FUTURE TOTEMS

Ahu works with a team of third-generation Turkish artisans to craft a collection inspired by Ottoman ceremonial objects

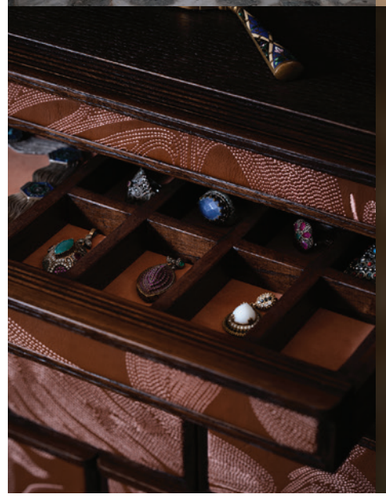


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Right, clockwise from below left: Aşk jewellery and scent cabinet; Ahu's marquetry technique uses flowing forms; carved wood writing and reading cabinet. Opposite page: Ahu founders Mevce Ciraci (left) and Eda Akaltun (right)

An almost sacred presence lingers in the cavernous chambers and echoing halls of Istanbul's 15th-century Küçük Mustafa Pasa Hammam. Once one of the city's oldest Turkish baths, it now plays host to arts and culture exhibitions. The latest furniture collection by Istanbul- and London-based studio Ahu was showcased here: a series of totems, created through a fusion of traditional craftsmanship and contemporary design.

Inspired by *nahıl*, a temporary tree-like ceremonial decoration used in Ottoman-era celebrations, the duo's first solo exhibition in Istanbul featured a limited-edition collection of the same name, reimagining conventional furniture as monolithic forms created through artisanal wood-carving, marquetry, traditional stonework and embroidery techniques. One such piece is Cem, a 150-centimetre-tall sculpture composed of fragrant oak and hand-embroidered *kutnu* fabric panels, akin to an octagonal prism. Once opened, it reveals a perfectly functional tea cabinet.

Much like the Ottoman *nahıl*, which showcased the talents of its artisans, every piece designed by Ahu reveals the integrity of Turkish craftsmanship, revised through a contemporary lens. "[This project] reflects the importance of craftsmanship, which is at the root of our work," says Mevce Ciraci, who co-founded the design studio alongside Eda Akaltun. "It emphasises the concept of craft and the notion of repeating a technique until perfection is achieved, which is very valuable to us as we work with craftsmen who have honed their skills in this way. We want to transform these traditional techniques by combining them with our own skills."

At the heart of the 15-piece collection is an aquatic motif created with the studio's own *ebru* marbling work, which uses digital enhancement. The motifs are repeated in every piece and are different each time, brought to life by a select group of Istanbul's third-generation artisans.

"The craftspeople we choose are always unique to Anatolia, Turkey and its geography," says Ciraci. "It takes time because not everyone is open to experimentation, especially those involved in traditional and classical crafts. They have spent years perfecting their techniques and can be reluctant to stray from traditional motifs."

Ahu's own *ebru* motifs decorate cabinet panels, upholstered benches and stools, delicate marquetry-embellished marble coffee tables and ash-wood dining tables. However, it is through the duo's hand-woven wool carpets that this technique truly shines, at times reimagining the classic Ottoman *lale* (tulip), and at other times referencing the *nar* (pomegranate), swirling in dark red, black and white. Here, movement is captured in static objects.

"In traditional Turkish handicrafts, the motifs are very geometric, so the eye is not accustomed to seeing the fluidity and the way our designs emerge from the marbling," explains Ciraci. "Breaking this perspective is what makes the objects so different." *ahustudio.com*