

FINANCIAL TIMES

superior interiors

OCTOBER 18 2008



how to spend it special interiors edition



THE CASTING VOTE

Materials traditionally used in art and sculpture are now being exquisitely crafted into a new genre of home furnishings. By Jenny Dalton.

If you thought bronze was a material beloved only of sculptors such as Henry Moore, or notable merely as the defining alloy of the third and second millennia BC, this is the year for a rethink. Bronze has made a strong comeback in recent months – but this time in furniture, with a bold contemporary take on sculptural, hand-cast design.

Many designers are embarking on projects that are on the border between the art and design worlds. "Bronze translates really well between art and design,"

explains Paul Johnson, owner of Johnson Trading Gallery in New York. "It's a classic art material that designers can use to produce functional design, due to its strength."

Such designers include Ingrid Donat, a furniture artist who exhibits with the Carpenters Workshop Gallery in London. Her art-deco-with-a-hint-of-the-primitive cabinets, commodes and tables (example pictured overleaf) feature engraved, highly patterned bronze. Donat and fellow designer Vincent Dubourg had a joint show exhibiting new bronze work at the CWG in September. Ahmed Sidki, owner of Somerset-based furniture maker BowWow, uses waxed and lacquered cast bronze in his bespoke, plinth-like indoor seating (from £1,800) and tables (from £3,800) that are monolithic and smooth, and slide about on disguised rollers. Hervé van der Straeten, a Paris-based lighting and furniture maker, creates cast-bronze table bases (from about £3,720), as well as



strip ties and handles for his new range of ebony and amboina wood marquetry *Cabinet Particules* (about £304,000), and even has a dedicated bronze workshop. And Max Lamb, a young British creator of one-off furniture pieces such as chairs sculpted from great big hunks of Northumberland sandstone, showed a limited series of cast-bronze chairs at Art Basel earlier this summer (pictured left, about £13,500 each). Commissioned by Paul Johnson, six of the chairs were sold to a Hollywood superstar, who bought them on the spot. They were created by pouring molten bronze into a polystyrene chair mould; the effect is of a surface of bronze bubbling away.

Also in the UK, Michael Anastassiades, a London-based creator of heavy, handmade "poetic" objects, has found that his brand of design has recently taken off. His bronze work includes Ball Vases (pictured overleaf, about £1,500), bronze bowls (£1,750),



Main picture: Cendrillon table cast in clear resin with gilded pattern relief on inner surface by McCollin Bryan, £7,400. Top: gold-plated brass Ball Lights by Michael Anastassiades, £450. Inset: Bronze Poly Chair by Max Lamb, about £11,850.



Clockwise from this picture: Pebble in Marble, an exhibition piece by Autoban, price on application. Bronze Table Basse Anneaux, by Ingrid Donat, £37,600. Bronze Ball Vase by Michael Anastassiades, £1,500.

Waiting months doesn't put off the client: "It's because I'm making things that you could really fall in love with."

and statuary marble Meditation stools (£1,850). These works seem anchored in ancient history rather than in the 21st century. Anastassiades' gold-plated brass lights (pictured on previous page, £450) were used by Ilse Crawford for the new interior of the Grand Hôtel, Stockholm.

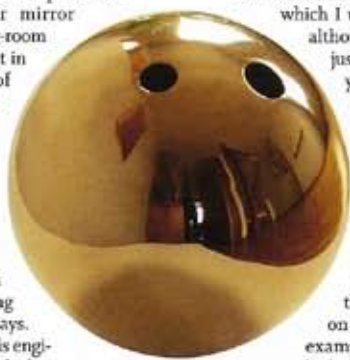
Interior designer Neisha Crosland recently bought several of Anastassiades' pieces for her own home, including a bronze tubular light for the staircase down to the cellar ("that has no daylight, and so the effect is almost religious"), as well as several gold-plated brass lamps (the same heavy feel as bronze, but a purer colour) and a copper mirror sculpture for a dining-room wall in her apartment in France. The use of bronze and other materials more commonly found in decorative or sculptural applications, is, says Crosland, a huge draw. "Their simplicity gives them a feeling of something very refined," she says. "He is ingenious in his engineering of a beautiful idea out of simple forms and materials. The bronze gives his pieces a sense of purity."

