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MEN'S FASHION

Blade Runners

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Power Tools A leuku by the blacksmith Josef Laiti (left), and its reinvention by Gijs Bakker. (img: Chikako Harada)

Maybe it's because I spent so much of my childhood rampaging through the woods pretending to be one of Robin Hood's outlaws or the last Mohican, but I think of old-fashioned knives (the sort you'd use to survive in the wild rather than slaughter rival drug dealers) as being noble rather than scary.

I'm not alone. Anyone who wants to play spot-the-designer at the Milan Furniture Fair should skip the fair itself and head for G. Lorenzi, the lovely old coltellinaio, as the Italians call cutlery shops, on the Via Montenapoleone. You'll find lots of boldface men (and women) drooling over beautifully made handles and blades.

The knife is a rare mix of precision and sensuality, two irresistible design qualities. Functionally, it's remorseless. If the blade isn't ground into exactly the right form, it won't cut. The same rigor is required of the handle and sheath, which have to be easy to grip even in extreme conditions. Yet knives can be made from very seductive materials: metal, bone, wood, leather. There is also the romantic symbolism. "A knife is a

tool — one of the most ancient tools, in fact," said the German designer Konstantin Grcic. "It can kill but also save lives. That's what's so fascinating about it."

Not surprising, then, that Grcic and 21 other designers, including the Briton Jasper Morrison and the French brothers Ronan and Erwan Bouroullec, jumped at the chance to create their own versions of one of the most ruggedly romantic knives, the leuku. That's the Finnish name for the long-bladed knife that has been used for centuries by the Sami, a semi-nomadic indigenous people living in the icy northern edge of Europe.

Many Sami still survive on hunting, fishing and herding, and depend on the leuku as an all-purpose tool for chopping firewood, skinning animals and building shelters. A typical leuku has a slender 7- or 8-inch blade with a bone or birch handle, which is chunky enough to be gripped by hands that are heavily gloved or numbed by cold. A reindeer leather sheath makes it easy to spot a leuku if you drop it. Losing one in the wild can be disastrous for the owner.



More leuku reinventions by Jasper Morrison (left), and Ronan and Erwan Bouroullec. (img: Chikako Harada)

Making such a robust tool requires considerable skill in the traditional techniques that Sami craftsmen have honed for centuries. Those skills are now dying, which is why the Finnish designer Simo Heikkilä is trying to revive them. “The leuku is a beautiful and functional object, pure in shape, well balanced and simply composed,” he said. “Locally developed objects like this are vanishing all over the world.”

He began by organizing a workshop for students at the forge of one of Finland’s great leuku makers, the blacksmith Josef Laiti. The next step was to invite international designers to reinterpret the original 7-inch knife. The results were exhibited in Finland last year and will be shown again at the Saint-Étienne Design Biennial in France this fall, when a book on the project is to be published.

Most of the designers remained faithful to the original leuku while interpreting it in their own way. “It didn’t seem right to try and redesign something which has its shape from hundreds of years of trial and error,” said Morrison, who is known for his subtly minimalist design style. “I simply tried to imagine what a

beautiful leuku would look like, refining the blade and handle shape, and giving it a sheath with a simple way of attaching it.”

The Bouroullec brothers showed similar restraint, but used bone — “the most sensual of the original leuku materials,” as Ronan Bouroullec put it — for both the handle and the sheath.

By contrast, Grcic, who always starts the design process by analyzing how the object will be used, looked for ways of improving the leuku functionally, and he found a flaw. “It seemed difficult to pull the original knife from its sheath,” he said. “So I added a lash on the end of the handle. Your finger can go through a hole in the lash to pull out the knife in an emergency.”

By puncturing both the knife’s handle and sheath with a series of holes, revealing the part of the blade that’s usually hidden beneath the handle, the Dutch designer Gijs Bakker hoped to highlight the craftsmanship of the knife. “The hidden part shows off the technique, but because it’s considered to be ugly and, of course, can’t be held in the hand, it’s always covered,” he said. “My design is a sort of homage to the blacksmith.”