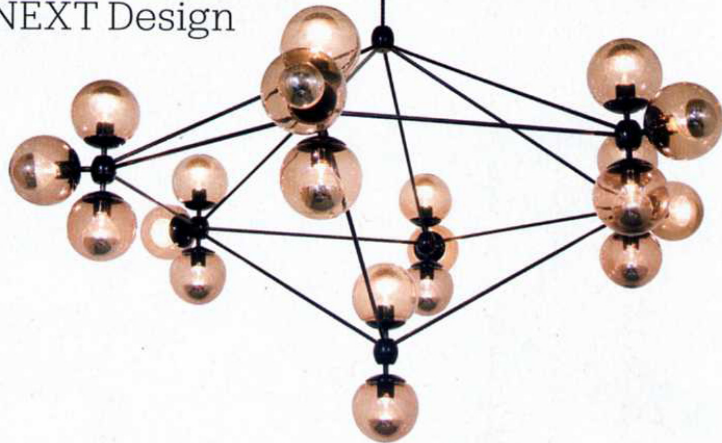


# Roll & Hill

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## NEXT Design



## Let There Be Light

Jason Miller's Roll & Hill wants to be that all-too-rare thing: an accessible maker of American design.

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BY JULIE TARASKA

✦ **JASON MILLER** was puzzled: Here he was, one of the most promising furniture designers to come out of the U.S. in decades, and yet it was mostly Europeans who wanted to produce his work. He surveyed the U.S. industry and was startled by what he saw—or, rather, didn't. There were tiny manufacturers targeting the superrich, and there were mass-market megabrands. But where were the medium-size design firms so common on the other side of the Atlantic—small enough to take daring artistic chances, yet big enough to survive a commercial misstep or two? "We're incredibly progressive in virtually every other aspect of product culture," he says. "Why, in this particular one, are we considered country bumpkins? It doesn't make any sense to me."

Miller decided to fill the void. Debuting in May at the International Contemporary

Furniture Fair in New York, his new manufacturing company, Roll & Hill, will focus on lighting that targets what one might call the "mass elite." He believes the Brooklyn-based firm, which showcases work by up-and-coming American designers, will create a new model in the U.S. by emphasizing homegrown high design. "Most products are made in Europe and work well there because those citizens understand the entry points," Miller says. "Our references are different."

Ironically, Miller's inspiration is European. Largely because of manufacturing costs, most U.S. furniture makers come in one of two forms. They either rely on huge volumes, such as Herman Miller, which cleared \$1.6 billion in sales in fiscal 2009. Or they're small-batch, selling a few, often bespoke items at stratospheric prices (think of the products stocked by haute boutiques like New York's Moss). Roll & Hill is targeting the middle. Miller envisions a designer-focused brand that would be the U.S. equivalent of Dutchman Marcel Wanders's Moooi, reaching affluent consumers and generating enough revenue to help cultivate the next generation of American talent.

Miller understands the breadth of the U.S. spectrum,

having worked as a studio assistant for artist Jeff Koons and an art director at ad giant Ogilvy & Mather. His commercial savvy drove him to lighting. "It's something people are willing to pay a little bit more money for, and something in which they want to see a designer's hand," he says. (In 2009, lighting produced half of Moooi's sales.) Margins on Roll & Hill's fixtures, priced in the \$2,000 to \$10,000 range, will be north of 50%, compared to the 10% to 30% typical for furniture. And unlike most furniture, decorative lighting can sell to residential, commercial, and contract clients, so Roll & Hill can reach more customers with fewer products.

Roll & Hill is producing lamps on demand, with some parts made abroad and final assembly in Brooklyn. That approach reduces labor costs, keeps inventory low, and allows a degree of quality control nearly impossible if it were done entirely overseas.

Miller is already exporting to Europe—which is only partly about national pride. "If we make crappy products that are 'Yeah, rah-rah American,' they're not going to sell," he says. "But if we make genuinely good products that appeal to the American market, then I think they'll have an appeal outside the U.S. too." ☐