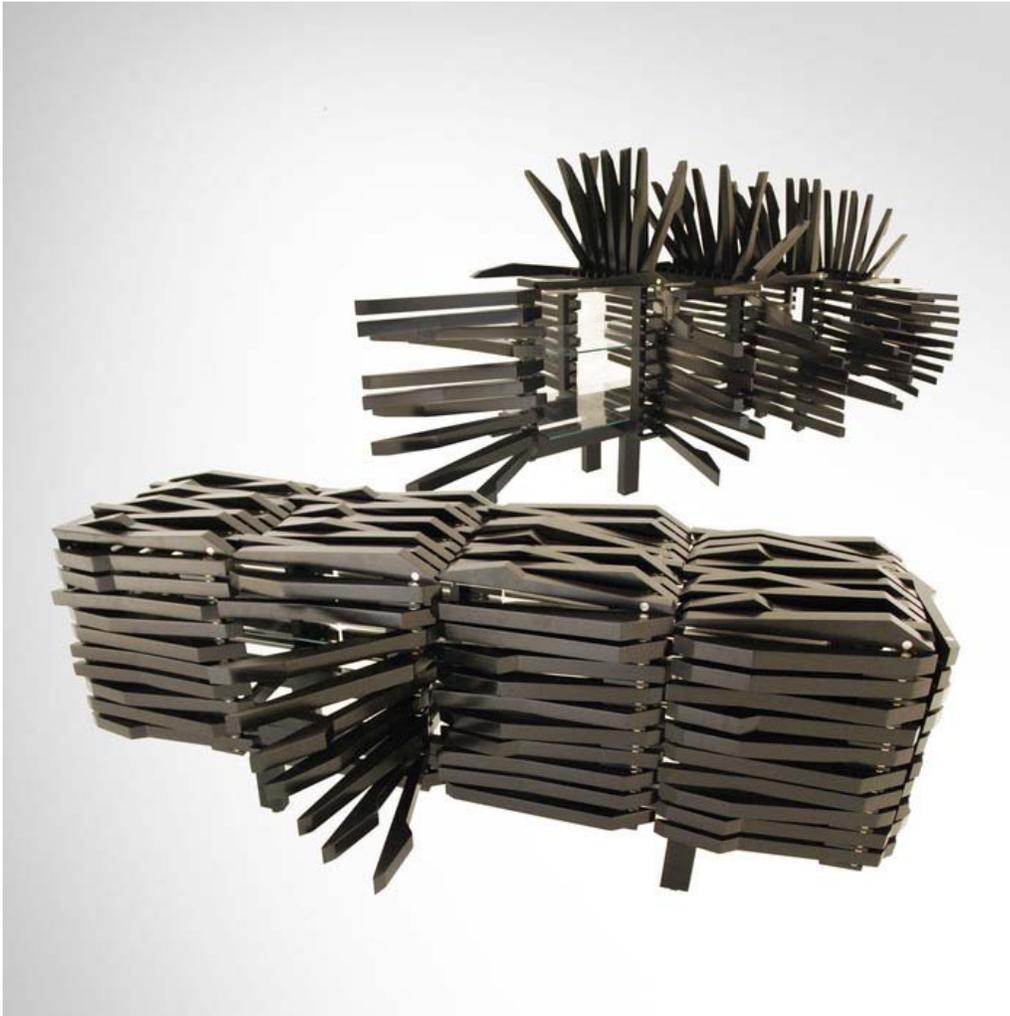


how to spend it

Cabinets of curiosity

Contemporary treasure chests can be as extraordinary as the precious objects they contain. It's a playful role reversal that is captivating collectors, says Nicole Swengley



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NICOLE SWENGLEY

Audible gasps of surprise could be heard when visitors spotted one standout piece at the Design Miami/Basel fair in June. Crafted in polished and patinated bronze, with 24ct gold leaf, the limited-edition Chartres cabinet by Antwerp-based Studio Job is a large, up-ended replica of the Gothic Chartres Cathedral, complete with the pointed pinnacles of its northern and southern elevations. This is not just a dramatic architectural reproduction, however, as the rear of this

opulent cabinet – depicting the cathedral’s cruciform floor plan – opens to reveal interior storage space where collectors can keep objects as precious as the cabinet itself.

