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MASTER OF ART DECO EMILE-JACQUES RUHLMANN

The sensual yet precise silhouettes and technical perfection of Emile-Jacques Ruhlmann's furniture have inspired a red-hot global revival of his 1920s aesthetic. Mark C O'Flaherty reports

There is a world of interior design that rarely makes it onto the pages of magazines. It is closed and private, defined by discreet wealth and power. Its rooms are filled with canvases that break records in auction rooms and with furniture that has nothing to do with the edgy displays at fairs in Milan and Scandinavia. Instead, with its balletic, curved, needle-thin tapering and dark, graphic and opulent materials, it echoes the most directional designs of the 1920s and 1930s. Some of it is antique, but much of it has been created recently, in bespoke fashion, by the likes of Pollaro in New Jersey, Atelier Viollet in New York and Rupert Bevan and Black & Key in London. It looks modern and luxurious and it all has one common denominator – the late art-deco French visionary Emile-Jacques Ruhlmann.

Aesthetically, the style is a mix of drama and fragility. It is refined and shamelessly elitist. Ruhlmann, who died at the height of the deco era in 1933, said of his designs: "Only the very rich can pay for what is new and they alone can make it fashionable." While the design industry has gone through several modernist and egalitarian revolutions since Ruhlmann's pronouncement, his point, as he made it, is still valid. His style of furniture looks more at home, and more contemporary, than anything else ever could in these truly grand environments. Pollaro's sculpted Macassar-ebony club chairs, upholstered in hand-tooled leather and with bronze feet (from \$28,000), breathe a very different air from the machine-

made, factory-line objects of much modern design. Similarly, Rupert Bevan's wenge-veneer tables, inlaid with mother-of-pearl (£12,500), are produced for homes that have had every detail lavished on them. It is something of a wonder that furniture this beautiful and this extraordinary exists.

Tastemakers and collectors have been in the Ruhlmann loop for some time. Restaurateur and aesthete Mr Chow has been fixated with him for decades and his self-designed Los Angeles mansion is filled with original tapered-leg consoles and desks, flanked by his incredible collection of artwork by Ruscha, Haring and Basquiat. "A long time ago, Bauhaus was my inspiration," he says. "It was anti-art deco, which was seen as too decorative. A lot later, deco was watered down. But when I discovered Ruhlmann's work, it changed my way of thinking – he was the master of deco. All my architectural inspiration now comes from him."

It's the evergreen, radical and contemporary nature of Ruhlmann that makes the look so popular and so ripe for revisiting, even in the most avant-garde of design circles. Rick Owens, known for his strong, architectural and often brutalist approach to fashion, has created limited-edition furniture that takes its cue from the French master. For instance, there is his marble 2Prong bench (price on request) that supersedes the look and angles of Ruhlmann's pieces. "I've always defined modern as finding the most graceful, simple line from point A to point B," explains Owens, "and Ruhlmann is about simple, graceful lines. He is decorative, but minimal at the same time."

The term "Ruhlmann style" is a hot

and emotive description in online auctions, and Ruhlmann-inspired sconce lights and chandeliers can be found in any decent lighting store, but the most significant development in the popularity of the Ruhlmann look relates to those new high-end pieces spawned by the originals. And there's good reason why.

"A year ago or so, I was walking down Madison Avenue," says furniture designer Christopher Guy, "and although I could barely see through one store window owing to the reflection of the sun, I was stopped in my tracks by the silhouettes of two pieces of furniture. They were a desk and dressing table by Ruhlmann and I'd have died to own both. Just one issue – they were each \$3.5m."

To create a holistic Ruhlmann interior is within the reach of only a select few. The market has heated to an incredible point. It was kick-started back in the 1970s when Warhol and Saint Laurent began their collections, but as Istdibs dealer Stephen Kelly of Kelly Gallery in New York, explains: "The change in the past five years is that the market has gone global." While reproductions and "inspired by" versions, such as the Savoy bed (from £3,720) by Black & Key, which channels Ruhlmann's Soleil bed design, or the matching Arc bedside tables (£6,132 per pair), may not have the resonance of having "been there" in the same way as an antique, they are created with the same skill and attention to quality of materials and finish. Pricing aside, they also have the edge on the originals in at least one key area: they are all immaculate. And with this kind of work, the polish and freshness is crucial. As Kelly says of the vintage pieces that are the source of the style: "Ruhlmann created everything

with elegant lines and technical perfection. He made wood look opulent by using exotic Macassar ebony, amboyna, rosewood and amaranth, and employed shagreen, ivory, tortoiseshell and lacquer to enhance his unique designs."

Accouter Design in London is currently working on a major two-year project for a client, creating a lavish deco-themed home. "We are commissioning bespoke pieces for it," says Accouter's director, Stella Savage. "There are many influences we have taken from Ruhlmann, in particular the diamond patterning found on various cabinets that gave rise to wall-panelling concepts for the family living area."

While this client wants to immerse himself in art deco, most mix Ruhlmann-inspired pieces with other styles. This more eclectic approach can create an interesting visual frisson and accentuate some of the wilder graphic elements of deco. Atelier Viollet recently worked on a house in Austin, Texas, that mixed one woman's passion for deco with her husband's interest in Mayan culture. "She had bought original Ruhlmann pieces in Paris and New York," says designer Jean-Paul Viollet, who owns the atelier; "and I was called on to design and fabricate additional furniture. The result is an assembly of valuable art deco with beautiful Spanish-style furniture, in a Mayan castle. It is totally unexpected, but the result is incredible."

