

Interiors

Rattan renaissance: why the 1970s material is cool again

Bamboo, cane and rattan furniture, for many years relegated to the garden, is back with fresh designs and retro originals



The Bohemian 72 Collection by Gabriella Crespi, reproduced by Copenhagen-based brand GUBI

Rory Robertson APRIL 1 2022

For many, rattan, cane and bamboo furniture will conjure visions of dated conservatories. But this retro material is finding its feet again with a contemporary audience — with new designs and old.

The Copenhagen-based design brand GUBI has announced it will be working with Archivio Gabriella Crespi to produce the Bohemian 72 Collection — a lounge chair, three-seater sofa, ottoman and floor lamp — that was originally designed by Gabriella Crespi in 1972.

Derived from the Malay word *rotan*, rattan encompasses more than 600 species of climbing palms, the majority of which are found in hot and humid Indonesian rainforests and archipelagos.

A surprisingly tough and durable material, the inner fibrous reed-like section of a rattan can make sturdy supports, while the outer bark can be stripped and used for weaving and more intricate caning. It's also sustainable, regenerating every five to seven years.

A series of bulbous-looking designs, the Bohemian 72 and the Rising Sun Collection — another of Crespi's rattan designs, made shortly after — were originally commissioned for the summer residence of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the last shah of Iran. However, they were only ever “produced in very limited quantities”, with the original pieces now proving “difficult to find”, says Elisabetta Crespi, daughter of Gabriella, who manages the archive. The collection coincides with what would have been Gabriella Crespi's centenary year.

Having opened a showroom in Rome's Palazzo Cenci in 1964, and later in Milan's Via Montenapoleone, Crespi counted Audrey Hepburn, Hubert de Givenchy and Gianni Versace as regular visitors, says Elisabetta.

Despite its outdoorsy vibe, rattan is not just for the garden. An original pair of Crespi Large Fungo table lamps from the Rising Sun Collection, complete with rattan shades and dating from 1973, is currently listed for sale on [1st Dibs.com](https://www.1stdibs.com) for \$138,500.



A pair of original Gabriella Crespi table lamps © 1stDibs

Gabriella Crespi had a passion for what her daughter terms “contrasts”: creating objects from gold, silver, precious woods and Murano glass alongside “less precious and more humble materials” such as rattan and bamboo.

[Rattan](#) is a surprisingly flexible and adaptable material and it is appealing to new designers too. It can be bent (the thicker variations of rattan can even be drilled), making it ideal for sculpting curves.

Jakarta-based designer Alvin Tjitrowirjo founded his furniture brand Alvin T in 2006 intending to combine Indonesia's rich cultural heritage with a fresh artisanal approach. Rattan is core to his work, and the Malya dining chair (designed in 2008 and launched in 2009) is one of Tjitrowirjo's most notable earlier pieces. He describes the curvaceous, bent rattan sections as "a blooming, crown-like structure". The design epitomises the characteristics of rattan, "embracing its blemishes but exemplifying its flexibility and strength", he says.



Alvin T's Malya dining chair

There is a common misconception that rattan and wicker are the same thing. They are not. Rattan refers to the natural material, whereas wicker refers to a specific style of weaving and technique.

But some artists and designers, such as Brooklyn and Colombia-based Chris Wolston, refer to their work more generally as wicker and see the terms as "interchangeable", in Wolston's words. In Colombia, he says, the weavers call it *mimbres*, which translates as wicker. Wolston's wicker work started with designs such as the Nalgona chair, which, he says, "hugs you back".

Wolston's latest pieces, including the wicker-edged Body Mirror and Hand Chandelier, were included in his show *Temperature's Rising with The Future Perfect* in late 2021. Wolston describes the body of work as a "meditation on escapism and fantasy", which pushes rattan and wicker to new, sculptural heights. Working with wicker allows him to create curvy, otherworldly surfaces such as the Supermodel chair and the Paramo cabinet.



Hand Chandelier by Chris Wolston

As Gabriella Crespi did during the 1970s, Wolston is also beginning to combine a “language of luxury materials” in his wicker and rattan work. Bronze, painted copper detailing and fur panes shine through on pieces like the Oro dining chair.

There is a more accessible way to get hold of rattan, however. Paul Middlemiss, founder of vintage emporium Merchant & Found, has noticed an increase in interest.

Aside from its sustainability, he suggests its rise in popularity is also because “many of us have grown up with it”. Good pieces in decent condition are hard to find though: Middlemiss says 1970s designs from Bonacina, Franco Albini, Viggo Boesen, Joe Colombo or Gio Ponti are “the Holy Grail”.

His advice is to “keep an eye out for simple, generic pieces that were just beautifully made and have an unusual shape or design,” he says. “You don’t have to break the bank.”

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