“People were completely gobsmacked by the piece because there’s nothing else like it on the market,” says Loic Le Gaillard, co-founder and co-director of Carpenters Workshop Gallery, who launched the cabinet at Basel. “It stretches the idea and execution of a design into the realms of contemporary art and sculpture. The level of detailing in the bronze is remarkable. It took guts and courage to push the boundaries, artistically and financially, to this extent.”

Everyone who saw Chartres (about €320,000) was totally captivated by its extraordinary shape, emotive presence and intricate craftsmanship. And it was a similar story a few weeks later at Masterpiece London, when award-winning furniture-maker Marc Fish’s Babel cabinet (\$70,000) was shown for the first time by Todd Merrill 20th Century. Inspired by intricate shell structures, this tall, tactile cabinet looks more like an undersea lifeform than a collector’s repository. Double doors in the textured-sycamore surface glide open to reveal a metal upright with glass shelves. “It’s very organic – like a seed pod or shell – and takes cabinet-making to a completely new level,” says Merrill. “The technique involves micro-stack-lamination of the sycamore, which is moulded and bent, then carved and lined in copper. The designer’s ability to manipulate the wood in a wholly new way is amazing.” Babel sold to an Oxford-based client who saw it at Masterpiece. As the owner of a contemporary home, he wanted a glamorous and intriguing-looking cabinet, worthy of the personal treasures it would hide or reveal. And it is with this purpose in mind that cabinets have remained popular through the centuries.

“Historically, cabinets have always been important pieces of furniture,” says London gallerist David Gill. “What’s new is that collectors want cabinets that are works of art in themselves. Previously, they were quite functional – a place to store precious objects. Now they need to look as fabulous as their contents.” He considers the current trend for owning such statement pieces as part of a long tradition. Cabinets of curiosities – or cabinets of wonder as they were sometimes called – emerged in the 16th century when they housed a bewildering array of objects and natural specimens chosen to reveal the owner’s connoisseurship and arouse a sense of awe in visitors. Now, playing with roles, it’s the cabinet itself – as much as the objects inside – that is designed to stimulate a response.

One of Gill’s favourites is the Organ cabinet (price on request; edition of eight) created by Swiss-born Paris-based designer Mattia Bonetti. This glossy, lacquered cabinet “floats” above gleaming pipework as finely fashioned as any grand church organ. “The dimensions of the pipes create a playful geometry, while the various finishes – chrome, stainless steel, tinted lacquer – offer so much for the eye to contemplate,” enthuses Gill.

Eye-catching cabinets have become something of an obsession for Bonetti. “There are no restrictions on the creative process, which is why I love designing them,” he says. “You start with a simple shape and can do anything from there on. I like creating a contrast between the basic, functional part and some very striking, elaborate elements.” He cites Liquid Gold (\$125,000; edition of five available at Paul Kasmin Gallery) in which gold-plated bronze “liquid” drips randomly over a cabinet made by casting aluminium and adding a border of semiprecious pink rock crystal. Meanwhile, Bonetti’s cubist-inspired Trésor (€82,000; edition of eight available at Galerie Catberro), which is embellished with gilded and nickled brass on a eucalyptus and birch

vener, brings to mind the work of artist Piet Mondrian.

“Our clients often have inner sanctums where significant *objets d’art* and collections are displayed and admired,” says Pippa McArdle, co-founder of Bespoke Global, an online design broker. “Crafting a cabinet that conceals or reveals these objects and maximises their impact requires careful customisation by our artisans.” By way of example, she cites Dime, a wall cabinet (£33,329) made by London-based Splinter Works, which was founded by Miles Hartwell and Matt Withington in 2009. The studio’s designs are characterised by opposing attributes, such as solidity and weightlessness or motion and stillness, and this visual trickery works well in Dime, whose spherical, shuttered form was inspired by a spinning coin. Individual crescent-shaped rosewood segments glide open to reveal shelves and a drawer, adding a sense of mystery and revelation to this intriguing piece.

