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Designing Art

With record-breaking auction sales, new gallery openings and a host of big-ticket events, there's never been a better time to embrace contemporary design, says *Victoria Gill*

DESIGN has traditionally been the poor cousin to fine art in terms of value and collectability. Slowly but surely, however, the tide has been turning, as the auction of Eileen Gray's *Dragons* armchair at the Christie's sale of Yves St Laurent's collection earlier this year confirmed. Selling for £19.4 million, it was the highest price ever secured for a single piece of furniture. Even taking into account the significance of the late fashion designer's provenance, the sale marked a watershed in the appreciation of the value – both aesthetic and financial – of high-end design.

Since then, a raft of design art galleries and events have launched across the city with west London leading the charge, from the seminal *Telling Tales* contemporary design exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum to the Tom Dixon-curated showcase of new creative talent, *The Dock* – a highlight of the London Design Festival last month. Meanwhile, celebrated design emporia Mint recently relocated

to South Kensington, home of the Brompton Design District (established in 2007 as a part of the LDF), which counts Rabih Hage Gallery, the Victoria and Albert Museum, Paul Smith, the Royal College of Art and Gallery Libby Sellers among its fold.

And as the gap between art and design grows ever closer, the trend shows no sign of slowing

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down. This month alone, design showcase *Pavilion of Art and Design* sets up its stall in Berkeley Square to coincide with *Frieze Art Fair*, with many west London design galleries staging exhibitions and events on and around that same weekend.

More practical than fine art by nature, it will perhaps come as little surprise that interest in design

art grew alongside the housing market, reaching its peak in 2007 when *Design Miami*, a forum dedicated to limited-edition, experimental design work, launched. And even if the days when we changed our homes more often than our cars and our furniture as frequently as our bed linen are gone, design art remains a potent force in the marketplace.

"It's not about buying 10 things then throwing them away anymore," says Mint founder Lina Kanafani. "People want to buy one item and enjoy it and love it." Gallerist Libby Sellers, formerly senior curator at the Design Museum, agrees: "People want something that is personal and individual."

"Design is still generally more affordable than art," observes Parisian Patrick Perrin, who launched *Pavilion of Art and Design* (then dubbed *Design Art London*) with South Kensington art collector Stephane Custot in 2007. "Great iconic contemporary or post-war pieces will always remain timeless and never go out of fashion."

And, as the sale of Grey's armchair proved, the value increases exponentially when these pieces come from a famous talent or owner – the total value of the goods sold at the auction of Yves Saint Laurent's collection was £52.6 million. "If you can tick all the boxes of having a rich and wonderful history, then the piece becomes a magical provenance, and the value increases immensely," explains Philippe Garner, Christie's international head of 20th Century Decorative Art and Design.

Classics such as Jacobsen, Prouvé and Le Corbusier remain valuable alongside popular works by Ron Arad, Marc Newsom and Zaha Hadid. Among the 'new school' that has emerged in the 21st century, look for tables and sofas by Dutch contemporary designers Atelier Van Lieshout and Jeroen Verhoeven as well as the exquisite lamps by US designer Jeff Zimmerman.

The market for investing in and discovering new talent is on the increase. "People always buy what




they like, but if they like it and it becomes known and increases in value, everyone is doubly happy," says Kanafani. She discovered Maarten Baas, whose first piece from the iconic *Smoke* collection fetched £1,700. Seven years later, these pieces have trebled in value.

Sellers suggests that would-be collectors should support young designers and visit their studios. "Ask questions without being intimidated and understand the materials involved," she advises. "Design is more accessible than art, and designers more practical in

The boundaries of art and design are now blurred

their approach to working with clients."

Next month, a new design art gallery, Wolf and Badger, is scheduled to open on Ledbury Road. Championing the work of young creative designers, its owner, Samir Cleric, notes that "the boundaries of art and design are now blurred", something that became increasingly apparent to the Salon Gallery founder while selecting talent for her new Notting Hill initiative. "I don't think anyone can really predict how big this thing is going to be," she continues. "I think it is the future, that in nine or 10 years it's going to go through the roof, and we'll be witnessing something quite extraordinary in this field." 

Telling Tales, until 18 October (vam.ac.uk); Pavilion of Art and Design, 14-18 October (padlondon.net); Frieze Art Fair, 15-18 October (friezeartfair.com)



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: 'DRAGONS' ARMCHAIR, EILEEN GRAY, 1917-1919 | LIGHTING BY JEFF ZIMMERMAN (CHAIR BY HUGO FRANCA) | 'THIN SLICE' CABINET, PETER MARIGOLD, 2008 (COURTESY GALLERY LIBBY SELLERS; LIBBYSELLERS.COM) | 'SMOKE' CHAISE LONGUE, MAARTEN BAAS (COURTESY MINT; MINTSHOP.CO.UK) | 'NO ANGLE NO POISE' LAMP IN RED, TIAGO DA FONSECA (COURTESY MINT) | 'THE HONEYCOMB VASE', TOMÁŠ GABZDIL LIBERTINY, 2006 (PHOTO: RAOUL KRAMER)