

Wizard of Odd

THE INDUSTRIAL DESIGNER
INGA SEMPÉ TURNS THE CLASSICS
UPSIDE DOWN. IAN PHILLIPS MEETS
THE PARISIAN PROVOCATEUR.

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sk Inga Sempé to name her favorite designer, and she doesn't miss a beat. "Vico Magistretti," she immediately asserts. "I love the inventiveness and simplicity of his work." She has a particular affection for the Italian maestro's 1967 Eclisse lamp, manufactured by Artemide. "It was the only modern object we had at home when I was a kid," she recalls.

At 36, the French-born Sempé may not yet have gained the same fame as the great Magistretti, but she has been grabbing her fair share of attention. Two years ago, she was awarded the Grand Prix de la Création by Paris city officials and was also honored with a small, one-woman show at the city's Musée des Arts Décoratifs, housed in a wing of the Louvre palace.

Among her designs to date is a clever wall clock that is at once digital and analog. It has L.E.D. numerals on the minute and hour hands. There is also the shelving system produced by Edra, fitted with partitions made from industrial brushes. You can put your hands through them, but cannot see what is behind. "The idea is for it to be both open and closed at the same time," Sempé explains.

The design doyenne Andrée Putman, her former employer, says, "There's a sort of provocation to her work and an incredible sense of innovation." Chantal Granier, the artistic director of the crystal manufacturer Baccarat, agrees: "Inga attempts to venture off the beaten track. She gives a twist to the meaning objects can have."

A perfect example is Baccarat's classic Harcourt glass, which Sempé turned on its head and adapted for use as a candlestick. She also likes



One-woman show: Inga Sempé and her designs. From left, shelves for Edra made from industrial candlesticks born of upended Baccarat glasses and a pleated lamp for C

designing lighting. Her best designs feature pleats that are prominently displayed in a series of prototypes for large ceiling lights and a standing lamp for Cappellini.

Pleats are also omnipresent in the small office in her apartment in the northern part of Paris. The white curtains are neatly configured in a modern style, as is the dark gray light shade above her desk. The flat, white wall she shares with her 6-year-old son, is neither a bed of luxury nor a haven of signs. The antiquated kitchen has just three burners. Sempé's desk is made of two pieces of chipboard placed on metal trestles. Her neighbor, she claims, is so unsavory that it is unsafe to walk home late at night.

"My dream," she says, "is to move. One of the things I like to do is looking at real estate ads."

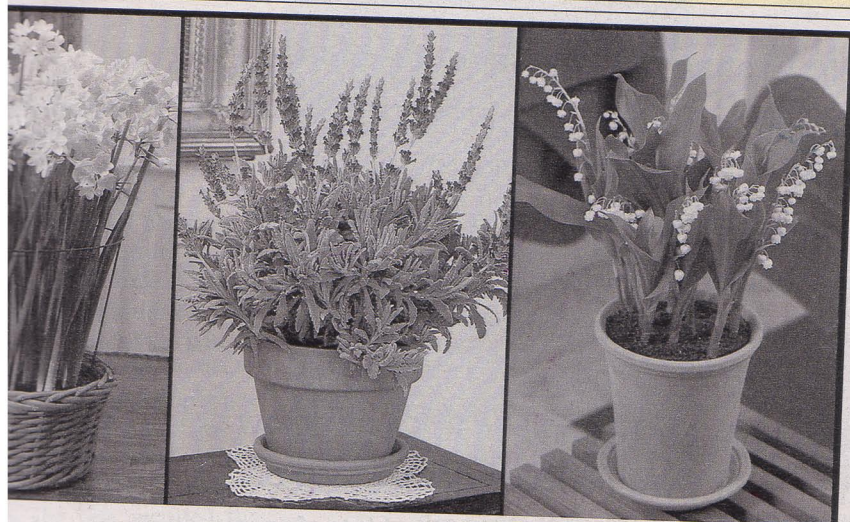
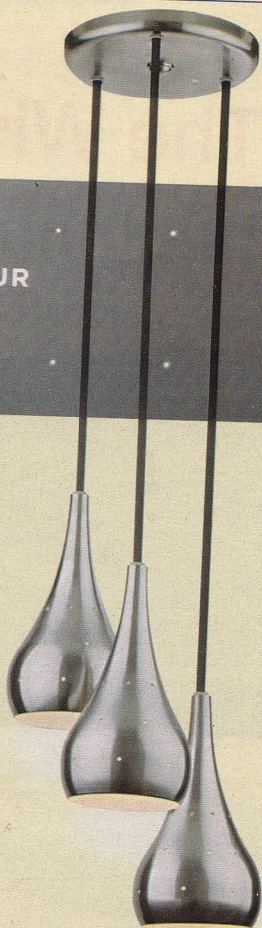
Articles about Sempé never fail to mention two things. First, she hates being questioned about her father, Jean-Jacques Sempé, a c

