

luxury briefing.

issue 120 September 2008

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Private equity and luxury

First half results

Why luxury is looking good



required reading.

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Meta

Getting *physical*

The Meta collection of contemporary furniture and objects was instigated by none other than a 150-year-old traditional antiques house, Mallett. The antithesis of machine-age production, Meta is proof that quality, attention to detail and thoughtful selection of materials and construction is as desirable today as it was in the past. KATE PATRICK takes up the story

LOOKING to one's archives is a dependable way to find inspiration for new designs, be they in fashion, watches or objects. With its eye-catching new collection of 11 contemporary objects and pieces of furniture, developed under the brand name of Meta, the 150-year-old London-based antiques dealership Mallett has gone a step further. It was not so much the function or form of 18th and 19th-century art, furniture and lighting that provided the inspiration, as the materials, techniques, time and love that were employed in creating them.

The Meta collection (the name implying 'change without losing what's gone before'), first revealed at the Salone del

Mobile fair in Milan earlier this year, currently showing at Mallett's Madison Avenue outpost and due in London for October Frieze Week, is the culmination of a three-year plan by Mallett to infiltrate the lucrative contemporary design market on its own uncompromising terms. Flush with cash from the sale of a George II palace in west London, and with even some of their traditional customers expressing an interest in contemporary design, Mallett's shareholders began to look at ways of expanding without losing the core values of this great antiques business.

Managing Director Giles Hutchinson-Smith explains: "Our idea was to create really beautiful pieces to sit in people's homes, by bringing together the trinity of great design, materials and manufacture. Part of this involved rediscovering processes and materials that had not been used since the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries, and which had a certain magic about them. We were, in a sense, looking back to go forward. We wanted every piece to have its own, whole story."

The alchemy to make this happen was provided by independent creative directors Louise-Anne Comeau and Geoffrey Monge (previous clients Swarovski, Stella McCartney, Thomas Heatherwick), who introduced currently fashionable design teams: Tord Boontje, Matali Crasset, Barber Osgerby, Asymptote, Wales & Wales. Then, with help from Mallett which routinely uses master craftsmen around the world for restoration work, they spent a year sourcing and interviewing 170 workshops from France, Italy, the UK and US, Russia and Germany (not a Chinaman to be found), whittling them down to around 50 whose skills would be deployed to craft reality from fantasy. They even had to pitch to some ateliers, such as the demand for certain artisans' work.

Ideas for pieces and – Mallett's great forte – the materials that could be used to make them were workshopped, and a picture of what could be achieved emerged gradually from the creative furnace. (Hutchinson-Smith once remarked that it was like sitting down with Thomas Chippendale and discussing what to make.) Interestingly, both designers and craftspeople



Hanging lantern by Matali Crasset

observed that no one had previously sought to bring them together; and each group found, to its excitement, that there was a great deal to learn from the other.

Mallett's President, Henry Neville, hoping to attract a younger, affluent group, equally believed that the Meta offering would not devalue an antique environment, merely lend a different focus. As a 'trust brand', Mallett has the power to lead some of its traditional customers into this brave new world. Alongside these, it was believed that the Meta collection could also attract collectors – not just of the chosen designers, but of great design in general. "There has been a seminal change in collecting over the past 10 years," says Hutchinson-Smith. People are better educated and informed, and more relaxed about mixing old and new, hanging, say, a Lucien Freud over an antique commode; many people want to live with less 'clutter' and cleaner lines. Provenance is also critical: people need to know who it's designed by, where it's been, where it's going; and also its historical context. The Meta collection ticks a lot of the right boxes for today."

The Meta moment is certainly a feast for the senses. Edward Barber and Jay Osgerby's bronze and marble reading table was made at the Venini glassworks in Venice. Its glass shade, which pushes mouth-blowing to its limit, was a challenge even for Venini's top master craftsman.

Matali Crasset's exquisitely balanced, diamond-shaped hanging lantern is made from a silver/nickel alloy called *paktong*, brought in the 18th century from China and used in gun barrels and fireplaces because it didn't tarnish. Mallett sent a 1720 candlestick to a specialist foundry to be analysed and at Heritage Metalwork in Pennsylvania the 'bastard metal' was reproduced. The glass panels are handblown, and each lantern then takes two weeks to polish.

Also demanding of time and skill is Asymptote's Ivo 03 coffee table, designed by Hani Rashid (brother of Karim). Forged of fine steel cut into diamond shapes which throw out a strange blue halo, it comes from Tula in Russia, where furniture set with gold and ormolu, with the same blue hue, was made for

Catherine the Great's palaces. The Tula foundry also makes armaments, a twist which is currently holding up production of the Meta piece, due to Russia's military engagement in Georgia. It's a quirk of fate which may even, perversely, add value to its collectability. Orders have already been taken for the coffee table from within Russia.

The most labour-intensive piece is the Fig Leaf Cabinet from Tord Boontje. This is a dreamy casement of 616 enamelled glass fig leaves, each one taking 10 hours to complete and signed by its enamellist. At £350,000 it's a collector's item; but Monge has described it as a functional piece with integrity, whose value lies in being a beautiful object to be loved and lived with and not put on a pedestal.

Mallett has undertaken to make any of the 11 pieces to order, which, though requiring a customer to be patient for weeks or even months, arguably makes the end result more desirable than if it were part of a murky 'limited edition'. In practice, because of the timescales and complexity involved, it's unlikely that customers will find the same object gracing their next door neighbour's drawing room. Mallett set aside a relatively modest £1m to finance this odyssey, and hopes to start making returns to shareholders within the year.

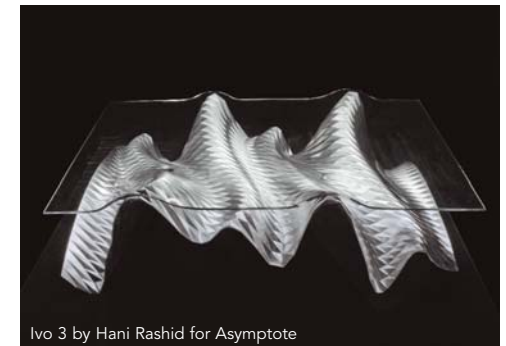
What of the prevailing moral and economic climate – a rather different spectrum through which to view this project now than when it was begun three years ago? Hutchinson-Smith is candid that Mallett viewed it as a commercial enterprise as well as a unique creative adventure. Prices are set mainly between £20,000 and £90,000, but will they find the potential market reining in spending on both moral and practical grounds? "The economic cycle is tough, but there's a real appetite for incredibly unusual pieces. The human race is determined and energetic and also extraordinarily impatient. Smart people don't want to hang around. Word from the luxury boat market is that they've never had more orders for enormous boats – an amazing symbol of wealth. And those with misgivings about spending will know that they are helping to preserve a rich vein of valuable skills in tiny workshops around the world that are struggling to make ends meet. It's very important that this heritage is not lost."

A second series of objects by a new set of designers, currently being prototyped, is scheduled to appear in June 09. It's still early days, and Hutchinson-Smith says they are waiting to see the world's reaction. If they've got it right, they will hope to be selling pieces from the original collection 10 years from now, such will be their timelessness. With Meta, Mallett has managed not to go downmarket, change its values or compromise on quality, but it may just have changed the shape of its business forever.

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Fig Leaf Cabinet by Tord Boontje



Ivo 03 by Hani Rashid for Asymptote