

INTERIOR DESIGN

10 Questions With... Jomo Tariku

Virginia-based designer and furniture maker Jomo Tariku grew up in Ethiopia among objects his father, an attaché, brought home from his trips to Kenya, The Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Zambia to name a few. Tariku, who was born in Kenya, traveled across Africa as a teenager thanks to his mother's job at Ethiopian Airlines. "Our house was full of objects and furniture, which was a pretty eclectic collection," Tariku tells *Interior Design*. "My parents didn't have a specific style, but within the diplomatic community, there is always a tendency to exchange gifts." Between age 14 and 16, he worked in the capital city, Addis Ababa, at a car shop, which he remembers as "being the same size as my current studio." There, he varnished, painted, and assembled "anything outside the dangerous machinery work," while also constantly sketching and drawing his surroundings. From those days to his decades-long career in industrial design, Tariku's life and work continues to reflect his ongoing exploration of objects and culture.

A search for different aesthetic codings followed Tariku to the United States where he graduated from the University of Kansas with an industrial design degree. After 30 years in the sector, demand for his work is on the rise. Philadelphia's Wexler Gallery brought his various pieces to last year's [Design Miami/](#), including the Nyala chair, the Qwanta totem chair with interchangeable backs, the Meedo chair, and the Mukecha stool, all of which garnered attention.

From combs to totemic figures, forms related to African heritage, everyday life, and rituals find their ways into [Tariku's furniture](#). The results are sleek pieces with minimalist finishes, bold hues of black ash and orange colorings, and energetic nods to African craft and furniture-making traditions. The Metropolitan Museum of Art recently acquired Tariku's comb-shaped Mido chair (2021), in addition to other acquisitions by Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Mint Museum, [Denver Art Museum](#), and Baltimore Museum of Art. Response to Tariku's work has indeed expanded from the art and design world to film: Hannah Beachler, the Academy Award-winning production designer for "Black Panther," tapped some of Tariku's pieces to decorate the sets in the franchise's recent installment, "Wakanda Forever."

INTERIOR DESIGN



Jomo Tariku. Photography by Gediyon Kifle.

INTERIOR DESIGN

JOMO TARIKU TALKS AFROFUTURISM AND FINDING INSPIRATION IN EVERYDAY OBJECTS

Interior Design: How did moving to the U.S. influence your decision to pursue design?

Jomo Tariku: My parents were always supportive of my decisions, but my first plan for education was to pursue computer science like my older brother. I discovered the world of design a year after attending college, which was a small school in Kansas. I pretty much didn't do well with the direction of computer science. My grades started failing, but I was doing well with my elective painting and drawing classes. The professor there said I could pursue a minor degree in art. Then, I went to the University of Kansas during my summer break to talk to instructors—there was one person available and he ended up being my design mentor. Furniture design came later, when I did my thesis for the industrial design program at University of Kansas.

ID: Your approach to design has a lot to do with everyday objects, often altering the scale of combs, necklaces, and even animal bones to play with their familiarity. How do you see this connection reflected in your current practice?

JT: One of the arguments I was making in my thesis was that our inspirations should not only come from pre-existing seatings or chairs that we see. When we look at all the stools around us, we end up tending to design a stool that looks pretty much like what we've seen. I've always thought we cannot innovate much from that perspective. To walk away from that, I've needed various other things to inspire me, as long as they're within the real estate of Africa: that could be hairstyles, the afro pick, a landscape, the headrest, or other seatings, which I'm not saying I don't use as reference points at all. If you let all these different things inspire you, there's a good chance you can come up with unique designs that differentiate you.

ID: What do you think about the transhistorical quality of your designs, which reference totemic objects and mundane tools. In a way, they defy chronology and symbolize collective or personal histories and rituals. This builds an interesting relationship with the past looking towards the future.

JT: When I do research, sometimes it's really hard to find information on some of these objects, because there is barely any historical record. Many objects coming from Africa were made for utility, without a manufacturing structure. A local craftsman made it out of different needs, and suddenly they end up at a museum or somebody has photographed it, but this doesn't mean there is enough or correct data on the object. Me being a western-educated industrial designer, I make this connection and say, 'yes, the past has influenced me.' With my skills and education, I interpret the past. A hundred years from now, they'll look at objects of today and

INTERIOR DESIGN

say, 'okay, this is how they made it back then.' I can make an improvement or I can take it in a totally different direction but regardless, I make sure to title them in reference to their inspirations. Nyala chair is influenced by nyalas [antelope native to southern Africa] or the Boraatii stool is influenced by Oromia region's headrests in Ethiopia. While I would like to make these connections, I'm not trying to hide my inspirations.



Meedo Chair which comes in a black ash with orange trims adopts the Afro Comb silhouette on its legs, assuming the object's celebration of beauty and representation. Photography by Julie Lehman Photography.

INTERIOR DESIGN

ID: Do you think about the relationship you're building with the people who will use your furniture? For example, the Qwanta chair is interchangeable, so you offer the typical experience of sitting and touching a chair, but also an option to contribute to the chair's formation.

JT: Qwanta was inspired by the traditional African birch chair which you can pick apart. If you pull out the seat part, the holster comes out and the chair collapses. I experimented to reverse that order where the seat becomes static in the backrest. And the backrest has become a totem, which plays major religious roles in different societies within Africa to celebrate our ancestors. The question was how to get others involved in creating their own totems incorporated to the chair. Eventually, the chair has become a living collaborative piece. One version includes a series of round holes around the back to invite users to tie their own fabrics through them.

ID: Could you talk about your ideas of purpose and function in design?