As well as purity, other clients tell Anastassiades that they are often surprised at the weight of a design when they pick one up. "The bronze ball vases are about seven kilos each. If you were to hold something that looks heavy but is less than a kilo, your expectation gets completely destroyed," he says. And weight, or the perception of weight, a very famous designer admitted

recently, is invariably considered an indicator of value. For such pieces aren't cheap. Max Lamb is under no illusions that the use of a fine art material like bronze adds a certain cachet to what would still be impressive designs in other materials, but perhaps less immediately attractive to a certain buyer. "I have to admit it's very exciting working with something as exotic and expensive as bronze," he concedes. Indeed, he has just produced an edition of patinated white bronze chairs (about £10,700) for Paul Johnson's gallery. "But as a raw material it's only slightly more expensive than pewter.

And even something like polystyrene, which I use a lot, is expensive, although people think it's just throwaway packaging you get free with your TV. What I'm interested in is giving value back to the material, but its monetary value doesn't really interest me. Whatever is most logical and most appropriate for the project I'm working on is what I'll use. For example, the foundry I worked with to cast the bronze stools was a fine art foundry and so was used to the material. With my early pewter stools [a triangular design that catapulted Lamb into the spotlight] it made sense to use a metal with a low melting point that allowed me to melt it on the beach with a camping stove. It also made sense to use pewter, which is 92 per cent tin; tin is synonymous with Cornwall, where I'm from."

Tillmann Koehn is another designer/maker who says the cost of something is



not his primary consideration. Koehn, who in a previous life was a boat-maker, spent his childhood "building things and forging knives in my bedroom" before embarking on a career in interiors via his first creation: a sculptural silver doorknob. Koehn's work, produced in a Hamburg studio filled with the finest woods and patinated metals, includes cabinets in bronze (£27,500) or German silver and ebony (£48,000), and bronze-legged and amethyst-fused glass side tables (£12,000). He also designs kitchens which feature the full range of his favoured art and sculpture materials, from parchment on cabinet doors to solid German silver handles. His pieces can cost tens of thousands of pounds (and in the case of the kitchens, much more), because he can only create one at a time – "a process which is almost like tattooing". Despite this, or perhaps because of it, there can be a considerable waiting list for his work. Caroline Shamash, of Saffron Interior Arts, who acts as his agent in the UK, says that waiting months for something of the calibre of Koehn's work doesn't put off the right type of client. "I think," says Koehn,

"it's because I'm making things that you could really fall in love with. For example, our parchment kitchen features cabinets made with dark-patinated gold parchment and the whole kitchen stands on a solid ebony floor, which has a slight undulation so it looks like sand under the ocean. It's very, very delicate, but it's also powerfully emotional. You come into that room and it feels special. When I go to the furniture fairs, I almost never see anything I find sexy in a serious way. But I like that idea of making furniture that is intimate, that is very detailed and has delicate parts and edges almost like figurines, and where there are a lot of things happening that modern, commercial design can't achieve."

Whenever materials traditionally used in art and sculpture are used for making furniture, there is debate as to how to classify such works. Koehn insists he's a metal worker and not an artist. But Don McCollin and Maureen Bryan, who have been working together as McCollin Bryan on limited edition furniture for a number of years, admit they chose furniture as a kind of conduit for their art-based designs. McCollin trained in textiles at Middlesex Polytechnic and then the Royal College of Art, Bryan in ceramics, also at Middlesex. Together they create extraordinary collections including pieces such as cast feature walls (about £13,000), bobbin-shaped mirror-top tables (£4,700), and resin and gold-leaf benches (from £1,230); there is also a stunning resin and gold-leaf table (pictured on opening page, £7,400) that has damask embellishments within the material to give the impression that the surface is embossed.

Their intention is to create "sculptural pieces or forms where we don't have to say these are sculptures that exist without a functional purpose. But equally we like our furniture to look quite architectural, like it's not really trying too hard to be a piece of furniture. It's a balancing act. But there's no denying furniture is a good umbrella