



In Costanza Rossi's Paris flat, Studio Akademos created a custom lacquered bookshelf that contains the sofa. Alexis Armanet

Having a Moment

Lacquer Is Back—Here's How Designers Are Reimagining the Finish's Potential

Designers agree: This age-old technique delivers undisputed wow factor

By Hannah Martin
January 2, 2024

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Last month, an intriguing, black lacquer bed with a swooping silhouette, part of a sale at Christie's, was all over my Instagram feed. It was Jean Dunand's 1932 bed *Aux Nénuphars* (*With Waterlilies*), realized for his distinguished clients, Ambassador Philippe Bertholet, then director of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and his wife. Shimmering with mother of pearl lilies and lacquered goldfish swimming in the deep black-lacquered void, the piece was given a place of honor in Madame Bertholet's Jean Michel Frank-designed boudoir on the first floor of their Paris house.

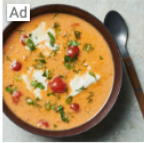
The eye-catching design—one of three, all slightly different, which sold for \$194,500—was the latest manifestation of a trend I'd been clocking for some time: Lacquer, in all its glistening glory, is having a serious comeback.



Apple green lacquer makes a major statement in this Boston home by Nina Farmer. Jared Kuzia



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A blue lacquer dining room is the star of this San Francisco manse by Nicole Hollis. The custom dining table also features a blue urushi lacquer top. Douglas Friedman

When we talk about lacquer today, we're often referring to a surface that is slick, shiny, and catches the light. There are a range of products on the market that give off that signature sheen. But the real deal—or "true lacquer," as it is sometimes called—originated in Asia, with some of the earliest examples found in Japan, circa 7,000 BC. Using this technique, objects were coated with several layers of processed tree sap which, after drying, creates a hard, smooth—and also more durable—finish. Red and black pigments were then created by adding iron oxides to the raw lacquer.

These objects of desire found their way into western interiors by the 16th and 17th century, when European aristocracy began importing them from Japan and China. (Marie Antoinette had a vast collection of Japanese lacquerware that she kept in her private rooms at Versailles.) In a trajectory not so dissimilar to porcelain, Europeans imitated and adapted the technique for their own interiors.



A 19th-century Japanese lacquered cocktail table is the centerpiece of Oliver M. Furth and Sean Yashar's LA living room. Yoshihiro Makino



A custom teal lacquer bed in this historic San Francisco home designed by Abigail Turin. Sang An

Over the decades it has reemerged—in the '20s and '30s when it emerged as the finish du jour of the Art Deco period (think: early Eileen Gray, who studied lacquer before heading in a more industrial direction), and in the 1970s when it became a statement maker in spaces like Michael Boyer's Paris apartment or Halston's New York home.

In the past few years, the slick, shiny finish has emerged on our radar once again. The 2019 winner of the illustrious Loewe Craft Prize was the Kyoto-based lacquer artist Genta Ishizuka.

Over the last year the lustrous finish has been the star of some of our favorite, refreshingly sophisticated interiors and furniture by emerging firms like Hugo Toro, Akademos, Uchronia, and EJR Barnes. And right now through January 27, you can catch a show of lacquered objects at Paris Galerie Anne-Sophie which ranges from a contemporary urushi lacquer chair by Sylvaini Dubuisson and Sandra Carigliano to a set of circa 1930s bangles by Japanese lacquer artist Katsu Hamanaka.



Circa-1930 lacquer bracelets by Katsu Hamanaka, currently on display at Galerie Anne-Sophie Duval Photo: Galerie Anne-Sophie Duval /photo Maxime Riché



The slick, robin's egg blue lacquered dining table makes a serious statement in a historical Seattle estate designed by Clive Lonstein. Douglas Friedman

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The cabinetry in this Art Deco Atlanta manse by designer Bradley Odum was lacquered and repainted in Benjamin Moore's Lafayette Green. Mali Azima

“We use it in almost every project,” explains Aurélien Raymond, one half of Paris-based duo Akademos, who has used lacquer on headboards, dressers, tables, doorways, and more. In his business partner Costanza Rossi’s [Paris flat](#), the duo applied it to bookshelves in the living room to create what he calls a “wow effect.” “We generally use it to underline details we wish people to notice through our interiors,” he explains. “The human eye is naturally drawn to shininess.”



More practically, though, that shine can work wonders to enlarge a space, adding more depth to otherwise petite rooms. Mexican French designer Hugo Toro’s own, rather compact [Paris apartment](#) is an enviable example. “I used lacquer in a yellow shade to visually enlarge the space by emphasizing the vertical lines,” he explains of the flat, where the dining table, console, and more are also slicked in shine. In Toro’s buzzy redo of Villa Albertine in New York, he used decorative wall panels made with crackled lacquer. “It captures light and creates variations throughout the day, bringing a mysterious or boudoir atmosphere,” he explains.



A lacquered ceiling, dining table, and console in Hugo Toro’s Paris apartment Matthieu Salvaing

EJR Barnes, a London-based designer, traces the trend to, “a strong resurgence of interest in the weirder corners of the Deco Moderne movement.” It’s an idea he explored in his [recent solo show](#) at New York’s Emma Scully Gallery, in which industrial materials like stainless steel were set with cast glass, horsehide upholstery, and, yes, lacquer. In particular, his [Emergency Best Friend Cocktail Plinth](#), designed to hold champagne flutes, caught our eye. “A high gloss lacquer finish felt like the best way to cement a certain elegance in the work,” he explains of the decision, the first time he’s used lacquer to this effect.



EJR Barnes’ Emergency Best Friend Cocktail Plinth. Joe Kramm

“I think the trend for lacquer finishes at the moment also has to do with a want to use certain strong colors in a way that feels classic and not too shouty,” he continues. “It has that slightly off-kilter, early 20th-century elegance that is so particularly well loved at the moment.” But Barnes is looking to push the craze into the next age, with plans to explore less traditional applications of lacquer in his work. Applying it to door frames or ceilings less precisely with a brush, perhaps? “That feels quite anarchic in comparison to these hyper-revered smooth and shiny objects of the past.”

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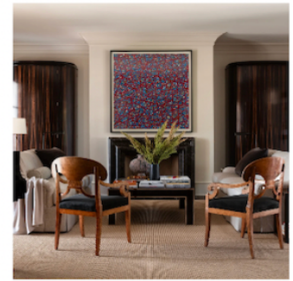
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