

A Man For All Seasons



Artist/Craftsman Zele Mané designs and builds stunning modernist furniture and architectural elements at his 18-person company near Santa Barbara.

“In the morning I wake up a steel worker. At noontime I am a carpenter. Afternoons I am a businessman and in the nights I design.”

Zele Mané’s modest response to a question as to how he defines himself belies a prodigious artistic talent and wide-ranging intellect. His eponymous company, located near Santa Barbara, is something of an anachronism in today’s mass-produced world, more of a sixteenth century Florentine artisanal workshop than an industrial operation, with Zele the master in residence.

The eighteen person Zele Company produces a wide range of hand made, Zele-designed modernist furniture and architectural elements for residences. The clean, classic lines and balanced proportions of his museum-quality chairs, ottomans, tables and other pieces are just beginning to be discovered in California, although the company has been here since 2001.

Zele’s furniture and structural elements are executed in rare imported woods, saddle leathers and stainless steel, combined in what he calls “a tension, a discussion between the materials.” Despite the costs of the woods—the silken wild Swiss pear he sometimes uses is ten times the price of mahogany—Zele is adamant about keeping his pieces affordable. This is remarkable when a chair may take a few months to finish while he waits, like a craftsman of violins, for a freshly cut coco bolo arm piece to reach just the right degree of dryness before attaching the metal elements.

Zele’s self-described work schedule leaves little time for sculpture and serious painting, passions that he has pursued since childhood. “Our mother said that from the first time he held a pencil in his hand it was clear he was an artist,” recalls Nurit Adizes, Zele’s younger sister, president of his company, and ever-attentive

Left: Zele relaxes next to his commissioned Pulitzer table. The owners wanted a sculpted effect, which Zele achieved by weaving stainless steel from the pedestal through the top. The decorative effect of the stainless on the tabletop plays with color and light on the wood surface, an effect achieved by alternating several layers of pigment and lacquer.

Opposite: Clean, rectilinear lines harmonize lightness and strength in the African padauk Sabina table and the ironwood Hadian bench., both of which are complemented by the soft curves of the leather and stainless steel Victoria chair. The natural ironwood color of the flooring is preserved by a coat of wax, lending a rich, timeless feeling to the space. A Richard Serra intaglio hangs above the table.

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champion. Several of Zele’s large expressionist oils hang in Nurit’s stunning oceanfront home in Santa Barbara, which functions also as a museum of sort for many of his creations. “The home is mold-free. Imagine, on the ocean! Because of Zele’s ingenious plans for circulation in the walls and floors,” Nurit says.

Of all the great modernists who designed furniture—Marcel Breuer, Mies van der Rohe, Frank Lloyd Wright, Ray and Charles Eames, Richard Neutra, Le Corbusier, Alvar Aalto—only one, the Dutchman Gerrit Rietveld, also made all of his own furniture, according to Michael Boyd, a noted collector. Rietveld, says Boyd, modestly explained this by saying that he was the son of a cabinetmaker. “For one person to be able to create the design and do both the metal and wood working is very, very rare,” says Boyd.

Zele is a ruggedly handsome man of medium height. His green-tinged hazel





Top: Ironwood triangles molded into natural, cocoa-colored English saddle leather in the back support of the *Elizabeth* dining chair evoke bare shoulders of a female form.

Above: Zele consults with Sam Roberts, his master metalworking artisan, on the tension bar of the sleek mahogany and stainless steel *Alexis* chair. A design element in the chair back allows a subtle rotation that adjusts the back to the movement of the person seated.

Right: The entrance to a home that Zele designed and built frames an inviting yet formidable inlaid mahogany door with window frames and soffits of matching mahogany. Zele also designed the lighting, which adds a quiet aura of illumination for the evening visitor.

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eyes have a limpid quality that immediately invite trust and suggest a deep and soulful intelligence. A native of Israel, he is conversant in several languages and speaks in a slow musical rhythm, his warm-toned voice drawing in listeners.

Some of his passions emerge over a long conversation in a small conference room off the main wood workshop, the whine of sanders and saws offering a cacophonous backdrop to his softly inflected English. Eight years ago at the age of fifty, Zele decided to immerse himself in Latin, in part so that he could gain a better understanding of Shakespeare.

"From where was this genius taking his imagination?" Zele asks. "It was always a big question mark for me," he says. "Now, I have found out that his real spiritual imagination came straight from Latin sources, which he read and knew well."

Zele (a nickname from age four) projects his own imagination much in the way of one of his ipe cabinets—quiet, supple, strong, gracious, elegant, and a bit mysterious as to what lies within. To carry the analogy further, some of his wood structures are invisibly reinforced with a

steel rod that guards against movement over time so the piece will carry on exquisitely for generations. Zele's own makeup too has an inner strength that allows no compromise of quality, no mistakes. He farmed on a kibbutz in Israel as a youth and, Nurit later tells us, was a paratrooper in the Israeli army during the 1967 War.

Zele's furniture, staircases and floors—unlike his paintings (which he calls "my raw soul")—express a certain ecstasy of color, form and texture tempered by a conscious restraint and discipline. The result is a purity of design and timeless beauty that unfettered creativity alone could not achieve. Zele speaks with restraint as well, preferring to express the eloquence of his inner truth through leather, wood and steel as a direct connection between thought and object.

One of his profound influences, he says, is the Roman poet and philosopher Lucretius. "In him I find a very beautiful balance of rational thinking and spirituality. I think this balance is the real secret of life. He had the courage to believe." The same might be said of Zele. CH





Left: Two iconic Mies van der Rohe *Barcelona* chairs are paired with Zele's solid mahogany *Galatea* coffee table. The leg elements of the table add to an overall structural integrity by extending into the top of the table. A large mahogany picture window inset with stainless steel and ironwood flooring offer gradients of color, echoed in another dimension by a Peter Lodato painting above the chairs.

Below, left: The sensuous curves of oiled and waxed English saddle leather in the *Riva* chairs invite a body to soak in the warmth of the fire in the mahogany-framed, slate fireplace. The chairs incorporate richly colored tropical cocobolo with stainless steel. In the foreground is the *Sabina* table of black lacquer in a mahogany frame with stainless steel sleeve designs in each corner. A Robert Motherwell collage sits to the side of the fireplace.

Below: Solid ebony handles are imbedded in padauk kitchen cabinetry, shown with honed granite countertops and a diamond fusion glass backsplash.

