
House & Home**All that glitters**

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Adolfo Finotto's seven-year quest to devise a durable, gold-plated parquet began with a sarcastic quip. He overheard an elderly woman reproach her daughter-in-law for complaining about her husband. "My son takes you to fancy restaurants. He bought you a luxurious home. He even gave you a sports car. What else do you want – gold floors?"

Finotto, an Italian chemist and businessman specialising in luxury parquet flooring, says the remark didn't make an immediate impression on him but over time it became a personal challenge: could he offer this seemingly impossible proposition? After years of trial, error and personal expense, he debuted his patented metal-leaf parquets, which sell for between €3,000 and €5,000 a sq metre through his company, Aurum. Available in yellow or white gold, pure silver or copper, Finotto claims they are easy to maintain and durable enough to last indefinitely under the moderate foot traffic of a home, yacht or luxury hotel suite.

Oddly, considering the current economic climate, Finotto is not alone in his pursuit of the Midas touch. Producers in Italy and elsewhere are breaking contemporary convention to apply ever more precious raw materials to interior decor. Those who still have the cash can now choose to fix up their homes with an imperial array of choices that would have made Marie Antoinette's heart sing: great slabs of lapis lazuli, agate and amethyst, Swarovski crystal wall coverings, platinum or gold-glazed ceramic and glass tiles, gold resin floors.

Even more curious, these emerging products are not antique, nostalgic or revivalist, nor do they cater just to the flamboyant margins of entertainment celebrity or dictatorial power. (As you might remember, Saddam Hussein and Elvis Presley both enjoyed gold bathroom faucets.) On the contrary, producers, designers and architects are using precious materials in innovative ways to position themselves in the uppermost range of the contemporary design world, as the middle market succumbs to the credit crunch.

"I think the last [golden age of lavish decor] was in the 19th century, with the rise of the middle classes and their aspiration to emulate royalty and the aristocracy," says Sebastian Davies, head of 19th-century furniture and decorative art for Christie's. This time rocketing new wealth in Russia and the Middle East has helped drive big decorative statements back into vogue.

Not surprisingly, Italian producers, well known for their luxury goods, have responded. "The Swedes and the Danes are still producing minimalist products that are aimed more toward the mass market," says Andrea Negri, president of Made Expo, an international fair for building suppliers in Milan. "This appears to be an Italian prerogative."



The Antolini Luigi stone suppliers were early movers in the extreme luxury decor niche. Although the family's roots in the marble business reach back more than 80 years, the company's serious foray into rare and exotic stones began in the early 2000s, when it launched its Stone Boutique showroom and exclusive collections, featuring onyxes, exotic marbles and precious stones. New technologies, including a specially patented resin reinforcement, have enabled the company to create large slabs out of stones that would otherwise be too brittle for such use and the company has expanded its access to quarries in far reaches of the world, from Madagascar to Brazil to the French Pyrenees. "Stones once destined only for the production of jewellery, like amethyst or lapis lazuli, we transform into refined panelling, precious backlit tables, elegant trend elements that can create unique atmospheres and great emotional impact," says Alberto Antolini, general manager.

Tiger's eye dining tables and desert jasper walls are now within the realm of feasibility, as are malachite panels that compare favourably to the green Doric columns of the Catherine Hall in the Kremlin. In the past two years, the company has also added 12 varieties of precious shell to its 900 or so available surfaces, as well as sparkling Swarovski crystal. Antolini would not disclose its prices, saying they depend on the requirements of individual orders and intermediaries, like stone craftsmen, architects and retailers.

Italian architect Carla Baratelli, who has collaborated with Antonlini, can't talk about her latest projects without rattling off a list of unusual precious products. She chose white-gold-plated parquet for the living room of a seaside vacation home of a European client, using its shimmer and texture to set off sky-blue, minimalist furnishings. As Baratelli sees it, literally precious decor is something of a spontaneous evolution in a market driven by aesthetics and exclusivity. "The middle stratum of the market [for design] has disappeared. The middle clients have either moved toward the top or toward the bottom, especially with the introduction of big retail players like Ikea," she says.

Piero Bisazza, chief executive of the eponymous Italian tile company, agrees. Ever since his company began sprinkling white and yellow gold tiles (above) into its annual collections a few years ago, there has been a rush on the stuff and so white and yellow gold was elevated to a leitmotif throughout most of the 2008 collection. "You have to keep a lid on the flamboyance. It has to be subtle. It has to be elegant. When it comes to gold, it is easy to overdo it," he acknowledges. But "our gold tile sales have risen four- to five-fold in the last three years and at a certain point we had to put in emergency production measures to keep up with demand". They cost €2,800 a sq metre compared with €80 a sq metre for basic colours.

Bisazza cites a general tendency away from minimalism towards decoration as well as the emergence of wealthy, fashion-conscious female consumers, aged 25 to 50 who is immune to the credit crunch. “We feel our customer is this certain woman who may buy Gucci for her wardrobe today and decide to redo her bathroom tomorrow.”



Precious materials are also benefiting from the resurgence of limited edition and bespoke designs, where art converges with artisanship and potential buyers approach pieces as an emotional and financial investment. London company Based Upon incorporates precious materials into its pieces using proprietary technology to handcraft metallic surfaces for walls, floors and furniture. A platinum-covered coffee table cracks like a desert floor; an infant’s palmprint blown up to 6 sq metres in white gold tells a family’s past and future; a yellow gold dining table wears black resin down its centre like the backbone of a snake.

Company founder Ian Abell, who studied philosophy at Oxford University, says the studio’s work is about layering different forms of preciousness into a single work and sees the use of gold, platinum or jewels as an appealing ingredient in a cocktail of subjective riches. “Why is gold gold? It doesn’t have any [practical] use,” he says. Yet “our attraction to it is so deeply rooted. It must be something in our DNA.”

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