



eye candy

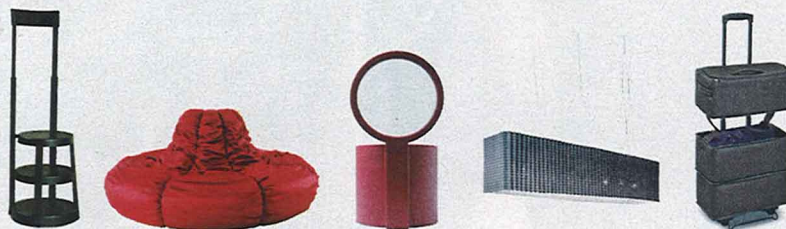
WOMEN'S FASHION FALL 2007

The actress Abbie Cornish

USER-FRIENDLY

ELEGANCE AND COMMON SENSE COMBINE IN THE DESIGNS OF INGA SEMPÉ. PILAR VILADAS INSPECTS THE GOODS.

Portrait by Sofia Sanchez and Mauro Mongiello



These are good times for design — and for designers. They can go the functional route, turning out plastic stacking chairs and sectional sofas that sell by the truckload, or they can go the design-art route, creating limited-edition pieces that are sometimes sublime and sometimes ridiculous. Or they can do both, and no one will accuse them of selling out. And between the limitless possibilities of design art and technological innovations, functional doesn't preclude fanciful. There has probably never been so much good stuff out there to buy.

And yet. It isn't easy to find objects that solve an actual problem and make you swoon at the same time. So a small exhibition of prototypes by the French designer Inga Sempé was one of the stealth highlights of Milan Furniture Fair week. I say stealth not because Sempé is unknown: her Chantilly sofa for Edra, a lush, almost *louche* creation covered in gathered jewel-toned satins and striped silks, was one of the high-profile hits of the fair. But her low-profile triumph — the prototypes — was tucked into an exhibition sponsored by V.I.A. (Valorisation de l'Innovation dans l'Ameublement), the French nonprofit association that funds design research. Sempé claims: "I never think of an aesthetic idea first. I only think of a use." Whatever the conception, these objects were so sophisticated in their blend of elegance and common sense — a chair that becomes a stepladder, with a back that telescopes up to become a safety railing; a rolling suitcase made of three boxes that zip apart for

individual access; round storage boxes with magnifying-glass lids — that it was astonishing that they hadn't already been snapped up for production.

That might have been too much for Sempé, though. Tall and slender, with that combination of unadorned beauty and matter-of-fact stylishness that is peculiarly (and maddeningly) French, she is the opposite of the celebrity designer who spends more time schmoozing than working. Sempé, who prefers flea markets to trade fairs — she loves the "accidental quality" of the former, as opposed to the studied slickness of the latter — seems surprised by success. "I can never be optimistic," she explains. But, she adds, "I'm not a pessimist — I'm skeptical. I like to wait and see. It's the only field on earth for which I can be patient: work. In daily life, I'm not patient at all."

Sempé's impatience extends to journalists who ask what she thinks are stupid questions — a trait she may have inherited from her father, the illustrator and author Jean-Jacques Sempé, who won a prize in France for being such a grouchy interviewee. But her frustration is only that of someone who's all about the work, which takes place in her Paris studio, located inside the sixth-floor walk-up apartment that she shares with her 9-year-old son. Like the shoemaker's children, Sempé lives with a minimum of furniture and a lot of naked light bulbs — hardly an advertisement for someone who has recently done furniture for the French manufacturer Ligne Roset, a table for the Swedish company David Design or a hanging light with an expandable pleated shade

for the Italian company Luceplan.

If Sempé has trouble indulging her sybaritic side at home, she does manage to instill a sensual quality in even her most practical designs. With high backs and channel quilting, the Möel settee and armchair for Ligne Roset were inspired by a chair design in the company's archive. Sempé liked the design's expansive, comfortable shape, but thought it looked "very '70s — and I hate the '70s. I don't like objects to look 'cool.' I wanted the advantage of softness and comfort, but with straight lines." The rigid exterior of each piece is covered in felt or leather; Sempé likes the contrast between the hard outside and the soft inside and calls the leather option a lighter version of a leather sofa.

Her dream commissions would include utilitarian things like tools, street furniture and wood stoves (because they give light as well as heat). She has designed a cognac bottle for Hennessy that will make its debut early next year. And she is currently talking to Luceplan, the maker of her expandable light, about manufacturing a two-directional light that was one of her V.I.A. prototypes. While 2007 has been a banner year by Sempé's standards, she's not indulging in any premature optimism, recalling the flurry of press after her solo exhibition at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in 2003, which was followed by relative silence. Still, it's not the attention that matters most; it's the work. "My aim is always to have something interesting to do," she maintains. But if her recent output is any indication, Sempé is in for a lot more than that. ■

High functioning Inga Sempé, right, in the Möel armchair for Ligne Roset. Her designs include, above from left, a stepladder chair with a telescoping back; the Chantilly sofa for Edra; a storage box with a magnifying-glass top; the Plissé light, with an expandable shade, for Luceplan; and a rolling suitcase with zip-apart boxes.

