

DESIGN

India Cool is...

# GOING BACK TO THE FUTURE

From the lota to the Jantar Mantar, Indian design has always played muse to designers around the world. These global brands spin a new tale, turning traditional icons into all that is cool and contemporary. By KOMAL SHARMA

Design history is full of stories of Western designers being inspired by Indian visual and material culture—whether it's American designers Charles and Ray Eames venerating the ubiquitous lota, or Italian designer Ettore Sottsass making almost annual journeys to India and recycling ideas and aesthetics into the works of his radical Memphis group, or the Japanese-American artist-designer Isamu Noguchi being inspired by the Jantar Mantar, with visible influences in his sculptural work. Inspirations, much like time, seem to follow a cyclical pattern. A case for cul-

tural appropriation could be argued, but it could also be viewed as a collective exchange of ideas over time and distance; ideas that come from the past as well as from the unknown future, from one's familiar roots as well as the foreign and exotic. And in an increasingly global world, this exchange only becomes far more seamless and enriching. With that motivation, we consider here the works of five international designers who have drawn from Indian concepts, motifs or methods, and upcycled them, to make traditional Indian design cool and contemporary.

## >>TAJ MAHAL BY STUDIO JOB

The Dutch-Belgian designers Nynke Tynagel and Job Smeets (Job pronounced Yob, rhymes with robe) are proving to be the new enfant terribles of the design world. Macabre, subversive and satirical subjects find place in their designs that are not entirely utilitarian, not solely art, but somewhere in between. Take for instance their larger-than-life collection Silver Ware, launched in Milan in 2007, which upended the relation of people with tableware. With a teapot as high as two metres, people seemed Lilliputian as they moved among these monumental yet quotidian pieces.



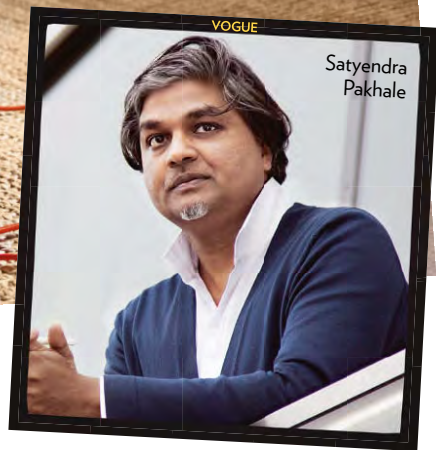
Studio Job often works with traditional materials and techniques, like bronze and laser-cut marquetry, producing highly ornate pieces that are reminiscent of an age preceding modernism, much like a critique of the industrial and the modern. The Taj Mahal coffee table (*below*) is made in the same tradition—the Indian architectural wonder is inverted and blackened and its architectural monumentality has been shrunk to become part of the everyday in the form of a coffee table. >

The inverted Taj Mahal coffee table is created in polished, patinated bronze





Pakhale makes industrial design more human, as seen in this kangri-inspired radiator



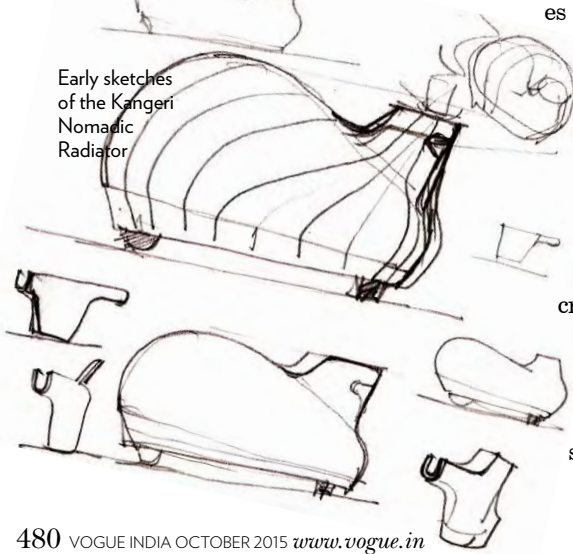
## >>KANGERI NOMADIC RADIATOR BY SATYENDRA PAKHALE

In the cold, damp winters of Kashmir, one often sees a Kashmiri cuddling a kangri—a curious, little personal heater. In use for centuries, this earthen pot insulated by a cane weave around it, with hot coal embers simmering within, is an ingenious design that has stood the test of time and kept generations of Kashmiri people warm, give and take a few burns.

In a cultural reference to the Kashmiri kangri, Amsterdam-based designer Satyendra Pakhale decided to call his newest work—a mobile electric radiator that warms the space around it—the Kangeri Nomadic Radiator,

manufactured by Tubes Radiatori, Italy. Visually, Pakhale's Kangeri looks nothing like the Kashmiri hot pot. But in his subtle signature style, Pakhale has conceptually upcycled it to create something that draws so strongly from the material culture of a people, yet which, with its aluminium and oakwood body and its functional and sustainable ambitions, truly belongs to the global world of contemporary design. It is sensitive to the current energy crisis and points out that whole interiors need not be heated, only the ones in use.

