

Pondering the life lessons of flea markets, ugly sofas and French snobbery, **INGA SEMPE** concludes that patience is a designer's greatest virtue

WORDS  
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PORTRAITS  
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## INGA SEMPÉ

1968

Born in Paris, France

1993

Graduates from École Nationale Supérieure de Création Industrielle, Paris

2000

Opens studio in Paris

2000–01

Scholarship holder at the Villa Medici Académie de France in Rome

2003

Awarded the Grand Prix de la Création by the City of Paris  
Solo exhibition at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris

2012

Guest of honour at the Stockholm Furniture & Light Fair  
Publication of *Inga Sempé: Illuminated* by Wästberg

2016

Retrospective exhibition for the Juli 2017 edition of Design Parade, Villa Noailles, Hyères, France

‘I visited flea markets a lot when I was a teenager. I’m very interested in daily life, and a flea market is a strange mix, a summary of many daily lives. I like how everyday things look normal at the time they’re made, before their use vanishes and they become extraordinary. I don’t like to read books about objects; I don’t like to look at pictures. I like to see things in real life – in shops or at flea markets – but not in museums.’

‘My parents were very critical about aesthetics. They often said things like *this is awful* and *that is awful*, so early on I became interested in the reasons why people like things. Why do people from certain backgrounds like the same things at the same time? Why are some things fashionable and others not? Also, why do old things look so much smoother and nicer, whereas when they were new they looked shocking?’

‘The only modern objects we had at home had a big impact on me. My mother bought everything from flea markets, but she got – and it still surprises me – two new lamps by Vico Magistretti, the small Eclisse ones. I loved to turn them around in my hands. I thought, *I just want to make things like this*. They were so clever. Ever since, I’ve tried to re-create this particular object, over and over again.’

‘I’m totally focused on design. We’re surrounded by objects, and I’m constantly looking at them. When I’m waiting for my bags at the airport, I study every piece of luggage that passes in front of me, not because I can’t remember which one is mine, but because I’m interested in all of them and in how they are made.’

‘I try to design things that will appeal to someone who is 80 as much as to someone who is 20. I don’t try to be ultramodern, I don’t care about that. I just care about the use of an object; that’s the main thing. I think it’s important to be outside trends. Otherwise, you rapidly become a caricature. I don’t want to make things that are just for one generation. On the contrary, I want to design objects that will be cherished for a long time to come.’

OPPOSITE PAGE RUBAN MIRRORS  
FOR HAY, 2015.



**‘SOFAS ARE CHALLENGING, BECAUSE I ALWAYS WANT TO GIVE UP AT THE FIRST STEP’**

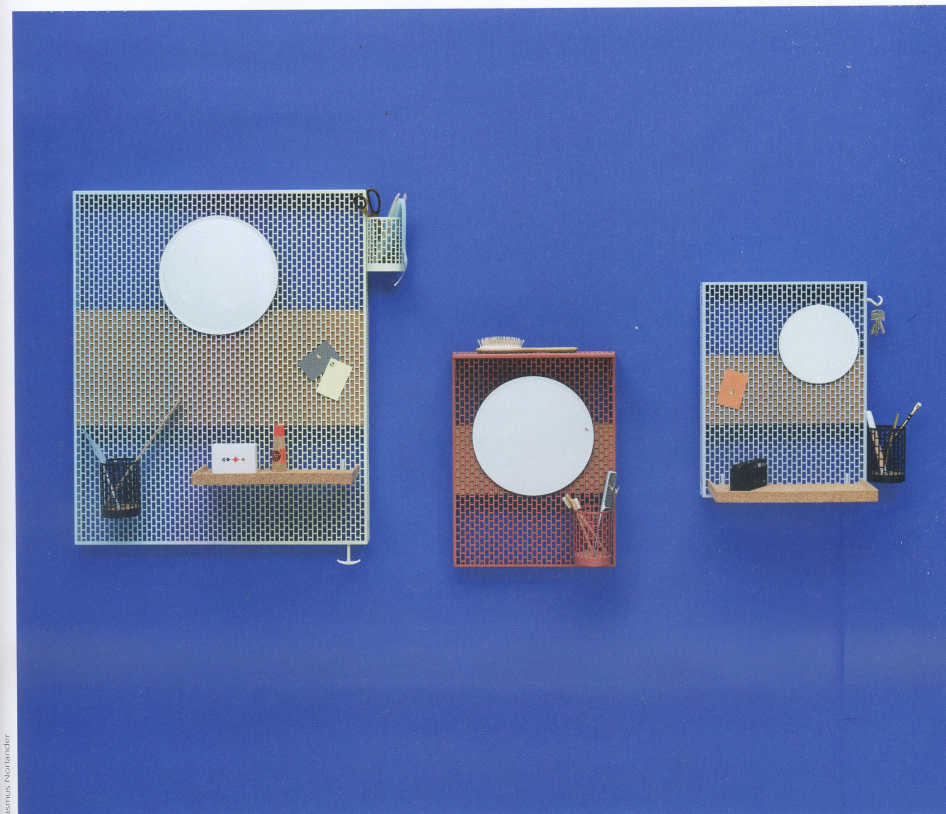
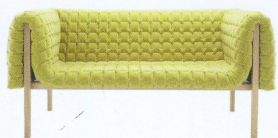
‘When I was at design school, I had a good feel for objects but no technical knowledge. That side was totally new to me. I learned a lot from the workshops, where we would do mock-ups and make models using real tools – a really important part of my education, because it allowed me to understand the limits that exist in factories. If you just design on a computer, you think there are *no* limits.’

