

Two weeks ago the world's design industry gathered for the 52nd annual Salone del Mobile. The Milan furniture fair is a six-day, city-wide celebration of design innovation where the biggest names launch their latest products, a new generation of designers hopes to be discovered, and emerging trends reveal themselves.

This year designers were unanimous in their affection for natural materials, particularly marble in myriad shades. Exhibition halls were cluttered with Carrara-topped coffee tables by brands including E15, &Tradition and Normann Copenhagen. Most impressive was by Jim Hannon-Tan, the Australian designer behind the 3 Signs nest of tables made from a single block of marble for the new Milanese design shop L'Eclettico.

The most ambitious use of marble was by the Spanish designer Patricia Urquiola, who worked with the Italian marble specialist Budri. When the company's warehouses in Mirandola, northern Italy, were hit by an earthquake less than 12 months ago, Urquiola was given free rein to create something from the tons of smashed marble. The result is Earthquake 5.9 (a reference to the scale of the quake), a collection of wall and floor coverings, shelving and geometrically skew-whiff tables made using more than 40 different marbles. It fits in nicely with the continuing 'upcycling' trend for designs made from discarded materials.

Seams of brass (and, to a lesser extent, copper) were to be found in abundance. The London-based Cypriot Michael Anastassiades, whose work featured in several exhibitions during the week, created elegant table lamps and ceiling lights whose opaline glass globes teetered on brass structures. Tom Dixon has long been a fan of these richly toned metals and this year used both in a range of wall lights. Particularly charming was a polished brass tea set for his Eclectic accessories range. On a far grander scale was Dixon's Mass coat stand and bookshelf: oversized, Brutalist-looking pieces of furniture clad in brass, described by Dixon as 'huge chunks of heavyweight, metallic minimalism'.

Cork popped up here and there, most pleasingly in the form of the oak and cork Drifted chair by the Norwegian designer Lars Beller Fjetland for Discipline – a new Italian brand to keep an eye on. Elsewhere bamboo, rattan and silk were incorporated into crystal chandelier designs by the Brazilian brothers Fernando and Humberto Campana for Baccarat. More unusual still were a dining table

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Material games Mass coat stand, clad in brass (left), by Tom Dixon (tomdixon.net); Get Set table light and pendant in brass and mouth-blown opaline by Michael Anastassiades (michaelanastassiades.com)



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and wardrobe made from woven banana fibre, as seen at Armani/Casa's theatrical presentation.

The 'minimalism' Dixon mentioned was very much in the air, giving today's arch exponents a chance to shine. Konstantin Grcic's Traffic range of wire-framed furniture for Magis looked as though it could have been produced for the Bauhaus. Jasper Morrison applied his no-frills approach to several new products, including an ingenious cable tidy, ideal for our increasingly gadget-abundant homes. The Swedish studio Claesson Koivisto Rune's produced Kelly, a range of block-coloured chairs inspired by the work of the American minimalist artist Ellsworth Kelly.

Each of these minimalists also appeared in the Just Black collection by Marsotto Edizione. Under the creative direction of the British designer James Irvine (who died in February) the marble firm released black Marquina versions of products that had previously only been available in white Carrara. The effect was severe but undeniably beautiful.

In fact, if one colour united designers of every age and from every corner of the globe, it was black. It was nigh impossible to avoid, with highlights including a new black version of Vincent van Duysen's pottery range for the Belgian accessories firm When Objects Work, and the toadstool-shaped Shelter standard light by HolmbäckNordentoft for Normann Copenhagen.

The Finnish brand Artek, set up by Alvar Aalto in 1935, was wholly committed to black this year. It unveiled the reborn Lukki range, which was designed in the late 1940s and 50s by Ilmari Tapiovaara. It takes its name from the Finnish word for a species of spider, and the four seats certainly share arachnoid qualities with their black bentwood 'bodies' and spindly metal legs.

While there is an inevitable appetite for all things new during the week, this trend for reissuing archive pieces shows no sign of abating as companies such as Artek exploit the commercial potential of their heritage. Equally appealing must be the money saved in avoiding the expensive and often lengthy process of research and development that goes into each new design.

There was no shortage of wit and whimsy from the legions of young designers who came to the Salone del Mobile with hopes of being discovered. Examples included Gao Xhuong, a student at the Beijing University of Technology College of Art & Design, who deconstructed a Burberry-checked shirt to cover a table whose shape was inspired by those from the ancient Song dynasty (960-1279). From Japan came an example of crafty loveliness by Chisato Ishikawa and her company 117/ichiichinana, which presented a range of snowy-white knitted panels to cover the glass panes found in front doors. And the promising Czech duo Jan Plechác and Henry Wielgus worked with the Bohemian crystal specialist Lasvit to create six pendant lights whose shapes are based on the silhouettes of chandeliers from settings as grand as La Scala and the Bolshoi. It was a design that spoke of having a new perspective on things, which is what we were all in Milan searching for.



Cork pops up Pianis pendant light in cork, and Drifted chair by Lars Beller Fjetland for Discipline (discipline.eu)



Less is more ES 01 socket by Jasper Morrison for Punkt (punktgroup.com); Traffic by Konstantin Grcic for Magis (magisdesign.com)

Magic in Milan

Every year the great and the good of the design world descend on Milan to discover who will be snapping at their heels. This year's highlights included the rise of minimalism, the renaissance of marble and the plundering of the archives of past masters. By David Nicholls