

Heading back to the future

CURIOSITY: Shagreen is once more in vogue. Interior designer Jamie Hemsall looks at the history surrounding this surprising material.



SHAGREEN has been used for both decorative and practical purposes for centuries, rising and falling in popularity over time. Many people will have encountered it in antique shops where they will see examples of it covering small luxury items such as boxes, opera glasses and picture frames.

It is a very distinctive finish where the surface is covered in small nodules. The material readily accepts die and forms a beautiful contrast across the surface between nodules and grain.

Many people assume that this hardwearing surface is leather, but in fact real shagreen is fashioned from the skin of the stingray, which has a smoothly pebbled texture.

There has been controversy over the use of the material in the past; however, modern real shagreen should now be manufactured from a specific family of the ray that is commonly eaten throughout South East Asia. The species *Dasyatis Bleekeri* and *Dasyatis Stephan* carry no CITES or other restrictions meaning

that they are not a threatened species in South East Asian waters. The skins are a by-product of the fishing industry and used to be thrown away (with fishermen only saving some to use as a sandpaper alternative – such is the strength of the untreated skin).

Faux shagreen has in the past been manufactured in paper, but these days there are flexible resin products that are cast to look like the actual product. One of the advantages of a resin alternative is that it shares the tough properties of the original, but is available in much larger lengths than an individual skin which means it is easier to use where larger quantities might be needed (for instance if covering a piece of furniture).

Shagreen has always been highly prized and associated with luxurious finishes.

Shagreen has always been highly prized and associated with luxurious finishes and objects. Earliest civilisations believed the stingray brought strength and power to any who handled it and the backbone, which resembles clusters of white pearls, was thought to be a protector of good luck and prosperity.

The Egyptians prized the beauty and durability of the stingray skin, which they used to fashion armour and decorative items. In the Middle Ages Samurai armour and particularly sword handles were made from undyed and untreated shagreen where its rough and granular surface made it an ideal material.

The first examples of shagreen-covered objects being imported

into Europe appear during the 17th and 18th centuries. At this time Shagreen was popularised by the tanner Jean-Claude Galluchat, who began manufacturing small items such as wig cases and snuff boxes items for the court of Louis XV. Louise XV's most famous mistress, Madame de Pompadour, was reported to be such an enthusiast that a week rarely went by when she did not purchase some new object from Mr Galluchat.

Shagreen's popularity reached a pinnacle in the art deco era when it was used in both small objects and furniture by the likes of Emile-Jacques Ruhlmann and Jean-Michel Frank. Both men were extremely influential in the field of interiors at that time and



RENAISSANCE: Julian Chicester Rene Bedroom Furniture, main picture; Lorca Dragon, above; Lamp in green shagreen by Simon Orrell Designs, inset left.

specialised in creating beautiful worlds for the beautiful people of the age.

The impact of the Second World War meant that tastes changed dramatically and shagreen fell out of favour for several decades. It regained popularity again in the 1970s; reputedly due to the influence of Karl Springer, a designer of exotic furniture favoured by the Duchess of Windsor. Provided it is antique, ethically-sourced or faux it is also potentially an attractive finish to use whether as a small objet (such as a small antique bedside clock) or as a statement piece such as a lamp or piece of furniture.

Simon Orrell is a Fulham-based furniture designer who specialises in working with materials such as shagreen and parchment. He takes great pride in ensuring the ethical credentials of the material that he uses in his products and loves the challenge of working with such an intricate and tricky material to produce dramatic results. He is one of a handful of highly-specialised craftsmen working in the modern era with shagreen. Simon says his clients find the draw of the material

is "its very tactile nature and exotic appeal". His latest range of homewares features lamps, mirrors and objects that use it to stunning effect (www.simonorrelldesigns.com).

Picking up on the trend, Phillips & Wood have also introduced a range of door handles that feature shagreen in dark green or cream set in brass, ideal for a hint of luxury, from £160 (www.phillipsandwood.co.uk - 020 8222 8117).

If you like the appearance, but prefer a different price tag, then alternatives exist. Julian Chicester feature the Rene Range of bedroom furniture finished in resin faux shagreen with simple contemporary lines which still hint at art deco glamour (www.julianchicester.com - 0207 622 2928). Alternatively, if you fancy lounging in luxury, the Dragon fabric from Lorca gives a wonderful effect perfect for cushions or drapes (£93 per metre; www.osborneandlittle.com - 020 7352 1456).

■ **Jamie Hemsall, BILD, is a multi-award winning interior designer.** www.jamiehemsall.com or call 0800 032 1180.



ARLINGTON
INTERIORS
KITCHENS - APPLIANCES - BEDROOMS - LIVING ROOMS

Can you afford not to...



© Howard Barnett Photography



WINTER SALE NOW ON

...visit probably the largest
showroom in Yorkshire!

www.arlington-interiors.co.uk

2 Limewood Road
Leeds | LS14 1LU

T: 0113 23 23 233 (Opt. 3)

Monday - Thursday 9am - 5pm | Friday & Saturday 10am - 4pm | Other times by appointment