

LUSTRE FOR LIFE

The natural beauty of semiprecious gemstones is beguiling those looking for furniture merging modern glamour with elemental – and at times talismanic – materials. **Charlotte Abrahams** reports

Jewel-like furniture may not be new, but October's edition of PAD London showed a more literal interpretation of the description with captivating furniture accented with, or almost entirely made from, semiprecious stones. Kam Tin's *meubles bijoux*, or jewel furniture, clad entirely in amber, turquoise or sparkling pyrite certainly courted attention at Parisian gallery Maison Rapin, and already features in some of the world's most glamorous residences. Katharine Pooley, for example, used Tin's turquoise cabinets (£145,000 each, pictured overleaf) in her design for a Kuwait villa, the pieces elevating the air of opulence in the palatial reception.

Back at the show, Francesco Perini's onyx-inlaid dining table (£72,000) at Gallery Fumi also caught the eye – but for an entirely different reason. The beautiful swirl of green onyx resembled flora growing from the oak tabletop, representing the aesthetic at the opposing end of the design spectrum, where the look is organic and elemental. "Perini has compelled people to look at something that is usually considered a precious adornment for the body in a different way. The inlaid onyx almost appears geographical," says Gallery Fumi's director Sam Pratt.

Vincenzo De Cotiis' latest work, recently exhibited at Carpenters Workshop Gallery in London, also challenges the view of gemstones as glittering ornament. The architect and designer's *En Plein Air* collection (its name, of course, a reference to the act of painting outdoors; prices on request) comprises a coffee table, bookshelf, dining table, floor lamp and console (pictured on final page) formed from a fusion of semiprecious Indian

stone, Murano glass, cast brass and recycled resin, so that they appear as semi-functional sculptures hewn from a cliff face. "I wanted to create a representation of nature, transforming the materials into a sort of visionary landscape," De Cotiis says.

Capturing the raw beauty of these materials is a key driving force for designers. "People are now looking for furniture with more individuality," says Martin Waller, founder of interior-design brand Andrew Martin. Stones dug from the earth are the very essence of individuality – with varying shades, lines and veins each is utterly unique, so that even when they are used on large runs of furniture, such as Andrew Martin's agate-topped *Ida* side table (£265, pictured overleaf), no two pieces can ever be quite the same.

Katherine Wildt O'Brien – whose New York-based

Matthew Studios, specialising in rough quartz and semiprecious gems, is more jewellery atelier than interiors space – delights in this difference. Her new *Madeline* drinks table (\$2,600, pictured far right), featuring two irregular slices of agate supported on a polished-nickel stand, is a celebration of the infinite and striking variations in colour and pattern that characterise the translucent gemstone.

"The natural qualities of agate feel honest in a world of mass-manufactured goods," she says.

O'Brien is also drawn to the more "spiritual" attributes of semiprecious stones. "Crystals are ancient – formed with heat, pressure and time. I'm entranced by the idea that they've been used in many cultures throughout history as both decorative objects and talismans," she says. "I believe the growing interest in furniture made from these stones stems partly from a desire to make the





Far left: Pierre-Yves Rochon for Lalique lacquered-wood, silk and crystal Coutard chair, £8,900. Near left: Matthew Studios agate and nickel Madeline drinks table, \$2,600, in a room designed by Carrier and Company

“The growing interest in furniture made from semiprecious stones stems from a desire to make the home more of a sanctuary”



home more of a sanctuary.” O’Brien’s highly crafted pieces of one-off furniture and lighting are a world away from the tiger’s-eye and moonstone pebbles sold in alternative-lifestyle stores, but she is not the only interiors insider to see a link between a renewed interest in the more metaphysical aspects of crystals and semiprecious stones and the rising popularity of jewel furniture. “The old Chinese philosophy of feng shui gives each gemstone positive energies,” says Philippe Rapin of Maison Rapin. “Pyrite, for example, is considered to be a symbol of optimistic energy in the home.”

The power of crystals to heal, calm and clear has been both celebrated and sceptically refuted for centuries. What is not in doubt, however, is that these gems can transform furniture into treasure that attracts the most discerning of magpies. Earlier this year, Italian furniture brand Smania launched a rosewood sideboard called Victory, its simple form made rich and decorative by a gemstone panel in tiger’s eye or labradorite – the latter (€8,022, pictured above right) creating an extraordinary optical effect thanks to the stone’s shimmering tones of blue, purple, green, yellow and orange.

Both Alexander Lamont and Pinto Paris have recently worked with mother-of-pearl – another natural material favoured by jewellers – to bring magical lustre to their furniture. Lamont introduced tiny, light-catching slices to the straw marquetry chevrons adorning his Prism sideboard (£34,500 at Miles x Bookshop), while the artisans at Pinto Paris have created an exceptionally beautiful shadow-play table



Clockwise from top left:
Kam Tin metal and turquoise cabinet, £145,000. Chahan bronze, steel and rock-crystal screen, €200,000. Smania rosewood, walnut, nickel, stainless-steel and leather Victory sideboard with labradorite panel, €8,022. Andrew Martin agate and brass Ida side table, £265. Simon Orrell Designs gilded steel and lapis lazuli console, £7,800

that is both refined and dramatic. “Stella [€45,000, pictured overleaf] is made of fine shell and mother-of-pearl marquetry,” says the gallery’s director, Davina Pinto Ffleda. “It goes from light to dark, dark to light and explodes in the centre like a glittering star.”

