

From top: Muranti brass, glass, gemstone and resin Pearl table, €62,401. Pinto Paris horn-marquetry and brass Centaures table, €18,000



# TOP NOTCH

Tabletops are turning into canvases for cool creative expression.

**Charlotte Abrahams** feasts her eyes

I think of furniture as interactive sculpture," says artist and designer Chris Wolston, whose sandcast aluminium Body table (price on request, pictured on final page), showcased by contemporary design gallery The Future Perfect, was a highlight at Design Miami last December. "There's a human interaction that comes naturally with furniture and dining tables are at the heart of the home. They also have a surface that can be treated like a painting – and can fulfil a role much like art that hangs on the wall," he says, eloquently summing up a trend brought to the fore at recent design fairs, where standout pieces featured tabletops transformed into creative canvases.

Wolston's practice is rooted in material experimentation and the Body table is a response to the soft, almost fleshy surface produced on the aluminium by the open-face



casting process he employs (where molten metal is poured into a mould packed with sand around a specific pattern). "I wanted to connect that fleshiness with the human form," he says. The various limbs that make up the tabletop were cast from Wolston's drawings and then polished to a mirror shine, reflecting the viewer's gaze.

The last edition of PAD London certainly offered up a feast of dining tables with surfaces so exquisite they erase the line between art and furniture. Design house Pinto Paris' Centaures tables (example pictured left, €18,000) are made from buffalo-horn marquetry arranged in a diagonal, chequered pattern so that the natural gold highlights of the material run like a spine through the centre of each top. "As interior design and decoration becomes more refined, each piece of furniture is expected to bring a unique artistic touch to a home," says founder



and director Davina Pinto Frida. "And, as contemporary 'art de la table' becomes much more sober in style, we have put the decorative accent on the surface of the table."

French artist Ingrid Donat explored a similar idea with the Tribal table (price on request, pictured overleaf), exhibited with Carpenters Workshop Gallery at the same fair. Inspired chiefly by tribal art, the patinated walnut surface has been embellished with bronze marquetry arranged in a pattern that, when viewed from above, forms the shape of a reptile. "Ingrid is one of the contemporary design world's pioneers when it comes to using the very old techniques of inlaying bronze," says the gallery's co-founder Loic Le Gaillard, "and this extraordinary table is the result of that skill. It also expresses the essence of what Carpenters Workshop Gallery is about – sculptural objects that match the quality of what our clients have on their walls. In a beautiful dining room, you need a centrepiece that looks like a piece of art but is also robust enough to use." He cites Constellation C080 (price on request, pictured below right) by rising Lebanese design stars David/Nicolas as another example of the dining table as usable art. Made from slabs of the natural stone Travertine Bronze inlaid with pieces of silvered brass, it is both monumental and visually delicate.

Dutch designer Ruben van Megen is firmly opposed to the idea of what he calls "extreme preserving", insisting that his richly decorative Café 6116 dining tables (from £12,000, pictured below) are, first and foremost, functional pieces of furniture made to be used. His designs are a neat reversal of the tradition that inspired him – the 17th-century western European custom of placing Persian carpets on the top of tables as a way of protecting them. "The ritual goes back to the Dutch Golden Age," he says. "I came across one of these carpeted tables in a café and my first thought was: 'How impractical!' Then I realised how special a Persian carpet is – totally hand-knotted and often



Clockwise from top:  
**Piergiorgio and Michele Cazzaniga for MDF Italia marble dust, bronze and steel Tense Intarsia, £4,338, from Viaduct. Marella Ferrera for Paola Lenti lava-stone, glass, steel and aluminium Sciarra, £17,177, from Viaduct. David/Nicolas for Carpenters Workshop Gallery Travertine Bronze and brass Constellation C080, price on request. Ruben van Megen bronze, Persian carpet and epoxy Café 6116, from £12,000, from Mint**

inextricably linked to the maker and their region. I decided I had to do a modern version." Van Megen's creations are composed of old Persian carpets preserved in epoxy resin and mounted on steel and bronze frames. The tables, full of colour and pattern, are beautiful from a distance but their real impact is evident as one sits down to eat – only then do the nuances of shade, the finely

crafted details and the many scars and marks that speak of the carpet's history come to life.

The inspiration feeding the artistry of designers like van Megen comes from many sources, notably the observation of nature. Portuguese brand Muranti has combined resin with natural stones such as amethyst and rose marble to create a collection of one-off tables (Pearl pictured on



## Each of these tables would take centre stage, but the real joy comes with the intimate engagement of use

opening page, €62,401). "Setting the stones this way is a very difficult process," says Muranti's Miguel Tavares, "but the beauty of using natural materials is that no two stones, and therefore no two tables, are the same. People spend a lot of time sitting around them, so it's important we create something functional that is also a unique piece of art."

