

Interiors

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March 28, 2014 7:44 pm

Designers put contemporary gloss on traditional lacquerware

By Trish Lorenz

The art of application is slow, laborious, repetitive and risky because there is no way to erase mistakes



Lacquered walls reflect the light and create a sense of depth in this Manhattan apartment

“The human being is not pure intellect,” Eileen Gray, modernist architect, designer and one of the great lacquer artists, once said. To create sensual and humane pieces sometimes only requires “the choice of a beautiful material worked with sincere simplicity”.

Urushi, the Japanese lacquer that Gray embraced and worked with more than 100 years ago, is making a comeback in high-end contemporary design. Dutch designer and artist Aldo Bakker has worked with urushi since 2005, with products including his pink-lilac Side table (€29,500, limited edition of seven) and ice-blue Urushi stool (€18,500, limited edition of seven plus one artist’s proof), both from Particles Gallery in Amsterdam.

“I fell in love with urushi on my first encounter with it, and I think I will keep working with it for the rest of my life,” says Bakker. “I like the fact that it is 100 per cent natural and ages beautifully and has a real depth and quality of surface and colour. Even very new and contemporary pieces have a sense of maturity and age to them.”

His latest piece, the Tonus stool, will launch at the New York gallery Atelier Courbet on May 10 and he is also in talks with the Danish brand Karakter, which plans to launch an urushi collection, likely to include tableware and furniture.



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Bakker is not alone in his passion for the material: urushi evokes a poetic reaction from many who come into contact with it. Wilpert Dreesmann, who is the curator at Particles Gallery, which represents Bakker's work, says: “Urushi has a depth to it both literally and figuratively. It creates magnificent, intense colours. I love the appearance of it and the way it feels to touch. It is as soft as a baby's skin but very hard wearing, not at all fragile.”

Urushi and other Asian lacquers are made of the resin from the highly toxic sap of the *Rhus verniciflua* tree, a close relative of poison ivy. The material is essentially a natural plastic: resistant to water, acid and, to some extent, heat. To create a lacquered item, sap is collected then gently heated to remove excess moisture and impurities, before being applied to the chosen object, layer by layer.

Urushi lacquer is naturally a translucent brown and it lends a subtle russet tint, even to bright and vivid shades. “I like to work with deep, old, layered colours and the earthy shades that urushi delivers,” says Bakker.

The art of applying lacquer is slow, laborious, repetitive and risky because there is no way to erase mistakes. For high-quality pieces, 30 or more layers of varnish are applied and each layer must be allowed to dry in a warm, dust-free, humid environment for a day or two. Lacquer applied too thickly or unevenly, or allowed to dry too quickly or slowly can ruin a piece. Each layer is polished by hand, a process that creates tiny, almost imperceptible variations in shade and colour and gives the surface its sense of depth and life.

German designer Manfred Schmid has worked with urushi for 16 years, creating pieces including bowls priced from €4,500, boxes that start at €12,500 and cabinets available for €120,000. Schmid says it was the emphasis on craftsmanship that drew him to the art. “Creating an urushi piece demands your full attention. It takes nearly a year to build up the individual coats and the time that is bound up in the object gives it a very special aura.”



Once the preserve of royalty, lacquer has always been both desirable and expensive, but designers believe its current resurgence in a time of austerity is a natural development. “Urushi has a logic that suits our time,” says Bakker. “The financial crisis has made us aware of how temporary things can be and it’s a natural response to become interested in deeper, more layered ways of doing things and to search for objects that can last a lifetime.”

It is a viewpoint that Schmid agrees with. “A properly made urushi piece can stay in good condition for 1,000 years. We are creating the heirlooms of tomorrow and that is something that has a great appeal at the moment. People are also looking to tradition again as something positive, which doesn’t necessarily have to exclude the modern.”

Giving lacquer a modern aesthetic has proven something of a challenge. The art of lacquerware originated in China as far back as 7,000 years ago, before being exported to Japan and southeast Asia. It is still widely practised across Asia today but usually in a more traditional way.

Urushi, for example, is primarily applied to miso bowls, bento boxes and chopsticks, and usually in deep black rather than contemporary shades. The practice requires years of study and the working methods and division of labour are strictly defined.

As a result, many of the designers working in a contemporary way with the material are European. Bakker, for example, experiments with the technique by applying it to oversized objects such as tables and also by using bright colours. “Urushi has such a deep cultural value in Japan that there isn’t perhaps an ethos of innovation,” he says. “My contribution is to have used different colours, shapes and sizes than are traditional.”

Tokyo-based design group Nendo is one Japanese consultancy that is approaching the technique in a contemporary way. It released an urushi collection this year titled Lump, consisting of bowls, cups and plates.

At present items from the collection are only on sale in Japan, priced from ¥4,515 (\$44), but will be made available in Europe and the US from June.

Although working within the distinctive techniques of regional Yamanaka lacquerware, both the design of the pieces and the colour of the lacquer have a very contemporary feel. Yamanaka lacquer workshops are known for their mastery of wood turning and the Nendo pieces emphasise this talent, using a natural finish to show off the wood grain of the exterior and the contrasting matt lacquer finish inside.

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The growing passion for lacquer and glossy surfaces is not limited to the art of urushi. In China, Shanghai-based architects and designers Neri & Hu create products based on inspiration drawn from their Chinese heritage. The group launched two Chinese lacquer collections last year, featuring bright colours (rather than the traditional red and black) and playing with scale. Products in the oversized Lacquer Scale 2:1 collection include a tray (priced Rmb1,680 or \$270), a dish (from Rmb1,200) and a vase (Rmb900).

The group's Lacquer Donut (priced from Rmb1,200) is a modern interpretation of a Qing dynasty relic used to store the elaborate necklaces worn by the nobility. The piece is simple and tactile and was created in collaboration with archaeologist Pia Pierre in a process that the group describe as “unearthing forgotten forms to create useful pieces for the contemporary home environment”.

There is also a growing interest in lacquered finishes in the west. Designers such as Jonathan Adler in the US are using lacquer finishes on everything from trays (\$150) and waste paper baskets (\$58) to cocktail tables (\$1,750). Interior designer, Michelle Jennings Wiebe from Studio M has also recently completed a number of projects using lacquer, including a ceiling in a chartreuse lacquer finish.

“Lacquered walls, ceilings and home decor have been becoming more common over the past year,” she says. “Some of the appeal comes from the fact that everyone can incorporate lacquer within their interiors, whether their homes are minimal and modern, eclectic or totally traditional. Over the past seven years we have been doing matt and distress finishes but now shiny surfaces are back and they exude glamour, sex appeal and refined sleekness.”