Pakhale's gift lies in how he manages to make industrial design more human. "Each culture has its own way to create personal warmth, with a hot-water bottle or a terracotta pot of hot embers. These are some wonderful, poetic answers to a basic need. Somehow that poetic imagination gets lost in all the industrial variants that flood the market," he says. The beauty of his creation is that it seems to behave like an electric pet or companion that sits close to you, keeping you warm, just as the Kashmiri kangri is cradled in the arms of a person, keeping them warm.



Early sketches of the Kangeri Nomadic Radiator

## >>RABARI RUGS BY DOSHI LEVIEN

Nipa Doshi—one half of London-based design studio Doshi Levien—says that it is not only about borrowing from "my traditional culture" but from "a culture." She reasons saying, "There's another way to do things, another aesthetic language, and see how beautiful it is." With that motivation, the husband-wife duo have created some of the most eclectic contemporary translations of traditional objects and interiors. Whether it's the Charpy for Moroso, inspired by the ubiquitous daybeds in Indian homes, or the Chandlo dressing table for BD Barcelona that is reminiscent of the bindi, Doshi Levien's work often finds origin in the visual culture of India.



Jonathan Levien and Nipa Doshi

One of their recent projects that references a typically Indian motif are the Rabari rugs. Produced by Spanish rug-maker Nanimarquina and hand-knotted by weavers in Varanasi, they are named after the Rabari, a pastoral community in Gujarat. Minimal and sparse, the flatweave Rabari rugs are at once traditional yet refreshingly contemporary. In beige and black backgrounds, the three rugs in the collection are made in a typology of lozenges, dots and discs—motifs used by the Rabari women in their textiles.



The Rabari rug features motifs used by Rabari women in textiles



REX FEATURES; PETER KREICI; SATYENDRA PAKHALE; JOHN JULIAN



The Beat lighting collection was inspired by hand-beaten brass vessels found in India

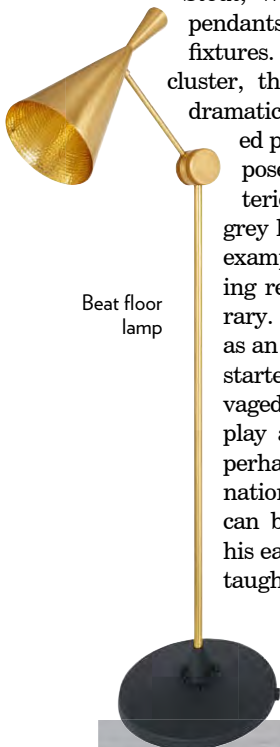


Tom Dixon

## >> BEAT BY TOM DIXON

One of the most influential British brands, Tom Dixon has been directing the course of industrial and interior design for more than three decades. Since the iconic S-Chair, made for Cappellini back in the '80s—it also found its way into the Museum of Modern Art, New York—Dixon has forayed far and wide in the subjects and methods of production. India's abundant object world was, naturally, no exception.

Dixon's Beat collection of lighting found its origin in the hand-beaten brass cooking pots and vessels of India. The distinctive character of the metal itself and the archetypal shape of the pot led to the making of Beat by Dixon. Handmade by craftsmen in Moradabad, final iterations were called Stout, Wide and Tall; a mix of pendants, floor and table light fixtures. Used standalone or in a cluster, the illumination is quite dramatic. Upcycling these inverted pot shapes for a new purpose, and brushing their exteriors in black, white and grey lacquer, Beat is a classic example of the traditional being re-invented as contemporary. Perhaps Dixon's origins as an untrained designer who started his practice with salvaged objects continues to play an important role. And perhaps his long-term fascination for brass vessels can be traced back to his early life as a self-taught welder.



Beat floor lamp

Sainsbury worked with artisans in Mahabalipuram for his Pestle & Mortar design

## >> MORTAR AND PESTLE BY JOHN JULIAN

Julian Sainsbury is the archetypal 'artisan-designer' that the design world is tilting towards. The London-based designer is associated with kitchen and tableware that exhibit simplicity and perfection. Working out of his own workshop—a rarity in today's design industry—Sainsbury's known for retaining traditional methods of making and is the kind of craftsman who toils hard to bring out beauty in the utilitarian. No wonder Sainsbury took a journey to India to explore his vision for a tool that is so integral to its spice-based culinary culture.

"My interest and love for pestles and mortars began several years ago while I was living with a chef. Watching her prepare food and the relationship she had with the implements was a joy," he recalls. Sainsbury decided to work with stone and arrived at "India's



Julian Sainsbury

strong tradition of carving granite as well as a cuisine rich in spices." He worked with stonemasons and sculptors in Mahabalipuram, south of Chennai, who made architectural pieces for temples. "The one icon that had most relevance to my pestles and mortars was the lingam. My work started from there and gradually progressed to more considered designs," he says.

Apart from granite, the exploration resulted in hand-thrown pieces in porcelain and red stoneware, all in his signature neutral palette. As primordial as a mortar and pestle might seem, they have a timeless quality about them that tug at us, no matter how technologically sophisticated we get. The Pestle & Mortar by Sainsbury's brand John Julian seems to embody that notion. ■

The Pestle & Mortar by John Julian

