

how to spend it

The e-stores helping to make buying furniture a breeze

A new crop of niche e-tailers are now a go-to resource for finding highly individual, handcrafted home furnishings that stand out from the crowd.

Emma O'Kelly reports

Buying quality home furnishings has come a long way since the days when it involved traipsing to far-flung showrooms or trawling Google and Pinterest and bookmarking hefty catalogues. The process for discovery is now vastly improved with aggregate websites that offer homeowners a streamlined search of multiple brands and transparent pricing. Clippings, for example, is one of the UK's top e-retailers. It has 3.5 million products for sale from 850 design brands, from Vitra to Hay, and offers quick delivery and an installation service. Founded in 2014, its sales have grown by over 400 per cent year on year since then, and it is the go-to website for interior designers, architects, property developers and savvy consumers looking for everything from tables to teacups.



From left: Jérôme Faillant-Dumas Eléphant armchair, €5,500, from The Invisible Collection. Giuseppe Rivadossi walnut Reims desk, £15,160, from Artemest

With the online spotlight on them in this way, designers need to be sure that the portal that presents them to the world is the right fit – for their product, personality and ethos. Like the other 40 designers who sell through The Invisible Collection, French designer Pierre Gonalons has multiple outlets for his work: Paris's Gallery Yves Gastou sells his limited editions; he produces furniture and lighting under his own label, Ascète; and he also works for many brands. "But I don't sell everywhere," he says. "The person, the moment and the place have to be right. The Invisible Collection is a nice story, a strong concept and the best platform for my products." Striking pieces by Gonalons on the site include the Sienna coffee table (€3,000) in Carrara, Marquina and Bardiglio marble, and the Sunset lamp (from €650).

Most of the items on The Invisible Collection see co-founders Anna Zaoui and Isabelle Dubern work with designers to sell either custom editions of their signature pieces or those designed for a private client project that were never ultimately produced. The idea for the site took hold when Dubern, former creative director of Dior Maison, wanted a custom version of a Papa Bear chair (from £10,000) by French interior designer Pierre Yovanovitch. "I called Pierre to order one," she says, "but he said I would need to hire him to create an entire project, which wasn't on the agenda!" Dubern discovered, however, that he was designing one for her friend Zaoui's New York apartment and, as a favour, Zaoui added an extra one to her order. It became clear to the duo that although designers might be happy to make a one-off commission for a client, they often don't have the administrative support to arrange elements like shipping, delivery and installation, and so the commission is turned down. "This is where we get involved," says Zaoui. For the likes of India Mahdavi or Jérôme Faillant-Dumas, having another discerning outlet that promotes existing designs, liaises with clients and ships the final piece is a no-brainer. This autumn a selection of Up lights (from £2,300) in different finishes from French architect duo Studio KO and 12 pieces from French interior designer Vincent Darré, among them The Conversation armchair (£3,000), join the mix. "Clients say we have a very French viewpoint," says Zaoui. "Very chic in terms of proportion and shape and less standardised than in the US or UK." Almost all the 300 pieces for sale, such as the Eléphant chair (€5,500) or the Sofa We (from £6,665), are by French designers who work with their own craftsmen, but the aim, says Dubern, is to build an Invisible Collection network of craftsmen across Europe.

Keeping products fresh and exciting is the biggest challenge for e-retailers. As larger sites like Yoox are often the first port of call for many design houses launching new collections (this November it releases exclusive versions of Achille Castiglioni's bestselling Lampadina lamp, £72, in red, white and green; a previously unrealised Tema & Variazioni plate, £100, from the Fornasetti archive; and a Mouse lamp, £60, in gold and silver by Seletti), the boutique sites must refresh their offerings in original ways. Next year, Maison Numen is debuting a capsule collection from a number of its makers, inspired by the Spanish conquistadors, and The Invisible Collection is working with the family of late Brazilian designer Ricardo Fasanello to relaunch iconic pieces from the archive. "We see Fasanello as the Brazilian answer to Pierre Paulin," says Zaoui.



From left: Pierre Gonalons lacquered brass Sunset lamp, from €650, from The Invisible Collection. Mingardo iron Elettra vase, £304, from Maison Numen