Pierre-Yves Rochon’s 2017 Signature Collection for French crystal maison Lalique pays homage to the purity of crystal glass – though not considered precious, it has the same subtle impact. The nickel-finished, lacquered-wood frame of Rochon’s Coutard chair (€9,800, pictured on previous pages), for example, is paired with a back decorated with panels of polished and hand-finished translucent crystal. The result is quietly opulent and yet the chair has the kind of presence that can transform a room.

There is nothing quiet about Armonia, a collection of Steinway & Sons grand pianos extravagantly embellished with precious stones by luxury Florentine design house Baldi Home Jewels. This extraordinary collection (price on request) includes pieces covered in lapis lazuli, amethyst or malachite. The stones are attached to the

surface of the piano in thin slices, a centuries-old technique known as *mosaico russo*, and then ground and polished by hand to create an immaculate, glossy finish. The dazzling end result may not be to everyone’s taste – and even fewer people’s budget – but these pianos are undoubtedly exquisitely made.

Craftsmanship is integral to working with gemstones. They are difficult and unpredictable to shape and, since their price means the market for jewel-enhanced furniture will always be small when

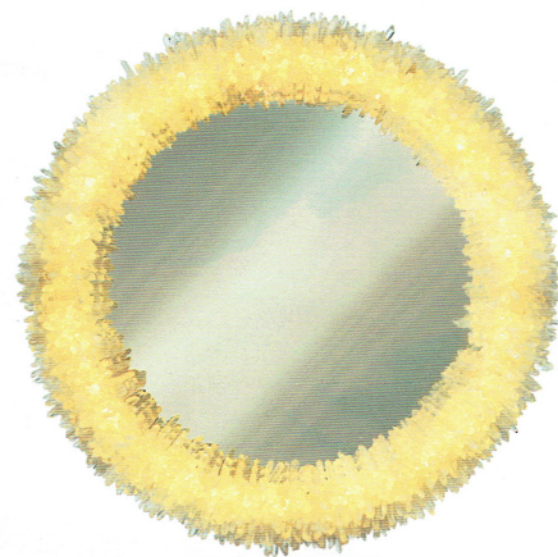
compared with other materials, it’s not economic for designers to invest in high-tech equipment to aid their making. Rather than perceiving this as a disadvantage, many of the creatives working with semiprecious stones do so precisely because of the complexity of the production process. “The work needed to produce these pieces involves specialist knowledge and expert craftsmanship,” says Philippe Rapin. “Designers see them as a real challenge, while customers treasure them as one-of-a-kind collectable pieces.”

That is certainly true of the furniture crafted in the Kam Tin workshop in





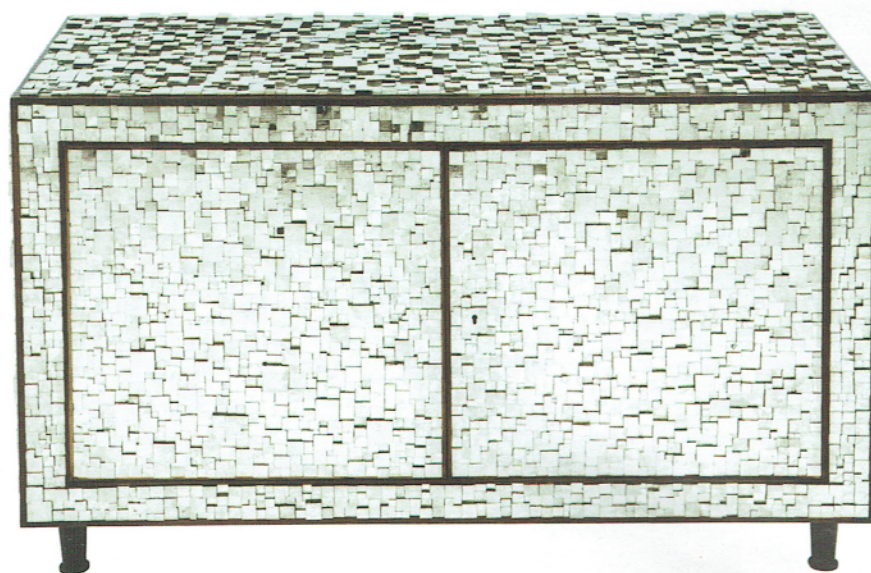
“Rock crystal has something mesmerising about it – the combination of raw beauty and an intriguing mystical element”



Germany. Once the gemstones have been sourced – an exacting task in itself, taking Tin from China (where he sources turquoise cabochons) to a pyrite mine “somewhere in Europe” – they are added to Tin’s designs by a team of five highly skilled craftspeople. Each stone requires different skills – pyrite, for example, emerges from the ground in a perfect cube, but its high iron content means it is very heavy. So, before it can be applied to furniture such as the two-door cabinet (€48,000, pictured right) shown at PAD London, it must be cut again into pieces of the same height. Each tiny square is then attached one by one to the wood frame.

