

# ZANAT: Ten Years of Marrying Craftsmanship and Design, with an Eye to Social Development

In 2015, the Niksic brothers saved an ancient wood-carving technique from extinction by collaborating with several international designers. Positive results for their community include UNESCO recognition of local artisan knowledge and economic development.

Nestled in the foothills of the Bjelašnica Mountains separating Bosnia and Herzegovina, along a border that is both imaginary and all too real for the two historical regions, the small town of Konjic is distant, in every sense of the word, from major hubs of contemporary design. Its main tourist attraction is not the minaret or the unmistakable humpback Ottoman bridge, but a huge hidden bunker built by Marshal Tito to withstand a possible nuclear attack. And yet, despite its peripheral location and the echoes of age-old and recent conflicts, over the last ten years the town has witnessed a fascinating design-based artisanal revival that has come to involve the entire community.

## WOOD, A FAMILY MATTER FOR THE NIKSIC

This story officially began in 2015, the year **Orhan and Adem Niksic** founded **Zanat** ("craftsmanship" in Bosnian), but its roots go much farther back. In 1919 the brothers' grandfather had founded a company that made hand-carved wooden furniture and decorative objects using a traditional technique learned from his father in a nearby village. "My brother studied architecture and always knew he would take over the family business. I, on the other hand, moved abroad to study in 1991 and then pursued a very different career," explains Orhan Niksic, who worked as an economist for the World Bank. "But I felt like I was missing a deeper connection to the place where I grew up." The idea emerged while vacation-







ing on the island of Korcula, Croatia: **put a contemporary twist on the typical handicrafts of Konjic and the surrounding area with the help of international architects and designers, thereby driving growth** of a region struggling with high youth unemployment. Orhan and Adem then proposed it to their friend Mark Bartolini, an aid worker and carver by passion, and laid the groundwork for their project.

#### FROM BOSNIA TO THE WORLD THROUGH DESIGN

Since then, the line between design and craftsmanship has been blurred by a new generation of makers who prioritize the handmade, but at the time it was clearly marked. "Tastes have changed a lot, and manual skill has taken on new value. No one asks anymore if craftsmanship and industrial design can coexist. But when we launched the first collection people questioned it," recalls Niksic. It was the 2010s and *hygge*, a warm Scandinavian-inspired minimalism, had started setting the pace. A 2016 New

Yorker piece enshrined it as the trend of the year, though signs of growth were already there, and looking north seemed like an obvious choice. After briefly exploring the local scene, the brothers began working with three Scandinavian designers led by **Monica Förster**, Zanat's artistic director from the start. The "family" gradually expanded to welcome big design names like **Michele De Lucchi**, **Jean Marie Massaud** via **Patrick Norguet**, **Sebastian Herkner**, **Ludovica and Roberto Palomba**, **Naoto Fukasawa**, and **Yves Béhar**.

#### SAVING TRADITION AND A POSITIVE IMPACT ON THE REGION

**The partners were driven by three goals: creating a dialogue between craftsmanship and design, promoting the local tradition, and uplifting the region's economy and society.** "In 2017, we succeeded in getting the Konjic woodcarving tradition registered on UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage list. Later, we opened a small museum and academy to pass

on this artisanal knowledge to young people, to help it survive the generational transition. When we started, the average carver was fairly old. Now we work with some 70 men and women of all ages," says the sustainable-development-expert-turned-entrepreneur. "We also try to preserve forests by not throwing anything away. There is no waste in our production because we use the smallest pieces of wood, even shavings, to make accessories and other products. Working with your hands helps you keep an ethical perspective because it takes time and forces you to go slow, so you develop a strong connection with the material."

■ Giulia Marani