Pictured: david/nicolas, founders David Raffoul and Nicolas Moussallem, in their Milan studio, opened for the first time to reveal the La Boiserie wall system in situ.

DAVID/NICOLAS

LOCATION
VIA S. MAURILIO, 1920123 MILANO MI, ITALY

PHOTOGRAPHY
GIULIO GHIRARDI, DAVID RAFFOUL

Opening their Milan project space for the first time during Milan Design Week, the international design studio david/nicolas, founded by David Raffoul and Nicolas Moussallem, presented the installation La Boiserie. Equally decorative and functional—a balance the pair has been refining for the past ten years—the artisanally crafted timber-panelling 'system' responds to diverse contemporary living spaces and lifestyles. A new chapter in the studio's material language, La Boiserie reimagines traditional woodwork through a present-day architectural lens.

You shared that La Boiserie represents a new chapter in your material language. How did this concept of a boiserie 'system' originate?

DR: We first had the idea when we were working on an interior project in 2014. It was a large intervention in a heritage Parisian apartment, which we had to restore according to its historical character. During this project, we worked with the renowned boiserie craftsman Guillaume Féau, whose archive really impressed us. We had an additional apartment project to complete after this one, which was extremely modern in contrast. In fact, it looked a bit like a hospital, with two large empty walls we had to work with. Boiserie was already on our mind, given the work we had just done, so we were inspired to translate a more contemporary expression of boiserie into this new space.

We decided to explore the idea of verticality. The verticality you see here in La Boiserie is inspired by the architectural proportions of our region. These proportions are very elongated and elegant, with slender panels. Combined with the idea of a customisable product incorporating elements such as inlays and shelving, this was how the concept of a system originated.

So we could say the product was created in direct response to the needs of contemporary living spaces?

NM: Definitely. It was born out of a need to adapt a space in a project we were working on. It was a solution, and I think that's what is beautiful about it. It responds to how people live today; as spaces change, it adapts accordingly. The product's design continues to evolve, and it remains a solution for transforming interiors.

For example, we were working on an interior project in Dubai a few years ago, and the residence had these enormous spaces that felt like a football field. We wanted to create a dining room off the living area, but to do so, we needed to establish a stronger sense of intimacy and limit how far the eye travelled through the space. We created a free-standing, floor-to-ceiling boiserie structure in the middle of the living room, with a window-like opening and integrated cupboards. This created a sense of connection between the spaces while also partitioning them. We have also completed projects in which an entire room—a bar room, for example—was based on our boiserie system. The possibilities are endless.

Can you explain more about how you refined the product's balance of decoration and functionality?

DR: We started working on boiserie panels in 35cm modules, focusing on sculpting the edges and exploring marquetry techniques. It became an ongoing process of testing and experimentation with patterns and techniques applied to the wood. Alongside this decorative character, we ultimately created a product that lets you completely transform a wall to suit your needs. For example, you can transform a wall into a bookshelf, or customise it for a dining room with suspended shelving or cabinetry. It was this versatility we were looking for: the ability for the system to adapt from the dining room to the reading room, or the living room.

What about the relationship between historical inspiration and architectural innovation?

NM: We have long been fascinated by the materiality of architectural elements—whether in stone or wood—such as the historic French boiseries found in 19th-century churches. There is always a sculptural quality that intrigues us. In the context of the interior projects we mentioned earlier, we wanted to create something more contained and spatially coherent; something versatile in a contemporary setting and transferable from one interior environment to another. From the beginning, we wanted to create something that had both sculptural and functional qualities.

When we worked on the first boiserie, our clients were in their late seventies, and it was their first modern home. They didn't want anything too overwhelming. We saw the boiserie system as a way of engaging with hardwood beyond flat panelling. Over the past 10 years of developing this system, we have continually refined both its decorative effects and the ways it can be assembled architecturally, ensuring versatility.

Can you walk us through the production process for your in-house boiserie?

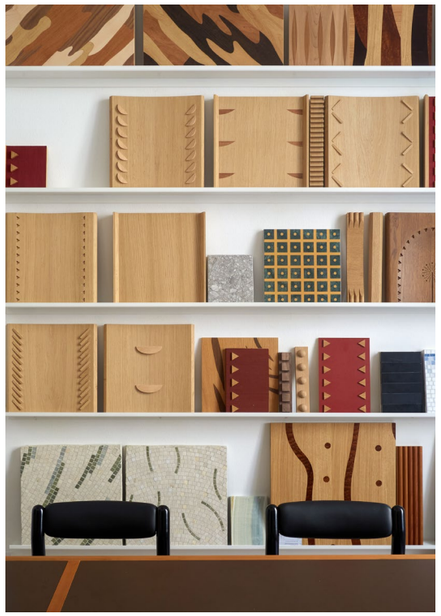
DR: Most of the boiserie products we create begin with a piece of hardwood. This must be chosen carefully because there are different dimensions and characteristics to consider. For example, the available surface area within the hardwood for carving, sculpting and engraving is limited. We had to find the right sculptors who could work with the material. Initially, we worked with a single craftsman; now we collaborate with three workshops, each specialising in a different stage of the production process. One focuses solely on engraving, while another is dedicated to assembly, for example. We have undertaken extensive research with the production team, and the process has evolved from small-scale production into something much larger.

With each new version of the product, we continue refining the system, responding to elements that require adjustment. For example, issues relating to height led to the solution of crowning, while alignment and orientation challenges led us to work with angles. There is always something pushing the production process to evolve. It becomes an ongoing dialogue between challenges and solutions.

La Boiserie, the installation at your project space, also represented a dialogue between visual art and architecture. Can you explain more about this?

NM: Presenting artworks, books and objects alongside the boiserie was very important. Without these elements, it's difficult to fully understand the product or visualise it within an interior environment. You can't connect with its function. With this presentation, we wanted to convey that regardless of where the product is installed, it takes on a different personality depending on its surroundings. Every client has their own vision for integrating the boiserie into their home.

DR: The presentation featured a curation of artworks from a private collection that didn't overpower the boiserie or distract from it. Rather, we selected works that complemented the product's narrative and reflected our own sensibilities. We included a Robert Mapplethorpe photograph—NYC Contemporary Ballet (1980)—on the main wall. The presence of hands within the image is very powerful and symbolic of our work. We also presented a 19th-century religious icon with gold-leaf detailing as a nod to the past; we are continually drawn to the tension between different periods. Another work was De Natura Deorum (2013) by Carlos Aires, a gold-leaf and digital print. The eyes featured in the piece gave the installation a more intimate atmosphere. Together, the works communicated naturally and formed an authentic extension of our creative world. They contributed to both the character of the product and the atmosphere of the space.



This page: The studio's installation featured hand-drawn sketches of La Boiserie in projects and conceptual details from the product's development, among the myriad samples on display. **Opposite page:** Above: Artworks from a private collection featured on the La Boiserie shelves, calling to the past, including a 19th-century religious icon with gold-leaf detailing and Carlos Aires' De Natura Deorum (2013), a gold-leaf and digital print that focuses on the eyes. Below: Developed in 35cm boiserie modules, the system explores sculpted edges and marquetry techniques through an ongoing process of pattern testing and experimentation on timber. Centred on verticality, the tall timber product allows the client to transform walls to suit their needs.