



Sarjak

...cross VIPs – starting with an understandable level of scepticism and a rather untraditional business model. “I thought there was no chance in hell I could get anything done in Egypt; such wonderful people with such a bad work ethic; such incredible skill, but such poor production. Here were some of the world’s most amazing craftsmen, who could make divine things with just a chisel and their hands, but they had the worst quality control, the dodgiest business environment and the artisans were abused.” At first El-Shahat didn’t understand why the Egyptian craftsmen didn’t want to do their best work, but



Private members club, Ohio, in London, designed by Samah El-Shahat

exceptionally poor. “All my tales can be traced to four pieces that were in people’s houses and people started talking about them,” he says. He takes great pride in the fact that one of the world’s top designers (who he regrettably couldn’t name) but whom he considers “the father of fashion” owns a few of his pieces. Despite the fame and fortune, El-Shahat has never lost sight of what he calls “the intimate touch”. He asked that I give *Esquire* readers his personal mobile number, and he promises to visit clients and develop unique pieces of furniture for them. His is not a commercial brand. He only shows one piece at his favourite boutique, Prebway Limited, at 48 Walton Street in London.

El-Shahat doesn’t take his role lightly. “I think it’s a huge responsibility for someone to let you put a piece in their house. You’re in their inner sanctum. It’s like letting someone play with your underwear. It’s really intimate. And he could make your head spin with the amount of thought that goes into each of his pieces. In a piece that resembles a dice he explains, “I’m making a statement about the arbitrariness of life. Islam is represented by the coat of arms from the last Muslim presence in Europe and Christianity is represented by the coat of Santiago de Compostela. Like a throw of the dice you have no control over where you’re born and who you become.” But not all his work sounds quite so esoteric. One comfortable looking easel chair made-for-two is named ‘Hot Pants Sit On This’. Perhaps that creative contrast is the best representation of the man: remarkably deep and intelligent but stylishly down to earth. The basic philosophy and trademark of Tawola Rasa is “functional(furniture)” because for this artist every piece serves a purpose, no matter how opulent it is. “So much furniture these days is based on the personal taste of the designer at the expense of the client,” he says.

What El-Shahat originally thought of as a “romantic, ridiculous and most likely economically suicidal” idea turned out to be much more than a fresh start for a frustrated banker. Instead El-Shahat reinvented his life along with luxurious Egyptian furniture. ■

www.tawolara.com
El-Shahat’s mobile number: +44 (0) 781 326 0751

“My manic depressive addictive personality needed an outlet and I began to see creativity as the way out”

now says, “I’m not so concerned as to say I’ve cracked the problem, but I’m not far off. After many centuries of being abused by their ‘betters’ why improve? If the guy above you isn’t going to give you fair value, there is no incentive.”

El-Shahat responded to the problem with a business plan you won’t find in any textbook. He fired over 200 craftsmen before he settled on his current 20. For the first four years of his new visionary venture, the artisans would “make it” and he’d “break it” (literally) and do a “post-mortem” to expose its weaknesses. In the workshop he put his original degree to use by enforcing the highest level of engineering. Those who protested would usually “move on”, but eventually the best-of-the-best emerged like gold refined in the fire. The product began to match the skill of its craftsmen. And El-Shahat continued this process for four years without selling anything.

His apparently extreme measures were part of a desire to create something great; to redefine and reintroduce Egyptian made luxurious furniture to the world again. “Luxury isn’t a brand, you can slap on the front of something. Furniture should be passed down from generation to generation,” he says in a mock grandiloquently tone. “Luxury is a state of mind, backed up by superlative quality; like a Fabergé egg – when you take it apart you realise the work that went into it is beyond the call of duty.” And when you take apart Tawola Rasa products – like his top-selling Union Jack chest of drawers (part of the Passport Series) – to find that the insides are gold-plated, he proves his point all too well. By drawing on thousands of years of experience in furniture making in Egypt – the birthplace of marquetry (inlaid wood) and techniques that no one else in the world uses – El-Shahat rediscovered a lost craft. Today El-Shahat commissions pieces for palaces and the



Miranda



Pants The First



Dark Santiago



Hot Pants Sit On This

THE MEN WE LOVE FOR THEIR CREATIVITY

By Travis Randall

Photographed by Dan Stevens



Cornucopia

The Passport Series

SAMEH EL-SHAHAT



IN HIS DRAWERS

The international style cognoscenti vie for his creations and the coolest clubs wait on his creativity. In London, Enigma's Travis Randall meets Sameh El-Shahat: a crazy, sexy, cool Egyptian designer behind this year's hottest luxury furniture brand.

It took Sameh El-Shahat a total of five minutes (just enough time for our expectations to arrive) to confess he'd once hunkered his soul and contemplated suicide. When you learn of a man's dark and despondent past within seconds of meeting, you know the rest of the story is going to be good.

Egyptian born but Britain bred, El-Shahat graduated with an engineering degree from Cambridge to find that Margaret Thatcher "had sold the industrial basis of the country." Although he "very un-politically correctly loved The Iron Woman for whipping England into shape," her policies meant he had a hard time finding a job. So he returned to Cambridge where he studied for an MA in International Relations. And then it happened: "I sold my soul. I became a banker – and was very unhappy. You really can sell your soul by doing something that makes you miserable and seeing money as a replacement for happiness. I eventually reached a point where I was verging on suicide."

Fortunately, he never jumped off a bridge. Instead he took a leap of faith into uncharted waters, risking everything on something he previously knew nothing about... furniture design. It turned out that the

banker/engineer with an MA in International Relations had an impressive creative streak. And with this streak he found solace as well as startling success. Today, as the man behind Tavola Rasa – one of the world's most sought after luxury furniture brands – El-Shahat even looks very much like an artist; with his arched 'fro and lightning rod-like curls which resemble bolts of creative brilliance.

"My music depressive, addictive personality needed an outlet and I began to see creativity as the way out," he explains. Contentedly anglicized, his desire to explore and express his creativity unexpectedly led him back to Egypt. His sister – with whom he has since co-founded the film production company Sibling Eye – was doing a documentary on the famous Egyptian furniture maker in Damyat, Egypt. What ensued was the rediscovery and revitalization of Egyptian made luxury furniture. El-Shahat's own creative restoration led to the re-birth of a long-forgotten craft. "I'd always shared a typical view of most Egyptians living outside Egypt; that it's a mess," he says. "So really it was almost sheer coincidence that I ended up working with Egyptian artisans."

The endeavour – which now sees the luxury line gracing the homes of heads of state and the world's most glam-



Salone Of The Fourteen Veils