The Viollet range includes a Macassar-ebony bed (\$81,500), featuring a mother-of-pearl inlay and integrated nightstands instead of a headboard. The latter element is pure Ruhlmann, as is the top of Viollet's dining table (\$60,000). The

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sunburst pattern on the surface is radiant with mother-of-pearl, rather than the ivory that Emile-Jacques would have used in the 1920s.

It is important to distinguish Ruhlmann's influence from deco in the broader, more general sense. He really was the master of the movement, and his work had a greater complexity than that of many of his peers. It was infinitely more sophisticated than the kitsch homage of today's chain-store "deco-inspired" mirrors and lamps.

"Whereas some art deco can essentially just be assemblages in geometric forms, Ruhlmann's work is more like stylised classical furniture," says Rupert Bevan. "It is much more aerodynamic." The materials, as much as shape, set him apart. "He used elements that were semi-precious and rare, and still are rare today – perhaps even more so – so they still exhibit opulence."

That said, Ruhlmann's work was never showy or gauche. "His designs offer a sense of luxury while not being ostentatious. They exude an understated elegance," says Richard Davidson, chairman of Davidson London, which creates wonderful Ruhlmannesque Charlton side chairs (from £3,037) in high-gloss black sycamore, and Carlton tables in high-gloss stone sycamore (£11,720), with polished-nickel details. "Much of the modern furniture made today in dark-figured wood has excessive decoration," says bespoke furniture

maker Rupert Cavendish. "It is specifically designed to appeal to the 'oligarch market'. By contrast, Ruhlmann used beautiful woods, but he never wanted them to vie for attention with the actual furniture design." Cavendish channels the Ruhlmann silhouette and style but creates pieces in lighter woods, such as burr ash and blond masur birch. The beds (from £12,500) and dining tables (from £10,000) are still very much, as Cavendish says, "statement pieces".

Some designers have taken this aesthetic and shifted it several gears. David Linley is synonymous with a certain kind of refreshed deco style – thanks in part to the suites Linley Interior Design has created at Claridge's. Many of Linley's designers' cues have come directly from Ruhlmann. "To pick some specifics," says Linley, "there is the bow front of a desk, the fluting on a torpedo leg and the fine lattice stringing on a chiffonier." While there had been a very literal art-deco line at Linley for some time, newer pieces have taken a more experimental direction. He adds: "Ruhlmann's work was not a pastiche of what had gone before; instead, he modernised traditional techniques and steered makers to innovate." The recently introduced Graft collection – in collaboration with designer Simon Hasan – illustrates his point. Within the range, console tables (£5,950), side tables (£2,750) and coffee tables (£6,500) have been given complex marquetry in brass and steel that showcases the graphic

nature of the wood. They strike a glamorous, rich chord that can be traced back to the 1920s, but still look unmistakably 21st century. The marquetry works against, or indeed with, the natural imperfections in the wood – imperfections that are customarily worked out before production. It represents a new accent in a subtly developing, very specific and rarefied dialect of design.

Similarly, designer Christopher Guy doesn't create obvious reproductions, but still claims Ruhlmann as his key influence. "A straight line remains a key element in modern design," says Guy. "But I learnt from Ruhlmann that curves have to be spot-on if they are to be sensual and elegant. Even when I came to patent my Chris-X leg [in evidence in much of Guy's work, including his stool-like Ferragamo chair, from £2,325], which has become the most recognisable element of my designs, it came with that curve." His leather Grosvenor club chair (from £4,441) is a particularly elegant piece, with a wonderful, sweeping backwards lean to its silhouette.

In what many might see as a surprise move, the actor and architecture enthusiast Brad Pitt designed a range of limited-edition pieces (from \$30,000) two years ago with Frank Pollaro, the world's leading authority on all things Ruhlmann and whose company produces Ruhlmann-inspired furniture of superlative quality. "Some of the Ruhlmann spirit is in

the fine details of those pieces," says Pollaro. "The choice of a gentle curve, the addition of a jewellery-like ornamentation, or the combination of two special materials."

Pitt-Pollaro's Long Run table (\$175,000) looks like classic Ruhlmann that has been digitised and teleported to another dimension. It would make a fine companion piece to Rupert Bevan's Prune Sombre lacquered TV cabinet (from £25,000), with its dark-purple high-gloss sheen and the choreographed chaos of the brass zig zags across the façade. These are forward-thinking pieces of design, but the original DNA of Ruhlmann is still evident.

The customers for Pollaro's super-luxe Ruhlmann-redux objects include media mogul David Geffen, CEO Larry Ellison and financier Sandy Weill, all names associated with the most contemporary of pursuits. "We created a round Macassar-ebony dining table with synthetic ivory inlays and a nickel foot-rest [\$225,000] that is a perfect example of Ruhlmann's modern style," says Pollaro. "It would have fitted well in a 1932 interior, and will fit equally well in a 2014 interior. The industrialisation of the 1920s dictated a cleaner, more modern language. Ruhlmann invented and disseminated this through glossy finishes and sophisticated materials. It was modern in 1925 and it still feels modern today."