James Mair, founder and director of London design showroom Viaduct, believes this desire for uniqueness is a key factor in the dining table's elevation to functional sculpture. "I think an important aspect of this is an ongoing quest for the individual rather than the general production piece," he says. An emphasis on singularity means, of course, that the aesthetic is less likely to filter down to the mid-market – to be cost effective, furniture almost always has to be produced on a larger scale – but the dining table as *objet d'art* is not only found in galleries.

Viaduct has recently taken delivery of two decorative designs. The Sciarra table (£17,177, pictured on previous page) created by the Sicilian fashion designer Marella Ferrera for Paola Lenti, takes the form of a stainless-steel structure topped with lava-stone tiles – each cut by hand and decorated with molten glass, so no two are the same. "They create a surface that brings artistry to the pure and simple architecture of the table," says Ferrera. MDF Italia's Tense Intarsia (£4,338, pictured on previous page) grew out of father and son duo Piergiorgio and Michele Cazzaniga's desire to "go beyond the material". They chose marble dust as a medium, mixed with filler and spread by hand over a composite base to create a layer 3mm thick. This smoothly perfect surface is then engraved with an irregular composition of lines in either white or bronze-gold, before being carefully sanded and finished with a special treatment of paint and natural wax. The effect is a complex, graphic pattern that shifts and changes according to the angle from which it is viewed.

Designer Raphaël Navot's Patchwork table (£5,920, pictured top) for French brand Roche Bobois also draws on the rich complexity of the non-repetitive pattern. Inspired by two types of wood craftsmanship – marquetry and parquetry – the surface is formed from a patchwork of randomly shaped pieces, each one cut and positioned by hand. There are approximately 500 in the large dining table. "There's nothing more beautiful to my eye than an empty table," says Navot, "but such a large open surface in the centre of the room must have some texture and materiality so it can stand alone without being perceived as too cold or rigid. My intention was to make a sculpted piece that will never need adornment."

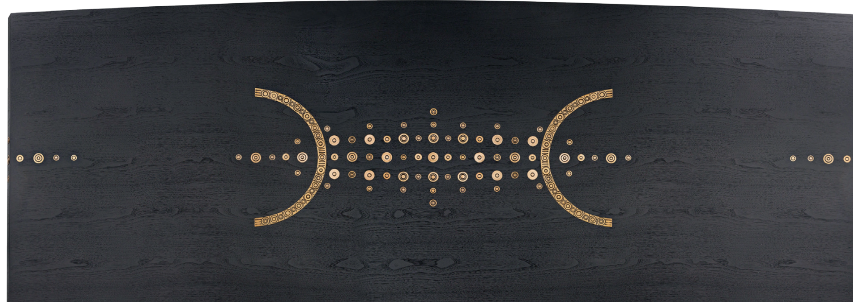
Each of these meticulously conceived dining tables would claim centre stage in the settings they are placed, but the real joy of such designs comes with the intimate engagement of use. Wolston believes the rise of the art dining table indicates a "value shift in the art-furniture market". "We are at a moment when people are becoming comfortable enough with the genre to buy pieces that they put in the very centre of their homes and actually use," he says. And that, according to Ferrera, is when the magic happens. "The moment when the artistic creation comes off the wall and merges with a table," she says, "is the moment when it is lived." ♦

### DINE ART

**Carpenters Workshop Gallery**, 4 Albemarle St, London W1 (020-3051 5939; carpentersworkshopgallery.com). **The Future Perfect**, thefutureperfect.com. **Mint**, 2 North Terr, London SW3 (020-7225 2228; mintshop.co.uk). **Muranti**, muranti.com. **Pinto Paris**, 14 Rue de Mail, 75002 Paris (+331-4013 0000; pintoparis.com). **Roche Bobois**, roche-bobois.com. **Viaduct**, 1-10 Summers St, London EC1 (020-7278 8456; viaduct.co.uk).



From top: Raphaël Navot for Roche Bobois walnut and linden Patchwork table, £5,920. Chris Wolston for The Future Perfect sandcast, mirror-polished aluminium Body table, price on request. Ingrid Donat walnut and bronze Tribal table, price on request, from Carpenters Workshop Gallery



PHOTOGRAPH: CARPENTERS WORKSHOP GALLERY