JT: When I was growing up in Ethiopia, we would make coffee with our pot to fulfill its purpose, and when we were done, we used to wash it and put it up on a mantel as a decorative element. All of my pieces are artistic statements as they are but also serve a purpose—they are sculptural, conceptual, functional pieces. Within our communities, most objects came out of a need for a utility purpose. But most people here in the U.S. and in the west, even other Ethiopians, buy those things and put them on a shelf or a rack as decorative elements. In the case of the Qwanta chair, I'll keep experimenting and let it be a collaborative piece with which I hope to create a relationship with other artists. I actually reached out to few when I was at Design Miami/ to offer them a blank canvas, which is a backrest where they can create their own marks.

ID: How about the sculptural aspect? Nyala is a sculptural form, almost in a Henry Moore-esque way, with sleek curves.

JT: Us designers, we generally like to make a statement piece, but where we run into difficulty is to make a statement that is equally functional. Ergonomics will get in the way of you going too crazy with the design because the idea needs to work, say, as a chair. When we prototype, one of the first things I do is to walk around it in circles and try to see if there's any angle that I can fix. The form needs to flow; it needs to be elegant; and the lines need to be very clean. Nyala I think has both that clean form with organic shapes flowing through it but it is also comfortable. When you appreciate art and craft, you want to be able to discover things that are not visually obvious. You want to be after elements of touch to discover the details. In the end, it is a mix. The finished work needs to satisfy my eyes, because on paper as a sketch, a lot of things look nice and easy to tweak. But everything changes when you starting making something. As a

INTERIOR DESIGN

designer, I don't know if there's anything better than having that visual satisfaction and sharing that object with people.



The Nyala chair sits in the permanent collection of LACMA, Mint and Denver Art Museum. During Design Miami/, a portion of the sales from the chair was donated to support research or conservation in Bale Mountains National Park. Photography by Julie Lehman Photography.

INTERIOR DESIGN

ID: What do you think about form in relationship to abstraction? While you borrow from familiar silhouettes, your objects carry a nod to abstraction. When I look at the Nyala chair, if I am not familiar with the reference of nyala horns, I might assume that I am looking at an abstract form.

JT: In terms of things that inspire me as of late, maybe since 2018, my focus has been on the silhouette. I don't really dive into the intricacy of the carvings or the paintings of these objects. What I extract from them are the simplest geometric shapes that I can achieve. I test endurance of these things, and if anything raises a red flag, I keep researching. In terms of references, take for example, the Ashanti stool. Show it to Ghanians or West African close to Ghana, and they'll pick it up right away—I don't have to explain them. Now going back to the industrial design part of it, maintenance, height, and how the plywood is cut on CNC all come into effect. My creative practice is a mix of what I see, how I interpret that in sketching, and what I eliminate through the process.

ID: Are you interested in experimenting with black ash wood?

JT: My material palette is limited. I do use ash, American ash, and birch plywood for the CNC cuts. I'm pretty much a one-person operation; cost is a major concern. Definitely I don't want to use exotic wood from Africa. The continent has been losing its trees, because people don't want to replant—they abuse it and walk away. Wild forestry in the U.S. is better managed, so I feel better about using these materials. Do I want to use materials outside of wood, such as plastics, metals, carbon fiber, and so on? Yes, I do in the right intention. I plan to expand as I experiment with different materials. A museum has requested one of my chairs in bronze, for example. I plan to expand within financial and environmental reasons.

ID: Could you also talk about your work in the Black Artists and Designers Guild?

JT: I was invited to be one of the members by the founder Malene Barnett when the guild was initially founded in 2018. One of our goals is to promote and make sure Black designers' work remains visible. We want to make sure our work is noticed by publications and we are represented at trade shows. We work to provide the designers opportunities to exhibit at museums and galleries, and get collected by institutions. These efforts include Black designers from the diaspora, as well as those from Africa. As a beneficiary of the guild, I notice for example that my work has started being noticed in the last year and a half after working in the field for almost 30 years.

INTERIOR DESIGN



Mukecha stool in a medley of black and orange is inspired by African mortars used for grinding various grains.
Photography by Julie Lehman Photography.

ID: Some of your designs have been used in “Black Panther: Wakanda Forever.” Did the collaboration prompt you to think more about Afrofuturism in your work?

JT: They approached me with a simple email saying they may want to acquire or rent some of my pieces for a film. They didn't specify that it would be for “Black Panther.” In our industry, it is not uncommon to get inquiries in this way, especially for photo shoots or commercials. I at first thought it'd be something in that vein but later the offer turned out to be for Marvel. They were interested in my Mukecha, Dogon, Nyala, and Boraatii stools to use in the background.

INTERIOR DESIGN

By default, I fall within the Afrofuturism style or concept. I come from the age of technological tools that are available via 3d laser cutting, printing, and modeling. So my style is within that matter. On the other hand, I've seen people from Asia react to the pieces, because they think there are similarities with objects within Asia. Others see them as close to mid-century furniture. There are all kinds of overlaps for admirers of any craft.

I try to push the agenda or views on African design while everybody can have their own vision for it. We are missing from the design canon which is way too much western-centric. When we get included, our work tends to be from the western gaze. The general belief is that Africans can only make certain stools, textiles, or use animal prints. I'm pushing against these misconceptions although those things are just parts of a kaleidoscope of things we create.



Nyala chair's back rest is a direct reference to the horns of the mountain antelope from the Bale Mountains of East Africa. Photography by Julie Lehman Photography.

INTERIOR DESIGN



Qwanta totem chair has an interchangeable back rest which allows users to engage with the furniture piece in creative ways. Image courtesy of Jomo Tariku.