

Diana Vives visits the Rampel atelier, hidden away deep in Nairobi's industrial district, which has been producing collector's items since the '80s. These are the chairs that are rocking the world

CELEBRITY CHAIRS

FROM TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT Bar stool in mvule wood, designed for Jocelyne Wildenstein's Kenyan ranch; 'Stool Number 2'; bench in cedar; 'The Armchair'; the 'Lounge Chair' in mvule wood, one of van Rampelberg's signature pieces

When the pieces finally emerge from the din and dust of the Rampel Designs workshop after eight to 10 weeks of labour, they appear deceptively effortless and light. The signature fluidity and smooth texture invite the touch, and the body moulds itself into their various shapes. There are no embellishments – the detail is in the finishing, the effortless gliding of drawers and doors that operate with hairline precision.

A reference point is hard to find. 'My work is often compared to Art Deco with which I share the curve, but my designs are stripped of any applied decoration and do not attempt to emulate nature. I want the volume to speak through a line which draws its inspiration from geometrical shapes,' says owner Marc van Rampelberg. Perhaps there is an affiliation with Verner Panton's form – moulded, jointless furniture synonymous with '60s pop culture. But where Panton experimented primarily with synthetic materials, van Rampelberg coaxes shapes out of solid wood. Perhaps from a technical point of view, in terms of stack lamination (layers of wood, bonded and sculpted) there is a kinship with Jack Rogers Hopkins from the American Studio Furniture movement.

'The line only looks light because it is in movement,' smiles van Rampelberg at an attempt to lift a solid ebony chair, weighing in at 15 kilos. A head-grain technique lends structural strength to these stunts of carpentry and exposes a beautiful patterning concealed by traditional side-grain woodwork. The use of mvule and mahogany from the Congo, cedar, palm wood and ebony or meringa from Tanzania carries a distinctive African note and an air of mystery: drinks cabinets that look like sarcophagi, panels that pop open to the touch, psychedelic barstools.

The carpenters are on lunch break, machines cooling off while they sit in the reprieve of silence, some dozing, others reading or playing chess and checkers. The hall is thick with sawdust that dances in the light from the clerestory windows, and the smell of linseed oil, beeswax and concentration lingers. All four walls are layered with plywood templates that trace the history of the workshop. While the designs and the original prototypes are developed by van Rampelberg, they are executed

by his team of 43 carpenters who work at their own pace. 'I believe that people have different rhythms. Some are three times faster than others. I let it happen and get the quality in return.' In two decades, nobody has left. The youngest, in their 20s, come with at least three to four years training and the learning begins, guided by master craftsmen like 74-year old foreman Michael Mwaura who has been there for over 30 years.

That Rampel Designs furniture is little known beyond Kenya and international connoisseurs may be due to its enigmatic owner, for whom the creative process takes precedence over the publicity. Quiet but enduring passions, intellectual integrity and patience have guided his career. Raised in middle-

places, it was in familiar Nairobi that fate awaited me: love, as love only can be, at first sight.'

In his African wife, sculptor Chelenge, and their three children, van Rampelberg found a reason to settle down and harness his talent and energy. 'We got by on my teacher's pay, but when we needed things, I made them.' His first piece was a cradle with smooth edges, followed by a bed and side tables. 'The Line' began to emerge and he slowly added pieces, eventually producing a collection that was an immediate success, selling out at a local exhibition.

In 1987 he bought a faltering workshop, inherited 12 trained carpenters who had apprenticed under an Italian master, and by a stroke of good fortune, Jocelyne Wildenstein and her husband – then the

largest private art dealers in the world – accidentally found their way to the workshop. 'For 12 years, half of my production was for them. Madame Wildenstein demanded the impossible and made us bend the rules of furniture-making.' His clientele grew to include British actor John Hurt with pieces for his mansion at the foot of Mount Kenya, the late Ruth Schaffner's Watatu Gallery of contemporary art, and Meryl Streep, who lugged a piece for the set of *Out of Africa* back to the States. 'In an operation reminiscent of my days in stage decor, I was once called in to create a presidential suite overnight for former US President Jimmy Carter's visit to the Nairobi Serena Hotel! A container ready for European clients was intercepted at the last minute to furnish the suite. Carter, a keen carpenter, was so impressed with the work that he asked to visit the workshop.