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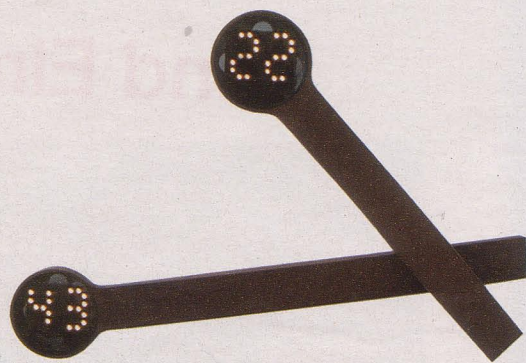


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Time share: Sempé's clock mixes digital and analog.

ist who has created more than 70 covers for The New Yorker (their relationship is said to be strained, and she never refers to him in conversation). Second, her prickliness. "She's very endearing, but people can find her to be a little cold and reserved," Granier admits. "She has a very forthright, strong personality." Sempé certainly has strong ideas. She insists, for instance, that she has no interest in art. "A corkscrew fascinates me more than a Manet painting," she once opined. Still, as Putman is keen to point out, she is also delightfully witty: "She's extremely sensitive and uses humor as a shield."

Sempé was born on Jan. 5, 1968, and brought up by her mother, Mette Ivers, a Danish painter and illustrator of children's books. Surprisingly, she has been to Copenhagen just once. "It was full of hippies and just depressed me," she says. After high school, she worked for a milliner and a photo agent before attending the École Nationale Supérieure de Création Industrielle (ENSCI-Les Ateliers) design school in Paris. A month after graduation, she went back to hear the designer Marc Newson give a lecture. Impressed, Sempé asked to do an internship and ended up working with him for six months. Later, she also spent two years with Putman before going solo in 1999. "I get terribly frustrated working for someone else," she explains. "I'm only interested in my own projects."

That said, she is interested in the work of a number of her contemporaries. Among those she admires are Konstantin Grcic, François Azambourg and the Bouroullec brothers. She also likes 19th-century spoons, the Bauhaus and articulated objects, like telescopic antennae. Less favorable in her eyes is anything from the 1970's and "things that are cute, like the new Mini Cooper car." She also chastises common perceptions of design. "What most people think of as design are very expensive, elitist objects," she says. "Often, they don't realize that everyday things were designed, too." An example, she says, is the umbrella. "It's something I'd love to have invented."

Tellingly, her long-term goal is to work on common, run-of-the-mill products, like light switches, trash cans and casters. In the meantime, she's busy designing furniture for Ligne Roset and Montina, a line of objects for Magis and lamps for Oluce, as well as working on the production of her dual-function clock by Ghaadé. According to Putman, "success is something that she rejects completely." Chances are, however, that Sempé may just have to get used to it. As Granier says: "She's not yet reached her peak. We're going to be hearing a lot more of her in the future." ■