

# THE NEW BRONZE AGE

It adds richness without overpowering, and sits equally well with antique and contemporary pieces. Helen Chislett reveals why bronze is the metal of the moment.





This picture: 1508 London's design for the new Presidential Suite at the Hyatt Regency Delhi.

**A**rguably, it is a by-product of living in a world in which entire national economies are crumbling that our appetite for stability, strength and permanence has increased. Designers are reflecting this emotional recalibration in their use of noble and classical materials, in particular bronze. Whether used in sheet form or cast into furniture, lighting and sculptural detailing, this tactile and durable copper alloy has taken on new relevance in interiors.

Matthew Carlisle, creative director of Candy & Candy, has been championing the use of bronze in recent years,

featuring it in everything from joinery and furniture to lighting and art objects: "Metal is a general feature of many of our designs, but the appeal of bronze is that it is warm and tactile, rather than harsh and cold. It is also wonderfully versatile, so you can marry it with lots of other materials. We like to apply several layers to our interiors, but bronze is never overpowering or garish, and works tonally with many different finishes."

Carlisle uses it both in its sheet form – for example, as the wall trim in a private home in Mayfair (pictured overleaf), where he combined it with a bronze metal-spray finish – and as a cast material. He is currently having three lions cast in bronze to form the base of a





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Clockwise from top left: bespoke bronze fireplace by Jean-Louis Deniot. Coffee table in bronze, pearlescent paint and glass by Francis Sultana, £26,500. Bronze twig handles by The Sheldon Studio. Bedroom with wall panels in bronze shades and bronze trim by Candy & Candy.



(pictured far left): "The concept was to draw a feminine element out of a masculine material, to accessorise the room like a piece of jewellery worn by a woman." Interestingly, he has no qualms about mixing it with gold: "Shiny gold is a wonderful contrast to the roughness of bronze. Gold dresses up bronze, and bronze dresses down gold."

Darren Gayer, owner of The Sheldon Studio, regards bronze as a "family friend", an ageless classic that never disappears entirely from the vocabulary of design. "Architects tend to specify chrome finishes, which are rather cold and clinical, but as designers who like to create tactile interiors, we then push for bronze because of its inherent quality and texture," he says. "Bronze goes with everything, so it is perfect as an accent to enhance a neighbouring material, even something not obvious such as velvet or vellum."

Gayer uses bronze extensively in his furniture, lighting and accessories for the studio's Astor Place product line. For Oakmayne Bespoke, he has designed two of the houses at Cornwall Terrace, a magnificent Regency façade that overlooks Regent's Park. There he has cast a twig in bronze to make door handles (pictured above left) that reference the famous green space beyond. "We sourced the ultimate twig and then had it cast," he says. "It is one of those detailing elements that is not supposed to jump out at you, but waits to be discovered. It is wonderful working with bronze because it has such depth and quality – to me, it feels much more old money than new money." Whether old or new, expect to pay: bronze varies from about £1,000 to about £5,000 per square metre depending on colour, finish and detailing.

Francis Sultana, who launched his first collection of couture-inspired furniture in 2011 (he has been designing bespoke pieces to commission for clients for many years) agrees with Gayer's sentiment. Called *Homage to the Art Deco*, the collection references the period of Parisian high luxury that has been such an influence on both his interiors and furniture design, featuring noble materials and truly luxurious detailing (and priced from just under £2,000 to over £25,000; bronze coffee table pictured above, £26,500). "I trained in using bronze in the late 1990s, when the neo-baroque period of furniture was so fashionable," says Sultana. "To me, the idea of modelling furniture in clay and then casting it in bronze like sculpture gave value to what I was creating. Some of my collection is cast in solid bronze, whereas with other pieces I have used cast handles or legs. What I love is that the opportunities for design are endless: you can use acid to create different patinations, gild it like French ormolu, or leave it to oxidise and change as it breathes. It is a very elite and

a particularly striking coffee table (a similar commission would cost about £35,000): "There are no fixings – the trio of lions just radiates from one central point with a beautifully thick slab of glass on top. It is a strong sculptural statement, but also utterly simple. No other material would be as impactful in that context."

At 1508 London, creative head Chris Godfrey also cites the integrity of bronze as a key influence in contemporary design. "We are interested in design that is not of a period, but that is respectful of period," he says. "Bronze is a very adaptable material – the fact that it has been used for thousands of years demonstrates that and makes it continually interesting for me as a designer." Godfrey has used bronze on both small and large scales, including a huge site-specific art wall (about £35,000) for a private home in Mayfair, and he finds it useful as a thread to link in other materials, such as stones and timbers. "Bronze is the perfect material for an accent or trim – a subtle piece of design interjection that speaks of luxury and refinement," he adds.