‘I try to put my personality into my projects. I don’t do projects that I don’t like – design is a long process, so why suffer through something you don’t find interesting? A project has to seduce me. Choosing the people you work with is very important. Usually I work with family-owned companies for this reason – with people who are deeply involved in their company and its culture, which they want to improve and develop.’

‘I always knew that I wanted to be independent. When you say you are starting your own studio, it sounds ridiculous. After all, it’s not like you’re opening a big office. You’re just alone, in your kitchen usually, trying to design something.’

‘When I worked with Marc Newson, I learned that you need to know certain processes and techniques from the beginning. Otherwise, you will lose control of the project, and the manufacturer will change it, for good reasons. You have to watch every step. Newson is clever, and he knows processes really well. You might think you finally understand the process, but there is always another way of doing things that you *didn’t* know about – or perhaps you thought the project wouldn’t be expensive, and it turns out that it is. So I’ve learned to accept that a project has to change in line with the technical rules involved.’

‘The starting point of a project is me making sketches – bad ones, because I’m not interested in doing good, nice-looking sketches. For me, a good sketch is one I can see it in my head and that helps me understand what I want to do. Until that point I keep drawing, and it’s very aggravating. Seeing the image in my head is important. That’s when I understand myself.’



ABOVE PINORAMA PIN BOARD FOR HAY, 2014.

OPPOSITE PAGE RUCHÉ COUCH FOR LIGNE ROSET, 2010.

BEAU FIXE COUCH FOR LIGNE ROSET, 2015.

‘I’m more attracted by objects that you manipulate than by furniture, which involves your whole body. Sofas are challenging, because I always want to give up at the first step. The initial prototype is usually awful, and I really don’t know how to make it look less like an elephant or less boring. It’s hard to find a solution, because the problem isn’t technical but aesthetic, and everything rests on my choices. I do like the Ruché sofa that I designed for Ligne Roset Italia, though. It’s uncommon, and at the same time it appeals to both young and old.’



ABOVE HERRINGBONE GRILL PAN FOR CRANE, 2017.

OPPOSITE PAGE INGA SEMPÉ POSES WITH HER LAMPYRE LAMP FOR WÄSTBERG, A ROBUST TAKE ON THE ARCHETYPAL TABLE LAMP IN OPALINE GLASS.

I like the w153 lamp I did for Wästberg, too. You can clip it onto something or stand it on the table. It's a simple, useful, happy design.'

'It's hard being a designer in France. I'm furious with French politicians who say they are proud of French design, even though we designers don't have any status. I hate the hierarchy of the art world – it's boring, so snobbish. Design in France is associated with manufacturing and the working class; it's not considered a noble profession. Even graphic designers enjoy a special artist's status, which is not given to product designers. That's why I feel a certain contempt for French politics.'

'A designer needs to be patient and tenacious, like a tick. This is important, because you are the one who is fighting – either with or against a company. Your aim is not always the same as theirs, and you have to show them that what you want can also be of interest to them.'

'I think women can be just as misogynistic as men. I've been invited to take part in stories about women designers, whereas there is never a story devoted exclusively to men designers – it's just not logical. If you are a designer and a woman, you are regarded as a woman designer and not just a designer.'

'I don't have big expectations. I don't want to have a big studio. I'm not able to do a lot of projects every year. I like doing things the way I do them now. I would like to work with companies like Leroy Merlin or Carrefour, but the people that run those types of companies are not used to working with designers.'

'Journalists are surprised to hear that I would like to design tools. They think that tools aren't "glamorous", a comment I find completely ridiculous. What's glamorous about designing a sofa? If my designs are sold in the basement of the BHV department store – that's what I call glamour.'