



DESIGN FURNITURE

# The outsiders

This brand, by two Italian sisters, wins for both innovation and beauty, writes **Stephen Todd**.

**Anna Lenti** started her career as a nuclear engineer working in the aerospace industry. Since joining her older sister, designer Paola, as chief executive of the Paola Lenti brand, she's been instrumental in developing some of the most out-of-this-world furniture around.

Using high-performance proprietary textiles in retina-spinning colours worked into statuesque silhouettes, the brand is famous for weather-resistant outdoor furniture, and is particularly appealing to owners of luxury superyachts.

There are the Pod lounge chairs formed from perfectly balanced, deliciously plump cushions that create amiable shapes in space. Tobit ottomans are woven from ultra-thick, sustainable cable, ideal as casual seating or as footrests. The Orbitry seat is a generous capsule that cuddles the sitter, available in a swivel-based floor version, or as a ceiling suspension swing.

Tables are created from Mount Etna lava stone glazed with viscous glass; massive umbrellas conjured from high-tech waterproof fibre; lanterns loom-woven from Rope, the foundational material of the Paola Lenti studio.

"We think of the collections as mini *scenografia*, textiles, timber, ceramics, enamels, they all work together," says Anna, speaking with *Life & Leisure* during a recent visit to Australia from Italy to inaugurate Paola Lenti showrooms in Melbourne and Sydney. "Paola started the business in 1994 with a technical innovation, adapting a felt used for transmission bags to make high durability, woven rugs. So, this idea of product and textiles based in deep research is part of the Paola Lenti DNA."

Anna joining the company as chief executive in 2000 allowed Paola to fully focus on developing the textiles that today form the backbone of the brand. Rope was launched in 2002, inspired by hiking bootlaces, informed by intelligence from the automotive industry and developed with the chemistry department of the University of Turin.

By using single materials to create textiles, Lenti ensures 100 per cent recyclability at the same time as creating thoroughly waterproof, sun-resistant materials that are incomparable in their durability.

"We normally do 1000 hours of stress testing of a material in very strong light, at extremely high temperatures combined



Clockwise from top left: Paola Lenti pieces include the Sciarra Mottainai coffee table; Orbitry swing seat; Altopiano table; Sciarra dining table; superyacht settings; Ami dining chairs and Mogambo parasol. PHOTOS: SERGIO CHIMENTO; JEFF BROWN

with water," says Anna. "We pay the utmost attention to limiting consumption by creating furniture that will last. We work with non-polluting processes and a network of local suppliers. We want to be as sustainable as possible in the belief that beauty cannot and should not be separated from ethics."

Since the launch of Rope, which is resistant to not just water but also mould and bacteria, the company has continued to innovate with textiles like Twiggy (created from striated lengthwise braids), Maris (loom-woven) and Diade (an open-weave, bonded fibre) – this last one fully patented.

As for those eye-popping colours, Anna explains that they have a catalogue of some 70 solid colours that they constantly mix "so we have about 500 possible variations".

No worries, then, that your sculpturally alluring, weather-resistant outdoor setting will be the same as the neighbours'.

Paola and Anna Lenti are the children of entrepreneurial parents who "while not artistic in the conventional sense, were naturally attracted to beauty". Allowing



their daughters to pursue the careers of their own choosing, Anna took up engineering, while Paola had enrolled at the Scuola Politecnico di Milano, the prestigious design school whose alumni include Renzo Piano, Gio Ponti, Gae Aulenti and Achille Castiglioni.

Upon graduation, Paola worked as a graphic designer, then as a set designer for fashion brands. (Milan being a double-whammy global capital of both fashion and furniture design.)

It was while working with a fashion client that she had the idea of adapting felt used in the automotive industry to create rugs. This would be a focus of her nascent company from 1994, until 1997 when she engaged

industrial designer Francesco Rota to work in tandem, applying her textile and colour innovations to 3D furniture designs.

"Given her training, the furniture would always give a graphic sensibility," notes Anna. "But collaborating with Francesco allowed Paola to articulate that sensibility in new ways."

They are winning ways: As it celebrates its 30th birthday, the house of Paola Lenti today turns over €40 million (\$66 million) in sales, 20 per cent of which is in Italy and 80 per cent to 60 other countries around the world. The 14,000 square-metre HQ in Meda, a hub of the Italian furniture industry just north of Milan, employs more than 120 people in R&D, design and production, both in-house and in local workshops.

Last year, Paola Lenti opened a new 4000 square-metre complex in a former industrial building in the Maciachini district of Milan, which in addition to a showroom houses a restaurant and enclosed gardens, an art gallery and a small boutique hotel. Already it is an It-destination for the design flock as it descends on Milan for the annual Salone del Mobile, or Furniture Fair, which takes place in April.

"The Maciachini space allows us to engage fully with Milano," says Anna. "And it permits a total immersion in the Paola Lenti aesthetic."

If Milan is not on your travel itinerary, you could always catch up with the latest Paola Lenti looks at the Monaco Yacht Show in late September, where it has been a constant presence for over a decade. There, you could kick back in the Upper Deck Lounge overlooking Port Hercules and Monaco harbour. You might well spot smatterings of Paola Lenti's designs adorning the decks of many of the superyachts below.

Or perhaps you could be content with test-driving their wares at the dedicated Paola Lenti spaces in the Dedece showrooms in Melbourne and Sydney.

"Outdoor living is such an Australian phenomenon," says Anna. "We always feel right at home here." **L&L**

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**Need to know**  
**Where** | Dedicated Paola Lenti spaces are located at Dedece showrooms in Melbourne (2 Dale Street, Cremorne) and Sydney (263 Liverpool Street, Darlinghurst).