

Entertainment

## France's most famous designer doesn't shy away from talking about money

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Nitouche and Oupette roam silently through the room. One walks down the spiral staircase. The other one lies on the shelf with the materials, on a stack of cardboard. The cats are hard to tell apart; both have light brown and black striped fluffy fur. One sniffs the visitor's coat, while the other jumps onto the long conference table and aims for the pastries. As the photographer picks up the shelf with the lamps and ceramic pots, one of them pushes herself between the objects and strikes a pose.

The designer Inga Sempé shares her studio not only with two employees and lots of models, material samples, papers and bits and bobs – but also with two Siberian cat ladies. Although sharing isn't entirely accurate, Nitouche and Oupette actually feel like they're the bosses in the room, as befits cats. When one of the two approaches the large cardboard box on the conference table, Inga Sempé quickly stands up and places a plate in front of the side opening. The animal shouldn't climb in here – it's a model of a room for the **Triennale** exhibition center in Milan. Miniature versions of Sempé's furniture are in the model, made from paper: the Ruché sofa for Ligne Roset, the Tripot stool for Foggia, the Column fitted kitchen for Reform. There is a living room, a bedroom, a kitchen, a bathroom – like in a real apartment. "The Imperfect Home" is the name of Sempé's solo show, which can be seen from Tuesday at the **Triennale**, just in time for the Salone del Mobile furniture fair.

“I don’t like design exhibitions,” says the fifty-six-year-old as she explains the model. “I don’t like it when you put an object that is in production on a pedestal like a famous sculpture. That’s absurd.” She doesn’t have to be seen as an artist: “I just want to be a designer.” She wanted to set up an apartment for the exhibition, but not a perfect one like something out of a magazine. Remote controls are said to be lying around and bills waiting to be paid. It should look as if the residents just went out briefly to buy butter. But mess or not, a cat in a display model would probably be about as bad as an elephant in a china shop.

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Many of her designs accompany Inga Sempé in her daily work in the studio.

Inga Sempé’s studio is located in a curious building in the 10th arrondissement of Paris, on a quiet street between Canal Saint-Martin and Gare de l’Est. A seven-story old brick house – charmingly built with chimneys, dormers and the typical Parisian mansard roofs. The neighboring buildings on the left and right have been missing for a long time; they were demolished in the 1960s in favor of a huge new building. An architect’s initiative only saved one house from the same fate, so that it has stood there all alone ever since, with the newly built monster as a fist on its neck.

The rooms on the ground floor once housed a textile workshop, and Inga Sempé moved in ten years ago. She lives with her family on the floor above; the spiral staircase connects both areas. There is neat chaos in the studio, as is often the case with designers. Everything is tidy and in its place, the dollhouse-like models of armchairs and sofas, the folders with documents, the stacks of folded textile samples. But it seems chaotic because there is too much of everything there. In front of the shelf with the pots and lights there are two rolled up carpets on the floor, as well as plants, an antique black standing mirror and even more lights. Only the workstations along the long wall with the glass blocks are tidy. The first place belongs to Sempé, she sits on a stool, her employees on desk chairs.

Inga Sempé has officially been working as a freelance designer since 2001, initially in her kitchen with a notebook on the table. According to Sempé, it took at least five years before she was able to make a reasonable living from her work. “It was a struggle.” To this day, there are always difficult economic phases, and doubts are part of the job for her anyway. Anyone who is too confident in themselves tends to repeat themselves or copy other drafts. “Every three years I think I should just quit.” A sentence you wouldn’t hear from many freelance designers. But Sempé is refreshingly fearless – and she talks freely about money. She remembers how in the early years she earned more from lectures and seminars at universities than from furniture and products.

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The fact that she never gave up also has to do with her background: As the daughter of the Danish illustrator and artist Mette Ivers and the French illustrator Jean-Jacques Sempé, she was familiar with the uncertain existence of the freelance professions from an early age. And from a young age, Sempé was also fascinated by the objects around her, the ordinary everyday objects. She says she became a designer to make such objects. She doesn't understand why not everyone wants to become a designer. After all, we are all surrounded by things from the day we are born, much more than plants or animals.

