small as ours is an incredibly intensive time. We're a small team of extremely talented individuals, all with our own personal strengths and areas of expertise. Every challenge, every task, every order knits us more tightly together.

When designers apply to work with you, what's your ideal profile?

Manuela Szewald  
The essence of all products, whether developed externally or in-house, is always the right inspiration. We've just added a new artist to our roster of designers, Ula Saniawa — a Polish ceramicist and architect from the Royal College of Art. We also create in-house designs when we see the demand is there and can identify a market niche.

Everything always starts with an idea.

Manuela Szewald  
Exactly. For example, Ula said it's

not possible to recycle porcelain. But there are mountains of ceramic waste in China. So we worked with her to develop a process in which the ceramic material is crushed and wood chips are added to create a new material. It took a year of meeting up again and again, and suddenly something emerged from it. Our focus is on timeless design, which is sustainability for today: consuming less, but more consciously. We embrace repair. We don't want things to be thrown away. We take back all our products within Europe and pay the transport costs so that we can reuse or refurbish them. We're one of the few companies that do this out of passionate conviction.

And how many products have you taken back?

Manuela Szewald  
Not many! People seem to prefer keeping them ...

How important is it for you to present a complete collection, including both ceiling and wall lights?

Manuela Szewald  
It's certainly important. We primarily concentrate on pendant and wall lighting, but we're currently working on a table lamp. However, our main focus isn't on filling gaps; it's about building on our strengths.

Strengths like individualisation?

Manuela Szewald  
Absolutely. That means special editions, which are always limited to a run of 20. Or one-of-a-kind pieces like the art installation, *Hive*, a collaboration with conceptual artist Maximilian Prüfer and lighting designer Sebastian Hepting. *Hive* is a chandelier made up of 1099 test tubes, 1000 of which are filled with honey. Max wanted to present this material — which has an infinite shelf life — in a different context in Vienna's Weltmuseum Wien, addressing the threat to biodiversity and the dramatic loss of insect life. 70 per cent of Europe's insect biomass has vanished over the past ten years. The 99 individually controllable LEDS of the chandelier mimic the shimmering movement patterns of bee swarms — and mirror the fragility of the biosphere.

You have high ideals. But also high prices ...

Manuela Szewald  
That's because all our production takes place in Europe, with European wage levels and European standards. And because we focus on uniqueness. We want people to recognise our origins. We view ourselves as a British-European company with an atelier in Germany, and we want designers and architects to have the courage to create a local *Gesamtkunstwerk* — an all-embracing art form.



KAIA

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GLOW 1  
SUSPENSION  
Design  
by Sophie Dries  
Handmade  
by KAIA

REINCARNATION  
CONE  
Design  
by Ula Saniawa  
Handmade  
by Ula Saniawa  
and KAIA

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NEKTAR 6  
Design  
by Maximilian  
Prüfer  
Handmade  
by KAIA



still needed. Quite a lot has gone awry on a global scale. For myself, I'm very anti-fast fashion and enjoy shopping on the secondary market. Any of our products that have slight flaws are also sold on the secondary market (*KAIA Re|Generations*) at a discount. I'm convinced that a change in consciousness is vital. Consumption isn't cheap. Our production stands not for monetary value, but for value of a different kind.

Flaws are a good topic. How to deal with imperfection, with faults, with rejects?

Manuela Szewald

We humans aren't perfect, so neither are the things we create. If a glass piece has bubbles in it, people no longer understand what it's about. And yet that's the whole beauty of mouth-blown glass! It has its own life, like brass, which develops a patina. It's a lovely thing. You could say it's the soul of the object, instilled by its creator. It's so fascinating when things aren't all identical, in the same way that the objects in a home always reflect the people living there. Imperfection is perfectly normal; it's an intrinsic part of the object. Europe is where so many things come together. Producing pieces of craftsmanship here is my life's mission and my life's work.

Thank you for your time!

What lies ahead for KAIA?

Manuela Szewald

Well, we're going to carry on doing what we're doing. There's still so much ahead, so many great designs, so many potential collaborations. I'm proud that we're being seen and recognised. Our fundamental principles remain the same: high-quality designs, Made in Europe standards, and honesty. Not mass-production in low-wage countries. Plenty of education and information is

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KAIA