Rampel Designs furniture is currently exhibited at the Hilde Cornelissen Gallery in Antwerp and BDG in Barcelona. 'My pieces scattered throughout the world, but if they hadn't, I would have saturated local demand then. Now there is the emergence of an exciting new Kenyan clientele interested in design.'

'Time always places styles in perspective, but I think that with the lounge chair, I have created a classic. That is for me a great achievement,' concludes van Rampelberg. His most recent project, the interior design of Nairobi's Mercury Lounge, will magnify his signature line into architectural spaces undoubtedly providing new impetus for change. ■
Rampel Designs, Butere Rd, Industrial Area, Nairobi, 2000, Kenya; ☎ (09 254) 20 557-629/558-295



Marc van Rampelberg, owner of Rampel Designs, with his wife Chelenge and their children

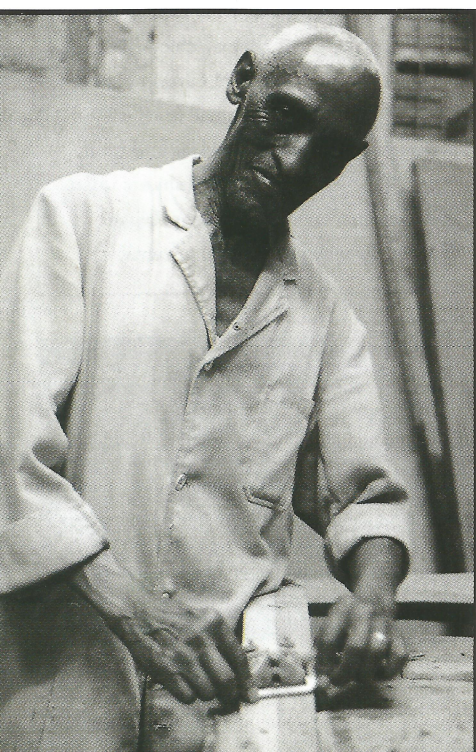
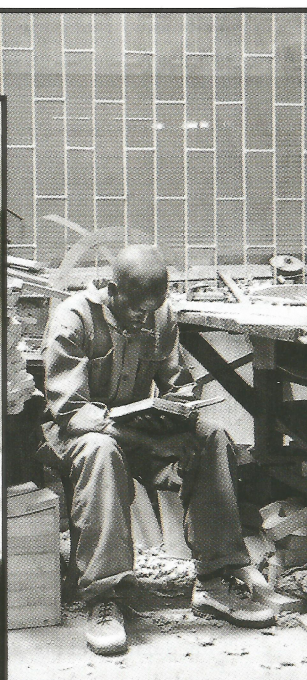
class post-war poverty, he was discouraged from attending the art academy and took a degree in teaching. But the longing for adventure that had led him to consider life as a clown, dancer and monk, projected him to a teaching post in Zaire.

'That was the beginning of my love affair with Africa which took me through many stages of self-discovery,' he says. 'In those hippie years I was a Bohemian with a surfeit of uncontained experiences. I drifted back to Belgium for four years, where I fell in with a group of artists, worked on stage sets and became assistant to sculptor Rik Poot.' But Europe couldn't hold him – on New Year's Eve 1980, he arrived at Alexandria harbour, making his way across Egypt and the Sudan back to Kenya: 'Of all

On the make

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT

The Rampel Designs team; unfinished group of 'Chair Number 2'; a workman reading the Bible, savouring the brief respite from the dust and noise; work resumes in the workshop after lunch; 74-year-old foreman Michael Mwaura at work. Michael is a skilled carpenter who has been working for Rampel Designs for over 30 years; carpenter William Otieno working on a rocking chair



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