In the recent transformation of a £14m apartment in The Knightsbridge development, 1508 London chose a bronze chaise by Paul Mathieu as the centrepiece of the master bedroom. More recently, Godfrey commissioned an ingenious and intricate screen of stylised bronze lotus leaves for the Presidential Suite of the Hyatt Regency Delhi (design pictured on opening pages), where the leaves will open and close according to the time of day.

What also appeals to designers such as Carlisle and Godfrey is the immense versatility of bronze. It can range in tone from deep browns to bright, patinated shades. It can be beaten, laser-cut, polished and hammered into different surface textures, made rough or smooth, thin or thick, matte or gloss. It can look equally crisp in an interior based on a dark palette as a light one, and sit as comfortably among contemporary

pieces as antiques and antiquities. Quietly understated, it has none of the brashness and bling of other luxurious metal tones, such as gold and platinum – a quality that Godfrey believes makes it right for today. "Bronze has a quiet refinement and an understated, timeless quality, which is why it features in our own palette," he says.

That is a view backed by interior designer Katharine Pooley, who is currently working on a sumptuous private residence in Qatar. "Chrome is much more fashionable and in demand than gold at the moment, and although I love chrome, it is too cold for a warm climate. Bronze, however, has warmth, richness and tactility. It is also a fantastic foil for other textures – anything from tinted glass to mother-of-pearl to all types of stone and timber," she says. "In Qatar I have used it extensively – as a feature of the joinery in the library, where it is teamed with blue leather, and for furniture, lighting, all ironmongery and the stair balustrade. In the hallway I have lined two columns in bronze, which look magnificent against a vast expanse of white marble. It is a very subtle material, but one that has a very striking effect."

Parisian interior designer Jean-Louis Deniot says that bronze brings substance to a space. "It anchors a room, giving feeling and depth," he says. "It works particularly well when you juxtapose it with soft materials, such as silk, wool or felt, but also mixes well with mirror, glass, straw marquetry and any type of wood. To me, it gives guts to an interior." One example of Deniot's use of bronze is a bespoke fireplace in a master bedroom



expensive material, but the fact that it is so understated is what makes it so sophisticated."

French artist Joy de Rohan Chabot has been producing beautiful and sculptural furniture for over 15 years, yet it was only two years ago that she found the courage to produce a piece in bronze. "I always wanted to work with bronze, but it seemed so precious and so beautiful that I was a little shy of doing so. It was a question of saying, 'Now I dare,'" she says. Since then, she has cast a number of her romantically rococo designs in bronze, such as *Table Arbre à Papillons* (Butterfly Tree Table, €16,000), enhancing the effect of birds, butterflies, flower and foliage with her own artistry. "I am a painter first and foremost, and I love colour, so it makes my furniture more personal to me if I add ornamentation to the bronze through paint." Today her furniture is bought by both those with über-contemporary homes and those who have filled theirs with 18th-century furniture.

What fascinates de Rohan Chabot is people's emotional response to the material. "I recently made two identical chairs – one in iron, the other in bronze. They were the same shape and the same colour," she explains, "and yet when people viewed them they immediately understood that one had real quality and was art, and the other, while charming, was not the same thing at all." Exhibiting the bronze chairs at a recent show in Paris, she was intrigued by how many people simply walked off the street and bought a piece, regardless of the cost: "I think people know that what is precious will stay precious. In ten years' time, many objects you buy today will be broken or look worse for wear. Bronze may have taken on a different patina in that time, but it will have lost none of its intrinsic beauty and could last a thousand years or more. It is



Left: *Seasons of Tranquillity*, a cast bronze artwork by Based Upon for a property in the Hamptons.

when you first encounter this artwork you should not know whether it had fallen from the moon or been dug from the earth," explains co-founder and creative director Ian Abell. "We wanted to convey the fact that the wooden house will eventually decay in time but the bronze will still be there. It also runs from inside to outside, so will be battered both by the high temperatures of summer and the low ones of winter. Only bronze has that sort of durability and longevity."

It is a huge piece, measuring 7m x 2.7m and weighing more than a ton. It may have been his first experience of casting from clay, but Abell hopes it won't be the last. "In a sense, it is a living piece, because we have no idea how it will change in colour over time. What we do know is that the bronze will do very well in the ageing process. It resonates with its setting perfectly – and it also holds the promise that it could last a thousand years or more." ♦

a wonderful thought that the furniture I am creating should survive me by millennia."

It was exactly this link to immortality that inspired Based Upon to create its first piece in solid bronze (pictured above; a similar piece would cost about £300,000) last year. Best known for its liquid metal and resin finishes, the design group's decision to cast bronze came directly from its response to a location on the very tip of the Hamptons, where the architectural firm Christoff-Finio was building a house for a particularly discerning client. "There was a strong sense from all of us – client, architects and the Based Upon team – that

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