

# EXPO

WRITER

*Julia Lasica*

If the room you're sitting in contains furniture made from wood, there's a strong chance that the raw material came from Poland. More than a third of the country's landscape is forest. These plentiful resources, combined with an entrepreneurial zeal that's symptomatic of a people whose opportunities were once limited by communist rule, have helped to transform Poland into the world's third-largest exporter of furniture, with brands including Ikea and Fritz Hansen making the most of this manufacturing powerhouse. We travel to the country's woodworking hub to meet the people who have turned carpentry into a catalyst for Poland's burgeoning economy.

PHOTOGRAPHER

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# SPLINTER GROUP

In late winter the weather conditions at Kleniewski Tartak can make work difficult. Surrounded by the dark forests of southeastern Poland, the sawmill is covered in snow when MONOCLE arrives. And yet it is buzzing with activity. Trucks rumble in, loaded with fresh supplies of wood, and cranes whir into action, extending their claws into the air.

The busy scene is emblematic of Poland. The country's economy has flourished since the fall of communism in 1989 and, with more than a third of its landscape covered in forests, international furniture brands across the globe have taken note of Poland's plentiful resources and robust financial system. It's a situation that has helped to transform the country into the world's third-largest exporter of furniture. Kleniewski Tartak is prospering.

Success hasn't been effortless. "When I took over the sawmill from my father in 2017, we were mainly selling to the domestic market," says Kleniewski Tartak's owner, Waldemar Kleniewski. "I needed to show international clients that we were a modern company." Buying Italian and Swedish machines to modernise production, Kleniewski shifted to processing raw oak and decentralised decision-making to employees. It involved breaking with the standards that had existed in Poland for decades, says Kleniewski. "It is the right way to do business."

At 29, Kleniewski is young for a sawmill owner. But his entrepreneurial energy is common across the country. Down a winding road through the forest, MONOCLE finds two of Kleniewski's local customers: Beata Woloszyn and Damian Wasyl, a young couple who co-founded the furniture company Raw just over a decade ago.

Their path to establishing the brand is atypical for the furniture industry. Both born in the small town of Tomaszow Lubelski, it took moving hundreds of kilometres away to Warsaw – and in the case of Wasyl to Rotterdam – to realise their true calling. "I'm a third-generation carpenter," says Wasyl. "But while my predecessors had to focus on filling in the gaps left in the market by communism, making everything from fences to doors, we can focus on the current shortage: affordable, high-quality furniture made from natural materials." The pair ultimately returned to their hometown to set up Raw and Woloszyn says that they received an immediate, positive reaction from the community and customers. "Poles want furniture made in Poland now, not Germany or Italy," he says. "That desire is increasing around Europe too."

With only a handful of workers, Raw is on the smaller end of Polish furniture brands. It is in the country's centre, in a triangle between the three cities of Lodz, Wroclaw and Poznan, where manufacturing for major international brands, including Denmark's Fritz Hansen and Sweden's Ikea, can be found. Also in this fertile production region is Converis, a company dedicated to rotomoulding, a plastic moulding process used to create large pieces of furniture. "Half of our customers are domestic and the other half international," says Converis director Tomasz Dyszkant, inspecting a stack of multicoloured pieces, which will soon be made into a playground in Israel. "A Danish company designed them, we manufacture, then they are shipped off across the world."

When MONOCLE visits, the Converis team is creating Polish brand Vzor's iconic chair, RM58, by pouring resin into metal moulds and setting it in an oven heated to 220C.

"Designers are on the lookout for new possibilities and technologies," says Dyszkant, who is overseeing the work. "There are exciting developments on the horizon."

In another factory, Claudie Design, managers attest to the importance of the wider region too – specifically Ukrainian workers. Though there was a large influx following Russia's invasion in 2022, they had long been filling gaps in Poland's workforce. Producing its own brand furniture, the factory carries out orders for brands both foreign and domestic.

While manufacturing takes place in the regions, Warsaw is the country's design capital. In the city's downtown, at Polish brand 366 Concept's showroom, the sense of a place buzzing with international connections is obvious. It is the perfect setting for their namesake piece: the 366 armchair. Designed by Jozef Chierowski in 1960, the chair instantly became an icon of Polish design, says the brand's co-founder, Maciek Cypriak. "But it couldn't break onto the international stage because of communist rule. Our design heritage remained unrecognised for too long." Now reconnected to the world, the showroom's Parisian feel is deliberate – after all, France is the brand's biggest market.