A more anthropomorphic approach is taken by Algerian-born, Paris-based designer Taher Chemirik. “I imagined my cabinets as an engaged couple – different, yet in perfect dialogue and harmony,” he says. “The Naive [€72,000] embodies spring. She wears a lacy brass and mahogany gown made of a constellation of handcrafted flowers. The petals reflect in the bevelled mirror-glass shelves. Some of the flowers have a polished mirror finish; others are satin, brushed or distressed with a hammer.”

“The Naive’s Fiancé (€72,000) is a knight in a parade outfit with a hexagonal base, brass grid and moss agates, plus roundels and rectangles in wood,” adds Chemirik. “He is strict in structure, yet lyrical in the decoration of copper flowers and semiprecious stones. Standing the two cabinets side by side highlights their differences and similarities. The main link between them is a wheat stalk – a symbol of fertility – which Naive wears on her hip and Fiancé as a belt.” The jewel-like appearance of these highly crafted cabinets owes much to Chemirik’s earlier work – designing jewellery for more than 20 years for fashion labels such as Chloé, Hermès, Balenciaga, Chanel, YSL, Roger Vivier and Loewe, alongside creating his own line of handmade jewellery.

Still, his choice of materials remains very much in the French decorative-arts tradition – a stylistic vocabulary also espoused by designer Christophe Côme. Having studied under French sculptor Louis Derbré, where he learnt to cast bronze, Côme initially specialised in sculpture and jewellery before starting to explore furniture in the mid-1990s. Initially inspired by the potential of architectural wrought iron, his work really took off when he began to incorporate industrial glass. Highlights from an outstanding series of cabinets – each unique – include Tube (\$50,000), Onyx (\$40,000), Large Glass Etagère (\$60,000), Irregular Enfilade (\$60,000) and Triscota (\$75,000). “Christophe is always playing with luxurious materials,” says contemporary design specialist Cristina Grajales, whose New York gallery sells his work. “His cabinets are classical yet innovative. You can put them in a modern environment or an 18th-century interior. They’re elegant, practical and timeless – that’s what my clients like about them.”

Challenging the paradigm that cabinets should comprise a box with two doors, the Chilean-born, New York-based designer Sebastian Errazuriz reveals how differently it can be done. His conceptually ambitious and technically brilliant Porcupine (\$75,000; edition of 12) is inspired by Japanese samurai armour, as well as its spiky namesake. The cabinet has a flexible “skin” with articulated wooden “quills” that allow access to its contents from any angle. The

astonishing shapes created as the various parts unfold are as far removed from a conventional cupboard as you could imagine.

“Errazuriz is a very cerebral designer and also very provocative,” says Grajales. “Porcupine is a magical piece. It’s so imaginative and kinetic.” Her clients are clearly captivated, too. Within five minutes of launching the piece at Design Miami in 2010, Grajales had made her first sale. Errazuriz’s latest design, Kaleidoscope (\$60,000; edition of 12) is another game-changer. This seemingly traditional walnut cabinet, which launched at Design Miami/Basel in June, opens to reveal an illuminated landscape of multi-angled mirrored glass, while two peephole views of the interior from one end pay homage to the optical instrument that inspired it.

Designers who reimagine traditional cabinetry techniques, shapes and materials are also finding enthusiastic audiences for their work. The Heritage sideboard (£18,804; edition of 20) by Boca do Lobo, for example, resembles a stack of irregularly sized books. Its façade is clad in handpainted ceramic tiles featuring historic Portuguese buildings, while the interior is lined with gold leaf.

