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A maker of unfussy, elegant design objects, Inga Sempé delights in things both great and small—even if she doesn't own any.

Plain and Sempé



Inga Sempé stands aloof and alight by both the tall and short versions of the Lampe Plate for Cappellini in 2001.



Inga Sempé likes objects. Not just the objects she's designed, which appear in the galleries and sleek showrooms of Milan and New York, but things like vegetable peelers, hammers, kitchen pots, screwdrivers, and baby strollers—items produced by the thousands, intended not for cultural enrichment but rather as machines for better living. "People are ashamed to say they like objects. It's always art they praise. You know, 'Art, it's the noblest thing, it's superior, I couldn't live without it,'" explains Sempé, "but I think you'd live a lot less well without a sink than without a painting on the wall."

When she graduated from the ENSCI-Les Ateliers industrial design school in Paris in 1993, Sempé thought she might design casters and screws. Instead, she has channeled her interest in the banal and utilitarian to become one of the dominant emerging talents in furniture design, taking principles of utility and simplicity and adding a singular twist: a giant pleated lamp for Cappellini evokes a paper accordion folded by an idle child's hand; a candlestick series for Baccarat flips the crystal maker's signature stemware upside down to use as a base; a new sofa line just released by Ligne Roset provides rare intimacy, cradling its inhabitants with a towering quilted backrest.

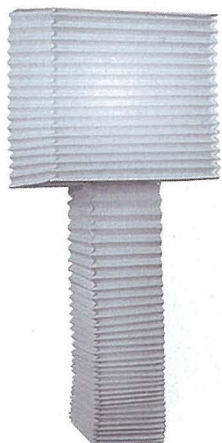
"She designs with force, without making any concessions, and that's what interests me—even if at times it can be a bit difficult," says Michel Roset, co-owner of Ligne Roset. "She's a woman in the prime of her life, with a strong personality, experience, and maturity."

Now 39, Sempé has come into her own. Though her renown still lags behind that of fellow French designers Erwan and Ronan Bouroullec and François Azambourg—part of her coterie—the pace of commissions has picked up. Current work includes a suspension lamp for Luceplap and a sofa for Edra, as well as a range of clever ▶

Subtlety in palette and form are characteristic qualities of Sempé's work. Clockwise from the top: Sempé's Grande Lampe Plissée for Cappellini, Moël armchair for Ligne Roset, and Bougeoirs for Baccarat.



Taking the simplicity of a paper fan and applying it to both form and function, Sempé's *Lampe Extensible* and *Suspensions Plissées*, both for Cappellini, (top left and right) are refined and playful. Her *Etagère à double accès* (below left), a prototype designed for the VIA Carte Blanche grant, serves as an airy space divider, book or object shelf, and art piece.



prototypes that debuted in January at Salon du Meuble. Cognac maker Hennessy has commissioned a project, still under wraps, while Ligne Roset, buoyed by the success of their initial collaboration, is adding another piece to its Sempé line. “We’re going to get the word out about her and make her well known even to the general public,” says Roset. Ambivalent about her newfound success, Sempé admits to wanting public recognition, but adds, “You do this work for yourself—not for others—so you’d better be happy with it. And on the whole, there’s much more self-doubt than overall satisfaction.”

Those who write about Sempé regularly remark on her reserve and occasional frostiness. Many manufacturers cite her strength of character—which often produces an active collaborative exchange—as the source of strength in her work. Perhaps what destabilizes critics is not her willfulness (her personality, if it was ever chilly, has now defrosted), but rather the fact that she’s a woman: Despite talk of democratization, the field of furniture design remains a distinctly masculine one. Sempé is conscious of standing alone, though she doesn’t see herself as a poster child for affirmative action. But Alessandro Sarfatti, CEO of Luceplan, sought her out to reconcile his company’s “masculine” image, believing that Sempé can tweak the “same old promise of Luceplan to the market—innovation, technology, quality—with a feminine touch.”

Sempé doesn’t see her work as being gendered in any way. If anything, her work is androgynous, singular, and conceptual rather than earthy or sensual: a double-sided asymmetric shelving system inspired by an ironmonger’s shop, cylindrical storage containers with a magnifying-glass lid, a retractable rolling chair whose extendable back doubles as a stepladder. It is all by a woman, yes, but not feminine. “I had the disadvantage of being the ►



daughter of an extremely misogynistic man," she says, referring to her father, the illustrator Jean-Jacques Sempé, whose work has appeared on dozens of *New Yorker* covers. "It's something that holds you back but pushes you forward at the same time."

Such gentle contradictions hold sway in Sempé's character; her inspirations are all push and pull. A child of artists "with zero DIY in them"—she grew up with her mother, painter and illustrator Mette Ivers—Sempé inherited a talent for drawing, but she was totally uninterested in art. In the face of her parents' impracticality, she became an expert tinkerer. And though she may profess a love of objects, she doesn't particularly want to own any. "I don't particularly like possessing things. It bothers me, and I don't like to be given things. I guess I just don't want them. Potential for mess."

That said, the 19th-century Parisian apartment she shares with her eight-year-old son—in which her studio takes up a large corner room—could use a few things. Despite having designed countless light fixtures and furniture pieces, including the Edra sofa she calls a "silky cloud," she suffers an "awful" single bulb dangling in her bedroom and lacks a comfortable couch. "A kitchen that works would be nice, too," she quips. Perhaps it's the absence of these home comforts that has inspired her to create them for others.

Since the age of 15, Sempé has only followed her own lead. She fiercely protects that freedom, and it has made her a more resilient designer, even if, as Edra's Massimo Morozzi said, it can make collaboration with her "look like a fight." He and other executives continue to seek out what Luceplan's Sarfatti describes as someone who is "100-percent true." At this rate, it may be quite a while before Sempé gets around to giving the banal objects she loves most—tools, wooden stoves, and lawnmowers now top the list—a redesign. ■

Sempé's *Rangements Brosse* (above), for Edra, is a swishy number that conceals objects flippantly and easily with its flapper-like skirt, exemplifying the designer's lighter side. The *Stepladder Chair* (right), designed for the VIA Carte Blanche grant, expresses her love of functionality.