And while there's a design heritage to be tapped into, there's also an urgency to secure Poland's design future – an ambition continued by the School of Form, Poland's leading design institution. Part of SWPS University, School of Form was founded in 2011 by Piotr Voelkel, a Polish businessman. "Though Voelkel had a furniture business based here in Poland, he couldn't find any well-educated designers in the country to work with," says the school's artistic director, Agnieszka Jacobson-Cielecka. The school was formed in collaboration with Lidewij Edelkoort, former director of Eindhoven's Design Academy.

As former artistic director of Lodz Furniture Festival and long-time curator, Jacobson-Cielecka is used to bringing people together. "We wanted to create a juncture where different mediums, experiences and influences meet," she says. Students are invited to meet international designers several times a year. Polish tutors with experience abroad are also sought out. Down the corridor, Londoner Stas Macleod is working with students in the metal workshop, while Westminster School of Architecture alumna Megi Malinowska is teaching product design.

In the carpentry room, MONOCLE catches up with Szymon Pasierb, head of the school's prototyping workshops. Returning to Poland after studying at London Metropolitan University, Pasierb is focused on reviving Poland's forgotten education traditions. "With the changes of the past decades, Poland lost its craft schools," says Pasierb. "But if you read the papers and listen to people's conversations, you can sense that there is a need for them." Pointing towards the northern port city of Gdansk and the southern, mountainous town of Zakopane, Pasierb says that the country has its own craft traditions to be proud of.

An hour's drive out of the capital and MONOCLE finds evidence of that craft bubbling away. Domenico Russo and Kaja Alaszkievicz met in Italy, when Alaszkievicz was on a university exchange programme from Warsaw. Moving to the UK together after graduation proved to be the catalyst for establishing their own business: in London, Russo stumbled across a furniture workshop in the city's east that inspired him to swap a desk for a workbench. "My





Lorry bound for Kleniewski Tartak with fresh goods



The modern way to slice logs



The Boegli horizontal band saw in action



Processed wood in the sawmill's drying chambers



Finishing touches at the Converis factory



Table saw being used with Raw's customary precision



Made-to-order side tables awaiting shipping



Damian Wasyl and Beata Woloszyn in their office



The Raw workshop team is small but tight-knit



Simplicity that highlights oak is key to Raw's designs



Kaja Alaszkiwicz and Domenico Russo, the Polish-Italian duo behind Nudo



Pieces await polishing at Nudo's workshop



School of Form's artistic director, Agnieszka Jacobson-Cielecka



Tutor Estera Mrowka in School of Form's printing workshop



Metal-working technician Stas Macleod



Pupil in the robotics workshop



Megi Malinowska, product design teacher



Rolls of textiles in Claudie Design's factory



Upholstering in action



366 Concept chairs awaiting further production



Meeting of textures in Maja Ganszyniec's design



Cloth being sorted for sewing



366 Concept's Parisian-style showroom





Nudo's pieces deliberately evoke the brand name's original Italian meaning

grandfather was a woodworker back in Italy and all my memories came flooding back," says Russo. "I realised that I needed to make a change."

The couple set up their furniture brand Nudo in 2018 and chose the Warsaw region as the location. "It's not as expensive as London and there is a feeling that things are happening here," says Alaskiewicz. The mix of Polish craft and Italian heritage has proved essential for success.

In Warsaw's Mokotow district, Maja Ganszyniec, Polish designer and founder of Nurt, greets MONOCLE at her brand's showroom. "Back in 2000, it wasn't just that Poland was a different country; it was a different universe," she says. Being a satellite state of the USSR had frozen the country in time, Ganszyniec explains, depriving it of everything from clothes to cars. "Ikea had started manufacturing in our country in the 1960s but we weren't even able to buy the pieces they were making."

However, unlike so many others, Ganszyniec grew up with a glimpse behind the Iron Curtain. "My childhood home was a beautiful 1930s villa," she says. "It was filled

with furniture from all over Europe. I knew that things had been different once."

Studying abroad in Milan and then at London's Royal College of Art, Ganszyniec felt instinctively that her country had something to offer. "Often when people want to compliment my designs or Polish design, they'll say it looks Scandinavian. But that's a back-handed compliment," she says. "We share a sea, nature, architectural styles, history; of course the designs are similar." She has made it her life's work to achieve recognition for Poland's own style and aesthetic. "When someone says 'Polish design', people don't have famous names or iconic pieces to relate to. Our job is to build up that picture."

There are challenges to maintain momentum but Ganszyniec says that Poland will always prosper because of its people's innate curiosity. "Imagine you are in the most remote place on Earth," she says. "You think that there is no one there but lift up a rock and you'll find a Polish person. We were held back for so long. But now that we're free, no one can stop us." — 