“There’s definitely a trend away from minimalist storage units to more opulent designs,” says London-based designer Andrea Felice. “Our clients want great interiors in their cabinets, too – beautiful wood grains, dovetailed drawers, leather linings, mirrored shelves.” As the grandson of master carver Riccardo Felice and son of a former professor of cabinet-making, you’d expect Felice to employ conventional joinery techniques. What you might not anticipate is his desire to inject humour into fine craftsmanship. The mischievous result is Beelzebub (£24,000), a pink, copper-clad cuboid cabinet sitting on four curvaceous legs with a giant anatomically accurate aluminium-winged fly embellishing its façade.

Or how about a cabinet resembling a stack of firewood? As is the case with New York-based Antoine Schapira’s Endgrain Commode (\$18,500), comprising fruitwood-branch end grains embedded in resin and topped with slate. Or a wall cabinet shaped like an accordion in full play? Here Schapira, who trained as an *ébéniste* (cabinetmaker) at the Ecole Boulle in Paris, employs the curvaceous shape to create an appearance of weightlessness. Made from Brazilian rosewood veneer, with attractive variations caused by the depth of the sap, the Accordion cabinet (\$35,000) begs to be touched. “I like to make the wood feel alive, smiling, in motion,” explains Schapira.

Even when a designer is influenced by master woodworkers as innovative as George Nakashima, Wharton Esherick and Wendell Castle, it’s still possible, it seems, to take an entirely fresh approach to cabinetry. Massachusetts-based artist Michael Coffey uses exotic hardwoods to handcraft the sculptural form uniting two separate parts of his Touch & Go cabinet (\$66,000). Part artwork, part functional storage unit, this is contemporary cabinetry at its finest. “I purposely designed the rectilinear cabinets so that the slinky, central sculpture has little competition in attracting attention,” says Coffey. “The cabinets are elevated on tiptoe, as it were, with the sculpture hovering, about to take flight like a startled bird.” And letting the imagination take flight is exactly what a cabinet of wonder should do.

Andrea Felice, 1A Hexham Road, London SE27 (07931-871 928; www.andreafelice.co.uk) and see Bespoke Global. **Antoine Schapira**, 600 Palisade Avenue, Studio 305A, Union City, New Jersey 07087 (www.antoineschapira.com) and see Bespoke Global. **Bespoke Global**, +1212-537 0112; www.bespokeglobal.com. **Boca do Lobo**, Palácio das Artes, Largo de S Domingos, 4050-545 Porto,

Portugal (+3519-1093 6335; www.bocadolobo.com). **Carpenters Workshop Gallery**, 3 Albemarle Street, London W1 (020-3051 5939; www.carpentersworkshopgallery.com). **Christophe Côme**, www.come.fr and see Cristina Grajales Gallery. **Cristina Grajales Gallery**, 4th Floor, 10 Greene Street, New York, NY 10013 (+1212-219 9941; www.cristinagrajalesinc.com). **David Gill Galleries**, 2-4 King Street, London SW1 (020-3195 6600; www.davidgillgalleries.com) and branch. **Galerie BSL**, 23 Rue Charlot, Paris 75003 (+331-4478 9414; www.galeriebsl.com). **Galerie Catberro**, 25 Rue Guénégaud, 75006 Paris (+331-4325 5810; www.catberro.fr). **Marc Fish**, www.marcfish.co.uk and see Todd Merrill 20th Century. **Mattia Bonetti**, see David Gill Galleries, Galerie Catberro and Paul Kasmin Gallery. **Michael Coffey**, www.michaelcoffey-sculptor.blogspot.com and see Bespoke Global. **Paul Kasmin Gallery**, 293 10th Avenue, New York, NY 10001 (+1212-563 4474; www.paulkasmingallery.com). **Sebastian Errazuriz**, www.meetsebastian.com and see Cristina Grajales Gallery. **Splinter Works**, 01429-538 835; www.splinterworks.co.uk and see Bespoke Global. **Studio Job**, www.studiojob.be and see Carpenters Workshop Gallery. **Taher Chemirik**, www.taherchemirik.com and see Galerie BSL. **Todd Merrill 20th Century**, 65 Bleecker Street, New York, NY 10012 (+1212-673 0531; www.merrillantiques.com).