Rock crystal poses similar challenges. Chahan Minassian, the interior designer behind Hôtel de Crillon and owner of Parisian gallery Chahan, was drawn to the material by its transparency and fragility. “I wanted to make a divider for a room that would allow for privacy but still enable light to pass through it,” he says. “My idea was to create a screen resembling a windowpane. But rock crystal comes in small sizes, so we had to find a large enough quantity to allow us to cut numerous small slices and then find a way to piece them together.” So complex was this task that he consulted gem specialist Georges Floret, who sourced crystal from Madagascar and worked with the many inclusions, gaps and cracks to create an intriguing, semi-transparent folding screen (€200,000, pictured on previous page, and on show at the gallery’s new design space) that is both timeless and utterly contemporary.

Timothy Oulton, founder and creative director of the eponymous British furniture brand, has also been beguiled by rock crystal. “There is something mesmerising about it,” he says. “The ancient Japanese called it ‘breath of white dragon’ because it represented perfection, while Australian Aborigines referred to it as ‘frozen rain’. I became fascinated by this combination of raw, natural beauty coupled with an intriguing mystical element, so I decided to create a pair of rock-crystal mirrors. They are a very

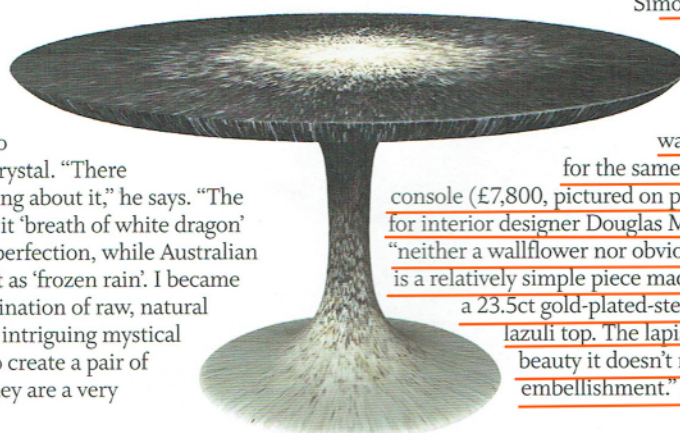


Clockwise from top left: Vincenzo De Cotiis cast-brass, semiprecious stone, resin and recycled fibreglass console, price on request. Timothy Oulton rock-crystal Elysium mirror, £11,050. Kam Tin for Maison Rapin wood, brass and pyrite cabinet, €48,000. Pinto Paris mother-of-pearl and fine-shell Stella dining table, €45,000

modern take on glamour using one of the world’s most ancient materials.” Oulton’s Elysium mirrors (round version, £11,050, pictured top right; tall version, £35,725) are fabulously glamorous, but as the aesthetic is conjured by a natural material – each delicate crystal is simply hand-polished before being fixed to the frame – they retain a simplicity that is absolutely of the moment.

Simon Orrell, a designer who has worked with all manner of rare materials from shagreen to parchment, was drawn to lapis lazuli

for the same reason. His lapis-topped console (£7,800, pictured on previous page), created for interior designer Douglas Mackie, is, he says, “neither a wallflower nor obviously ostentatious. It is a relatively simple piece made from two elements: a 23.5ct gold-plated-steel frame and a lapis lazuli top. The lapis has such natural beauty it doesn’t require any further embellishment.” As Orrell’s work conveys,



the very best examples of contemporary jewel furniture are celebrations of material and craftsmanship – timeless designs to be treasured and adored. ♦

ROOMS THAT ROCK

Andrew Martin, 190-196 Walton Street, London SW3 (020-7225 5100; andrewmartin.co.uk). **Baldi Home Jewels**, baldihomejewels.com. **Carpenters Workshop Gallery**, 4 Albemarle Street, London W1 (020-3051 5939; carpentersworkshopgallery.com). **Chahan**, 11 Rue de Lille, 75007 Paris (+331-4703 4700; chahan.com). **Gallery Fumi**, 2 Hay Hill, London W1 (020-7490 2366; galleryfumi.com). **Lalique**, 47 Conduit Street, London W1 (020-7292 0444; lalique.com). **Maison Rapin**, 25 Quai Voltaire, 75007 Paris (+331-4261 2421; maison-rapin.com). **Matthew Studios**, 1916 Park Avenue, New York, NY 10037 (+1212-678 8626; matthewstudiosny.com). **Miles x Bookshop**, Unit G15A, Design Centre Chelsea Harbour, London SW10 (milesdelange.com). **Pinto Paris**, 14 Rue du Mail, 75002 Paris (+331-4013 0000; pinto-paris.com). **Smania**, +39041-513 7700; smania.it. **Simon Orrell Designs**, Unit 12, Townmead Business Centre, William Morris Way, London SW6 (020-7371 9339; simonorrelldesigns.com). **Timothy Oulton**, Bluebird, 350 King’s Road, London SW3 (020-3150 2024; timothyoutlon.com).