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Higher Standards



After six years, Karimoku New Standard is ready to establish itself as a key player in the world of contemporary design. What remains unchanged is its authentic brand of design and craft.

BY LUO JINGMEI

As with many companies that have established histories, change is not easy to embrace. Seventy-year-old Japanese furniture manufacturer Karimoku is one success story. In 2009, it launched the more youthful Karimoku New Standard label, which has gained quite a cult following in the contemporary design world with its authentic approach, clever branding and well-curated crop of designers.

Just recently at the Milan Furniture Fair, it released the new Scout chair and table—all sculpted angles and intricate details that showcase the skill of Karimoku craftsmen—designed by Christian Haas, who joins the company's fold of illustrious collaborators comprising Scholten & Baijings, TAF, Big-Game, Sylvain Willenz, Lucien Gummy, and Teruhiro Yanagihara, the Japanese designer who spearheaded the initiative and also came on board as designer and creative director.

In 2013, the creative director role was passed on to Swiss designer David Glaettli, who had helmed the project as an associate director at Yanagihara's studio but is now on his own. Having been there from the beginning, he is well aware of what made Karimoku New Standard what it is today.

"The initial concept that still applies was to assemble a group of interest-

ing designers that share a certain spirit, rather than to establish a superimposed look or style," he shares. "Even in the beginning, we gave little direction—really, more curating than directing—and counted on that spirit and mutual understanding of what we want to do and express with this brand."

This organic approach has resulted for Karimoku New Standard a veritable identity characterised by a youthful balance of contemporary lines, idiosyncratic forms and, yes, that distinctive colour palette comprising unique shades such as the fuchsia accents on Scholten & Baijings's Colour Wood series, and the soft green pastel of TAF's Soft Triangle low table, against the predominantly natural wood finishes. "It is a very harmonious range of colours that became characteristic for Karimoku New Standard, yet it had not actually been coordinated with the designers; it appeared naturally from their original design proposals," Glaettli shares on this unspoken connection.

For him, the question of the brand's identity also hinges on its legacy. "In order to find acceptance with the company, for the company to be able to represent the new brand, and for the brand to be authentic, I think it is essential to maintain Karimoku's identity—essentially a Japanese identity—within the

products," he says.

And what exactly is this Japanese identity? "It is not—and must not be—an obvious superficial look based on Japanese features, but something that I believe is in the core of every Karimoku New Standard piece: that they are made exclusively and sustainably of Japanese wood; in particular, 'thinned' wood sourced from previously less popular young, small-diameter trees grown in Karimoku's forest in Northern Japan, made by Karimoku's craftsmen using their particular techniques in the processing of the wood, in the joinery, as well as in the coatings and surface treatments, with the same passion for quality and longevity," Glaetli describes.

This is without a doubt a crucial component in the formula. "I think that even if the brand clearly has—and needs to in order to succeed internationally—an international appearance, that identity remains perceptible when touching, or looking closely at a Karimoku New Standard piece of furniture," says Glaetli.

Since taking over the reins formally, he has focused on what he describes as "deepening and structuring and then broadening the collection". What this translates to is introducing pieces to the original collection that positions Karimoku New Standard "from an interesting 'project' to a 'real' brand offering furniture for everyday life." He cites the Castor chair and table as a good example of this strategy. Already a best-seller alongside the Colour Wood series, they add a ubiquitous functionality to the earlier bevy of statement pieces. Next, is adding shelving systems and contract furniture, and in terms of branding, "to distinguish Karimoku New Standard more specifically from other brands that we are often being compared to, communicating and expressing the uniqueness and the extreme quality of the products," says Glaetli.

Not that the brand is lacking in that aspect. A more intimate approach to marketing its products—presenting its products in galleries and actual apartments at the annual Milan Furniture Fair, for instance—has become a unique trademark. "In a way, I tried to make our disadvantage of being very small and not well established yet into an advantage with modest, very personal exhibitions in 'real' locations to show the pieces in a natural context and express what we think Karimoku New Standard really is—a small collection of innovative, playful, very well-made furniture for daily life—rather than to show off, like it is very common in events like the Salone in Milan," Glaetli affirms.

This personal touch will continue to be the brand's signature as it grows its presence in Europe and Asia Pacif-

ic—particularly in Japan where there is recently a new growing appetite for contemporary design. In Southeast Asia, the brand made its debut last year at furniture retailer Stylecraft.

In further exploring the qualities of the brand, we ask three of Karimoku New Standard's designers to expound on their designs.

(OPPOSITE AND THIS PAGE) Karimoku New Standard Scout Chair and Table Set prototype.



