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Joseph Dirand, one of the important Parisian trendsetters from the last decade, is gradually conquering the international architecture and design scenes. Not only has he drawn private homes, but also luxury hotels and boutiques for Chloé, Pucci, Balmain, Rick Owens and Alexander Wang. For years his name has been on speed dial with aesthetes, who love his opulent minimalism. The Belgian custom design company Obumex also recently worked with Dirand; he designed a signature kitchen for them, a style statement petrified as a marble sculpture.
Natural stone is timeless. It has been writing history in architecture, sculpture and the decorative arts since the days of the ancient Egyptians. Its most recent high point was Art Deco, the tumultuous years around the inter-war period when stylised inlay in marble or (semi)precious stones was all the rage. Just look at Jean Dunand’s luxury objects or Michel Polak’s Villa Empain (1930) and you will know exactly what we mean.
If minimalism and Art Deco had a bastard son, he might very well look like this contemporary villa. Something like Pawson meets Mallet-Stevens. The spiral staircase greeting visitors in the entrance certainly gives the house the right swirly, roaring twenties air. Another nice touch is the staircase’s curve, inspired by the curved facade window, which is again a typical Art Deco style feature.

Natural stone plays walking bass throughout the house. The Statuario in the entrance sets the initial tone. But you also see marble appearing in even more exciting compositions elsewhere in the house. A very ‘modernist’ element, for instance, is the fireplace furniture piece: a graphic play of surfaces in Titanium travertine and white-lacquered wood that Gerrit Rietveld might have come up with. The bathroom, for its part, exudes the comfort of a first-class compartment on the Orient Express. Or a suite at The Savoy. Its floors, walls and wash-stand are all furnished with Gris de Brindisi, a grey-brown type of marble that has a sober pattern yet also looks and feels extremely luxurious. All that Jazz!
ARTISTS FROM
THE NEW STONE AGE

FRANCESCO BALZANO
Your roots are Italian, but you live and work as an (interior) architect in Paris. How does that show in your work?

My father is Italian, but I was born in Paris. I studied classic graphic arts and became fascinated with the sketches and paintings of old masters. Especially those from the Italian Renaissance. I also gradually developed an interest in classic and modern sculptors, whom I like to call ‘masters of volume’. Take Constantin Brancusi or Eduardo Chillida: artists operating in the area where art and architecture come together. Their monolithic concept of sculpturing fascinates me tremendously.

Which is why you also studied architecture.

Which architects do you personally admire?

I love architects who have a global vision of a project, who see it both large-scale and small-scale. People like Carlo Scarpa, Mies van der Rohe, Arne Jacobsen, or Alvar Aalto: architects that design with their erasers. They look to simplify and they use pure, raw materials. As an architect, I prefer to design at the object level. Like I do with buildings, I view objects as reflections on matter, light, proportions, form and craftsmanship.

Your objects simultaneously have something monumental, primitive and classic about them. How come?

When I’m designing, I always have the golden ratio in the back of my mind. It’s a mathematical, timeless approach to beauty. I don’t use the golden ratio as a mechanical trick, but it does make my designs intuitively timeless. It’s as if they might stem from classic antiquity as easily as from the present. In my mind there’s no distinction between these two time periods.

What’s the starting point for your different collections of furniture objects?

I use very diverse starting points when drawing collection objects. They do tend to be two-dimensional or linked to my roots in the graphic arts. My M collection, for instance, originated in a painting of a fictional house made by Japanese artist Minoru Numata. The pieces of furniture I designed would go perfectly with that nonexistent house. The architecture of cities such as Florence or Venice is also a direct source of inspiration. When I walk around there, any stone or building can lead me to design a new piece of furniture.

Iconic Casa Malaparte in Capri led to the marble Curzio loose-change tray.

During my whole childhood we would travel to Capri. Every summer we would pass by the mythical cliff house of writer-director Curzio Malaparte. It’s an artists’ residence now, the place where so many famous artists once stayed. To me personally, this house almost embodies the essence of architecture. The roof, part of which is also a staircase, I translated into the sculptural Curzio vide-poche. An homage to Malaparte’s house, which was immortalised in Jean-Luc Godard’s film *Le Mépris*.

Why are many of your objects made in solid natural stone?

I love stone because it lets you sculpt it. It’s a material that is directly connected with sculpture. You can’t really say that about plastic, can you? Sometimes I use natural stone as a monolith, sometimes I combine it with noble metals or precious materials. Natural stone is primitive and brutal. Ideal for the kind of work I want to create: timeless objects that encourage contemplation. They do have their functionality, but they go further than that; they are instruments for the art of living, beyond fashion and trends. They communicate with space but also with the past.
‘I always have the golden ratio in the back of my mind. It’s a mathematical, timeless approach to beauty. I don’t use the golden ratio as a mechanical trick, but it does make my designs intuitively timeless.’
ARTISTS FROM THE NEW STONE AGE
A square seat in leather and coated steel versus a round backrest cut out of marble. Microarchitecture at its purest.

Corner Chair for Maniera

OFFICE
Kersten Geers David Van Severen
Calacatta

A geometrical composition of a square and a circle: a typical element in the architecture of OFFICE Kersten Geers David Van Severen. The same element returns in their Solo House, which has a ring-shaped house resting on a square column structure. This Corner Chair does the same form exercise.
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Sometimes inspiration is just there for the taking. When Verhamme + De Vel Architects needed to materialise this flat with a frontal sea view, they simply looked to the elements directly surrounding it. In this case: Knokke beach. The sand-coloured floor tiles evoke the beach, while the Blue de Lignières kitchen block reflects the water ripples in the surf. The ‘wiped-out’ veins of this type of marble stand perpendicular to each other in the kitchen block: a subtle graphic detail that lends the design a fresh air. To keep the flat from totally sinking away in soft hues, the architects and constructor added some spice to the interior with a wall in exotic wood, Macassar to be precise. The details in brushed copper complete the tactile picture.
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