

There's something about

Mooi

(and Fabrik, too)

Minfu Chien's furniture and design stores show off his love of vintage German craftsmanship

BY CATHERINE SHU
STAFF REPORTER



Left and above: Chien's two Mooi stores feature modernist furniture from the 1950s to 1970s. PHOTOS CATHERINE SHU, TAIPEI TIMES

Below: Fabrik, which recently opened near Shandao Temple MRT Station, caters to design lovers and collectors with items from the 1920s to 1950s. PHOTOS COURTESY OF MINFU CHIEN



Cafe au Mooi

In addition to his small empire of vintage furniture stores, Chien is also a cofounder of Ecole (學校咖啡館), a cafe next to the Qingtian Street (青田街) branch of Mooi. He says Ecole was influenced by the small coffee shops he sees in Berlin.

"They each have their own style and really give you a sense of what the proprietor is like. As a result, the people who go there are similar in character to the owner," says Chien.

Chien wanted Ecole to retain the same relaxed spirit as its German counterparts. The cafe is named Ecole, or "school" in French, because he hopes customers will "learn new ways of thinking, through the magazines and the books we have or the music we play."

CDs and books (some for sale) are stacked on shelves within easy reach of customers. Another rack has periodicals in several languages, including almost every issue of *Monocle*, a monthly magazine on international affairs, culture and design ("I couldn't believe how wonderful it was when I first saw it," Chien says of the London-based publication).

The basement of the cafe hosts intimate performances, exhibits and other activities each month. For this month's roster, check ecole-cafe.blogspot.com.

In 1995, Minfu Chien (簡銘甫) headed off to France to study filmmaking. When he arrived, however, he had a change of heart about his plans. Chien spent the next six months traveling through Europe instead — and, near the end of the trip, landed in Berlin, the city that would change his life.

Having always been interested in art and design, Chien immediately felt a connection with the furniture and other objects he saw in the German capital's flea markets.

"I really regretted not having gone there sooner," says Chien. He now makes up for lost time, traveling to Berlin regularly to find items for his three vintage furniture stores in Taipei. Two locations are called Mooi (魔椅) and specialize in modernist design from the 1950s to 1970s.

Fabrik (加工廠), Chien's latest project, opened this week near Shandao Temple MRT Station (善導寺捷運站) and spotlights European design from the 1920s to 1950s.

But Chien, whose horn-rimmed glasses and square jaw echo many of the pieces in his store, says he does not feel bound to any particular style or era of design — just as long as it is old.

"It has to do with the patina of the

objects," he says. "And if something is old and is still around, it is because it is special. If it were ordinary, it would have been thrown away. It would not have been taken care of and preserved."

The first branch of Mooi opened on a tree-lined street in Songshan District (松山區) five years ago. The second branch, off of Qingtian Street (青田街), is also located in a bucolic residential neighborhood. Both contain living room sets, sideboards, dining room tables and chairs arranged as if in someone's house, with vintage toys, cameras and dishware placed about as accents to evoke a warm, homey feeling, despite the sleek curves and sharp grades in the furniture.

Fabrik, on the other hand, is located in a former factory and contains a range of items meant to appeal to design connoisseurs and collectors. The store's name pays homage to the former use of the location, as well as an on-site workshop where Chien and other designers will salvage material from old furniture and recycle them into new pieces.

"In Fabrik, I want attention to be paid to each object and the artistry of its design. I want the objects

here to have a patina, or a sensual feeling, like they've been touched before," says Chien. He is partial to simple furniture influenced by the Bauhaus school, which emphasized practicality and function. Fabrik's merchandise reflects that, including a heavy steel desk custom-made in the 1950s for a doctor's office and a side table with an extending tray that was used in a hospital.

The simplicity of 20th-century German design appeals to Chien. "It is very square and exact, at least in my opinion. It is not very romantic, but the workmanship is very good," he says. "I think German designers put a lot of research into their designs, so they are very deliberate. Because of that, people tend to undervalue its creativity."

Chien spends half of each year in Berlin, where he rents a small apartment that is his home base as he travels to other countries in search of wares for his stores.

"I go to flea markets where I've gotten to know the vendors and they'll take me to their garages and warehouses to show me other things," says Chien. "I like to go from place to place in search of things. I'll get a friend and we'll rent a small truck, leave in the morning, and drive around for three or four hours."

The name of his original two stores came about in an equally serendipitous way. The word *mooi* means "beautiful" in Dutch.

"I went on vacation in Holland and went on a driving tour with friends. Every time we passed by a scenic area, they'd say 'Mooi!'" says Chien. "And I thought, that sounds just like 'magic chair' in Mandarin and it really fits the furniture I sell."

When asked why chairs seem to hold a special place in the heart of design connoisseurs (on the photo-sharing Web site Flickr alone, there are more than 60 groups dedicated to this quotidian furnishing), Chien says it is because "chairs are like people."

"Chairs have legs, a face, which is its back, and a body. When you look at a chair from different angles, it takes on different expressions. And in any space, it is the most essential piece of furniture. It is placed in the middle of the room, the most important part, while things like cabinets and tables are often relegated to the sides."

Mooi has sold chairs ranging from simple stackable chairs that once furnished an American classroom to pieces by sought-after designers and brands like Hans J. Wegner, Niels Koefoed, Ole Wanscher, Casala and

Castelli DSC. But Chien says that the provenance of each item is not as important as its appearance and he does not seek out pieces based on their signature or labels.

Other items in Fabrik exhibit Chien's whimsical — but nonetheless deliberate — approach to collecting. One of his favorite items in Fabrik is a papier-mache figure of a rotund, mustached man in an old-fashioned striped swimming suit. Other things include tin signs from railroad stations (as well as a bench from a waiting room), vintage heaters and fans and wooden horses rescued from a children's park in Taipei.

While the two Mooi stores are located in quiet residential districts, Fabrik is in a less cozy area of Taipei City, surrounded by auto parts dealers and convenience stores. But Chien notes that his neighbors also include Huashan Central Arts and Literature Park (華山中央藝文公園) on Beiping East Road (北平東路) and Taipei Artist Village (台北國際藝術村), both of which are within walking distance.

"I chose this location because I think this neighborhood will slowly turn into a district for artists," says Chien. "I didn't open Fabrik to make a lot of money. As long as it doesn't lose money, then I'm happy."

CAFE NOTES:

Ecole

Address: 6, Ln 1, Qingtian St, Taipei City (台北市青田街1巷6號)
Telephone: (02) 2322-2725 X8206
Open: 1pm to 11pm, closes at 1am on Saturdays
On the Net: ecole-cafe.blogspot.com

Mooi (Songshan)

Address: 345 Fujin St, Taipei City (台北市雷錦街345號)
Telephone: (02) 2765-5152
Open: Tuesdays to Sundays from 1pm to 9pm

STORE NOTES:

Mooi (Qingtian Street)

Address: 6, Ln 1, Qingtian St, Taipei City (台北市青田街一巷6號)
Telephone: (02) 2322-2059
Open: Tuesdays to Sundays from 1pm to 9pm

Fabrik

Address: 3, Ln 31, Shaoxing N St, Taipei City (台北市紹興北街31巷3號)
Telephone: (02) 3393-8617
Open: Tuesdays to Sundays from 1pm to 9pm