

ELLE DECOR

THE AFRICA-INSPIRED FURNITURE DESIGNS OF JOMO TARIKU ARE JUST GORGEOUS

The work of Kenya-born, Virginia-based Ethiopian Jomo Tariku will renew your love of wooden furniture.

INTERVIEW BY [CHARLES CURKIN](#) PUBLISHED: APR 1, 2019



Alaric S. Campbell For ELLE Decor

In "60 Seconds With," ELLE Decor editor Charles Curkin chats with creatives and industry leaders, getting the scoop on their life and work in one minute or less. In this installment, he chats with Jomo Tariku, the Kenya-born, Virginia-based Ethiopian furniture designer and founder of [Jomo Furniture](#) who was featured as part of a story on the [Black Artists + Designers Guild](#) in the April 2019 issue of ELLE Decor. His beautiful wood

pieces are handmade and inspired by the artisans of Sub-Saharan Africa. Tariku's one minute starts...now.

When did you come to the United States from Ethiopia?

In 1987 to study industrial design at the University of Kansas.

What are some jobs you worked before starting your furniture studio?

I have been a janitor, a grocery night stocker, and a cashier at a convenience store. These days, I keep a day job as a data scientist at a large NGO.



Boratii stool
Jomo Tariku

Tell me about your latest collection.

All of my collections are inspired by my African cultural heritage. The two chairs are the result of my obsession with traditional three-legged stools. The Nyala chair came from a sketch I developed after seeing the beautiful horns of the male mountain antelope, and the MeQuamya chair was inspired by the T-shaped prayer staffs used in Ethiopian Orthodox church ceremonies.



Mukecha stool
Jomo Tariku

And the Ashanti I and Boratii?

The Ashanti is a reinterpretation of a traditional Ghanaian stool, while the Boratii was inspired by the wooden headrest found in the Oromia region of Ethiopia.



MeQuamia chair
Jomo Tariku

What was your biggest hurdle breaking into the business?

The standard definition of African furniture was either European furniture upholstered with colorful batik fabrics, or hand-crafted pieces, or recycled or upcycled furniture, masks, and so on. That did not align with my approach to designing modern African furniture. The market was not ripe like it is now when I started in 2008. This led my partner and I to shut down our studio and pretty much walk away from it all.



Ashanti stool
Jomo Tariku

Are there any big problems in the industry you think should be addressed?

There is a lack of black designers in the home and décor industry. It's very evident to me, especially when I travel for shows or attend conferences all over the world where I am one of a few black designers present. Seeing it once is fine, but when you notice it repeatedly, you recognize our role is minuscule. It's the same issue with trend-setting magazines. I say this because our industry is so closely defined by one's history and cultural heritage, be it in the making or design process. The ultimate definers of it have repeatedly been designers and companies from Italy, the Scandinavian countries, Germany, Japan, Spain, and Brazil.



Nyala chair
Jomo Tariku



E'nsera stool/end-table with a lid that opens
Jomo Tariku

Have you noticed any positive changes in your own business since the establishment of the Black Artists + Designers Guild?

Yes. Other than connecting with other black designers and not feeling like I am on an island, I have been approached by various industry people from all corners, including *ELLE Decor*. I have recently been invited to be part of a curated furniture show at a museum—this was unthinkable to me few weeks ago. I don't think I have fully quantified the impact yet. All I can say is “wow” at the moment, because my long journey is finally being realized.

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Charles Curkin is *ELLE Decor*'s Articles Editor, covering everything related to the architecture, interior design, real estate, and travel industries, and has previously written for *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *The Paris Review*.