Castor collection by Big-Game

Big-Game was founded in 2004 by Lausanne-based Swiss-Belgian-French trio, Grégoire Jeanmonod, Ellic Petit and Augustin Scott de Martinville. The firm's name comes from their first product—the famous range of plywood hunting trophies for French design company Moustache—and also reflects the serious ambition in their work.

What is it about Karimoku New Standard's philosophy that attracted you to the collaboration?

We were immediately aware of the great craftsmanship of these Japanese wood-working experts as well as the production quality. We also discovered the respect the brand has for materials and resources—Karimoku New Standard considers, for instance, that a piece of furniture has to last for at least as long as the life of the tree used to build it.

What design concepts were you trying to explore in the Castor collection of stool, table and chair?

We wanted to make comfortable, functional and compact furniture for everyday life. For us, comfort in use is really important; it is our responsibility as designers to ensure that the user feels good using our products. For instance, the chair is inspired by the comfortable seats you find in old Swiss cafes. It is stackable so convenient [for use] in both private and public spaces, and also compact so it fits easily even in small in-



teriors. A padded version was launched last year for even more comfort. The table comes flat packed and is easy to assemble. Its feet's positioning allows it to be put right next to the wall or two tables side-by-side without a gap.

Can you point out some interesting details in the design that were particularly challenging to design or make?

Karimoku New Standard is really setting new standards for the wooden furniture industry. The armrests on the Castor low chair and the back leg on the Castor chair are engineered on computer and fabricated using some of the most advanced technologies while at the same time, the human hand is required to prepare the right wood piece to apply the treatment. Their surface treatments are fantastic—[giving] deep matte colours to the wood while keeping the structure visible; it's important that the material remains present.

Soft Triangle low table by TAF

The Soft Triangle low table has a gentle, fluid form and thick body inspired by wooden chopping boards. It is designed by the Stockholm-based architecture and design studio run by Gabriella Gustafson and Mattias Ståhlbom of TAF ("TAF" is taken from Gabriella's surname).

What are the key ideas behind the Soft Triangle low table?

We got very excited using this kind of technique since [the wood] is recycled and there are possibilities using thick dimensions. We wanted to do a chunky yet beautiful piece that, with the thick dimensions, would be very durable. Like old peasant wooden furniture, it gets more beautiful over time. We also found it amusing to work with the contradicting [notion of a] "soft" triangle, since a triangle is something that you figure would be sharp and pointy.

Was it challenging to manufacture?

Yes, since the shape is quite complex [a cross between a circle and triangle], especially considering that it is made of wood, we think there was a big challenge to find out a rational way to produce it. We also spent a lot of time to find the right stained green colour.

What is TAF's design approach and why do you think Nordic and Japanese design are perceived as quite similar?

TAF's aim is to make ordinary life less ordinary through subtle but effective changes in how products and architect-



ture appear and function. A recurrent departure point in TAF products is that everyday objects, by their commonness, can be made uncommon. We think design is a reflection of our society. During our visits to Japan, we have been looking for similarities in our societies in general. Some important similarities that can be reflected are the interest of the new but still with a strong heritage and tradition, and the humility—or even shyness—of the people.

Colour Wood collection by Scholten & Baijings

Run by Stefan Scholten and Carole Baijings, this Dutch design studio's keen eye for colour, pattern and material experimentation has stood them out in the world of contemporary design in recent years, acquiring them two Dutch Design Awards among other accolades. The Colour Wood collection comprises tables, bins and platters.

What does the Colour Wood collection express with regard to the Karimoku New Standard brand?

The Colour Wood collection shows the possibilities of woodworking and Japanese craftsmanship in great detail. A modern version of very traditional pieces of furniture has been created through the minimal use of colour and the transparency of the colours. The level of finish is very high. We are surprised, time and again, to see that in Japan our designs are executed even more beauti-

fully than we had hoped. This is a rare phenomenon, but in Japan, it happens regularly.

Can you explain the processes in making the Colour Wood collection?

The objects are a result of considerations based on the characteristics of "thinned" wood, as well as woodworking traditions. Small diameter wood is joined to form a volume. The symbolic layering of a contemporary view on traditional shapes and techniques are achieved by superimposing different layers of colour shades and printed graphic patterns. The layers balance each other out and create depth in the stained and printed oak.

How would you describe Scholten & Baijings' approach to design?

Our signature, in key words, is colour, rich detail, layers, and transparency, coupled with hand-drawn illustrations and the combination of different materials. We used these elements to transcend anonymous mass production. That's one of the most essential features of our style. There's a need for a personal imprint; objects that stand the test of time are always those in which you can see a story, a way of working or a personal expression.

www.karimoku-newstandard.jp/en/

(OPPOSITE) Karimoku New Standard Castor Stools. (THIS PAGE) Karimoku New Standard Colour Wood collection.