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Sixtysix

THE CRAFT OF CREATIVITY

RONAN & ERWAN
BOUROULLEC

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Ronan & Erwan Bouroullec

Designers

One explores dozens of projects at once while the other dives deep into a world of new machines. These two French brothers have long been delighting in taking things apart only to reimagine them better and more beautiful than before. They showed us how they make—and break—things every day.

WORDS BY HAYDÉE TOUITOU / PHOTOS BY ÉLODIE DAGUIN



A lot of money is spent on modeling clay.” It’s one of the first things Ronan Bouroullec tells me when I ask him about the way he, his younger brother Erwan, and their dozen assistants work in the design atelier in the Belleville neighborhood of Paris. “We’ve been here for about 15 years now. I had to review our contract recently and hadn’t realized how long we’ve been here,” he says. “It’s the same for the number of people working here. I was convinced we were 10; turns out we’re 14.”

The brothers design for Europe’s most respected furniture brands, including Vitra, Flos, and Hay—but they don’t shy away from challenging design projects like designing a TV for Samsung either. I stumble upon one of these TVs when I enter their office, a shared space within their Parisian atelier. The studio itself is spread across three levels, with designated offices, a workshop, photo studio, storage space, and kitchen. Between 3D printers, fabric samples, and a coffee machine, the operation is fully equipped and ready to support the brothers’ research, prototype development, and all of the creative processes essential to their work.

“It’s not meant to be a showroom at all,” Ronan says of the space. “You arrived at a very peculiar moment. We emptied it a lot.” He’s the third person to say how tidy the studio is, and it makes me laugh because it doesn’t strike me as particularly tidy at all. But everyone seems happy and work here is in progress, with simple and elaborate sketches alike lining workspaces.

The Bouroullec brothers have long been leaving their mark on European design, from tables and chairs to rugs, office furniture, and art objects. You can find their work in permanent collections at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Art Institute of Chicago, and the Design Museum in London, but even with this level of success the brothers are sincere and humble—Ronan acting as though he became a designer by chance. He was an average student, he says, and until he found art he was bored.

At 15 Ronan started attending the L’École des Beaux-Arts de Quimper weekly art program. Every Wednesday he looked forward to going there and drawing. And so the bored student began to excel, learning how to take pictures and make objects. With his parents’ approval, but not enthusiasm, he moved to Paris to pursue his studies and make “little things.”

Ronan got an internship at an architectural firm in Paris, Studio Naco, when he was 19. There he was encouraged to take part in Design

The Bouroullec’s three-level office in the Belleville neighborhood in Paris is filled with drawings, including Ronan’s, and prototypes, as the design duo and their dozen assistants spend many long days at work.

Connection, the fair his firm did scenography for. “It’s quite strange. I feel I got on a train at 15 years old and that train is still going,” he says.

Erwan eventually got on the same design train. He, too, made it to Beaux-Arts. Looking back he says their upbringing was like most anyone’s growing up in the country—“centered around a tiny life.” “But for as long as I can remember I’ve always been doing things, in a very natural way, with tools and material I could find around,” he says.

Ronan was 24 when he started to experience success and asked Erwan to help. In 1997 the brothers were spotted by Cappellini, who gave them their first industrial design projects. They began working with the Galerie kreò in Paris and had their first solo show in 2001, before Issey Miyake ultimately hired them to design the boutique to house his new collection. The work continued. They met with Vitra and worked on a new office system called Joyn. Then came Artek, Flos, Glas Italia, Ligne Roset, and more. “We’re now an old couple, always working together, with interests that might vary, which works well considering the range of projects we’re offered,” Ronan says. Their creative process works—when Ronan is tackling 20 projects at once Erwan gets focused, spending months or even years in research mode. Today they’re working on a wide range of projects, including a belvedere in Rennes, furniture for a Parisian museum, and delicate glass-blown flowers for Iittala in Stockholm.

For Erwan, one of life’s great pleasures is diving into something new. “One of my passions in life is to learn and discover new machinery,” he says. “I never become an expert, but I like to learn the basics. For a few years I dove into computer coding. Some years ago it was more about stitching. Right now I’m trying to melt glass in a self-built oven.”

Erwan says he’s most creative in the morning or at night. That’s when projects, for him, tend to become clear. When he’s feeling stuck, he turns to the process; he tears things apart and builds them back up. It’s his favorite part. “Discovering a prototype, being in front of it, tearing it apart, and rebuilding it,” he says. Some days center on the building, which he says has a very positive energy, while others are about evaluating or even destroying, and those moments have a darker energy. “I’m full of necessary doubt, so some days can be dark,” he says. “Other days follow the natural flow of making and discovering by modeling and drawing. But I’m obsessed with my projects, so they’re always with me.”







Erwan reviews a current project with an assistant. Ronan's desk sits alongside drawings and a hanging prototype of Chânes, a limited edition art piece, right.





Nathalie Appéré,
Maire de Rennes,
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année 2016