In any case, Inga Sempé has studied the world of things thoroughly since her childhood. With her mother she roamed the flea markets of Paris, especially the Marché aux Puces “Vanves” in the south of the city. That was her design training. It was also about buying – to this day Sempé mainly buys used items – but above all it was about looking and studying the objects. She still does it that way, “that's my culture”. However, she doesn't read books about design and knows little about the “oh-so-great masters” of history. “I don't know the names of the objects that Mies van der Rohe designed for Achille Castiglioni, no!” She draws out the “No” at least three times as long as necessary. And then grins.

“I always made objects that were supposed to be useful in everyday life.”

She likes to swear, but she loves to show off her subtle sense of humor even more. When Sempé researches a commodity, such as a cast iron grill pan, she looks at online trading platforms such as Ebay. There she finds all existing variants of a thing, not just the examples that made it into the design books. “I'm not interested in academic hierarchies or judgments.” She created her first objects as a small child. She remembers bringing pieces of wood from kindergarten to build a frame for her mother to hold one of her drawings. Later she sculpted ashtrays out of plaster, made storage boxes for her mother's ink bottles and even made a table clock. “I always made objects that were supposed to be useful in everyday life.” She also sewed a lot and practiced working with fabrics. These experiences are still useful to her today.

Pot Bombance (Revol)

The love for things was later joined by enthusiasm for their industrial production. Visiting a factory is one of her favorite things to do. “You see the people who work there, the machines, you get a feel for the culture of the company.” When Sempé was working on a sofa for the French manufacturer Ligne Roset, she traveled to the factory near Lyon many times, to work on the prototypes. She experimented for a long time, especially with the quilting. Ruché, the sofa with the wooden frame and the cushion placed over it, was her first commercial success. “So I was no longer below zero.”

However, the path to this turning point was not straight. Inga Sempé knew as a teenager that she wanted to study design and found out about the Paris design school ENSCI – Les Ateliers in a television report. But when she took a look at the school, she wasn't thrilled: Instead of working on objects, she felt that they were mostly talking about them. She was unfamiliar with the academic world. That's why she initially worked in a hat workshop and later as an assistant to a photo agent.

Then she studied at ENSCI, mainly because of the university's workshops, where she learned how to work with wood, metal and plastic. "I learned a lot about materials there. I had no knowledge of techniques before. You don't learn that at a flea market."

The next important stop was her time in the studio of the Australian designer Marc Newson, who had a studio in Paris at the time. He showed her how industrial design works in practice, how the first sketch becomes a finished object. "You have to understand the manufacturing processes," says Sempé. Even today, she continues to acquire knowledge of technology and manufacturing methods with every new order and every new manufacturer. If someone says that it is not possible to implement her design for technical or economic reasons, she knows whether that is really true. Or whether the person is just "a little lazy." Further stages in her career: two years in the studio of the legendary interior designer Andrée Putman and a year in Rome, as a scholarship holder of the Académie de France in the Villa Medici.

Inga Sempé also shares her enthusiasm for everyday objects with one of her current most important clients: the Danish design brand Hay. "Mette and Rolf Hay really love objects, whether it's a paper clip or a chest of drawers," says Sempé. "They have a passion for things." For Hay she designed a sofa, mirrors and several lamps, including the Matin model with a pleated shade, which, along with Ruché, is one of her most commercially successful designs. In her studio, Matin can be found in several versions, as a table lamp and in orange on the ceiling.

Other customers include the Danish textile manufacturer Kvadrat, the Swedish lighting brand Wästberg and Magis from Italy. At the Salone del Mobile, Sempé and the Barcelona carpet brand Nanimarquina are presenting the Colorado collection, handmade carpets with a pattern of irregular stripes. Germany, on the other hand, is a blank spot on her map; so far she has not worked with any German company or exhibited in this country. But, she says, there is a concept for a furniture system. That might be something for a German company. "I'm good at designing systems that don't look harsh or unpleasant." Then, not for the first time during the conversation, she switches from English to German and says: "I can speak a little German, so you can call or write to me."

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