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How to spend it

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JUDICIOUS JUXTAPOSITIONS



Vellum, the velvety yet tough component of the earliest books and manuscripts, is undergoing an extraordinary renaissance. “Homeowners are always looking for the sensuous and tactile – and vellum is both,” says bespoke furniture maker and restorer Simon Orrell. “Many people are unaware that it can be used in furniture; they are fascinated when they see a piece, and love its richness and texture.”

Similarly smitten is designer Tim Gosling, a director at eponymous firm Gosling, who created a black vellum-topped dining table with internally lit glass-rod pedestal bases for a Mayfair apartment designed by Kelly Hoppen. “Vellum’s exceptional properties give it an aura of glamour, softness and enduring luxury,” he says.

“Its allure is twofold,” declares Paul Wright, general manager at William Cowley, one of the few remaining vellum makers. “No two pieces are ever identical, and the skill levels involved give it a remarkable cachet. Becoming a master craftsman takes at least seven years.”

So, what is vellum? The name derives from the early French word for calf – *vélin* – and it typically comes from a calf or goat (both are used in contemporary furniture). It is considered superior in quality to parchment, which is made from the split skin of a sheep. Vellum’s durability is highlighted by the retention of a practice, dating from 1497, of printing British Acts of Parliament on it for archival use. Yet it is also “a wonderfully unpredictable medium”, says furniture designer Julian Chichester. “The skins vary so much that not only is every piece unique, but variations in colour and tone provide an extensive palette. I recently clad every kitchen-cupboard door and drawer in my home with variegated brown skins.”

Chichester initially encountered vellum quite unexpectedly. “I came across some vintage Jean-Michel Frank pieces in a Paris gallery. A tall, two-door cabinet in calf vellum really stood out. I’d never seen anything like it. The skin’s texture had an almost three-dimensional quality.” It spurred him to use the material in diverse ways. His Cortes desk (from £3,874, pictured on cover), inspired by a 1950s Danish design, has a vellum-wrapped top and gilded-steel legs. The Pollock cabinet (£4,055, pictured far right) contrasts vellum-panelled doors with an aged gold-metal base, while the Royere cabinet (from £4,500) combines brown vellum with oak panels and an aged-brass trim. Meanwhile, grey and ivory vellum create impressionistic clouds on the Rose screen (£2,563), coffee table (£1,697) and side table (£1,020).

“Vellum is extremely versatile, working equally well over large areas or small details,” says Chichester. “The skins look best when contrasted with another material, such as aged brass, gilded steel or fumed oak. Jean-Michel Frank and other French designers working in the 1920s and 1930s combined vellum with shagreen, oak or bronze, which transformed the finish into a very new and exciting medium. It still feels this way today.”

“Vellum was one of Frank’s favourite materials and typifies his penchant for simple materials made precious by the exceptional skills their use requires,” confirms Hélène Dubrule, Hermès Maison’s managing



From left: Fairtlough New York vellum, lacquer, resin and mahogany Reflection Hinged Screen, \$16,400. Jonathan Baring vellum and ebony credenza, £14,880. Julian Chichester vellum, oak and gilded-metal Pollock cabinet, £4,055

the fetted calf

Designers newly smitten with art-deco favourite vellum are experimenting with this skin’s velvety versatility to intriguing effect. Nicole Swengley reports



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director. “Vellum looks as contemporary today as it did in the art-deco period. It was a natural decision to reintroduce some of his original designs [Coiffeuse dressing table, £28,480, pictured overleaf], and we occasionally use it for bespoke pieces, such as a leather and vellum dining table (price on request). Vellum mixes perfectly with other materials, combining easily with different textures and tints in furniture. It also reflects light in a very specific way, which is why it was traditionally used for lampshades. For us, it’s a link between tradition and our contemporary style. It can look very sober and pure or enhance a design with its colour and texture.”

An earlier exponent – the Italian designer Carlo Bugatti, father of car designer Ettore – upholstered chairs, covered tabletops and inlaid desks with vellum

from the 1890s onwards. An encounter at the V&A with his painted-vellum and walnut armchair, created in 1902, proved inspirational for Gosling. “I’ve collected a number of vellum-bound books, but didn’t make the creative leap to furniture until I saw Bugatti’s chair,” he says.

Just as Bugatti experimented by hand-painting directly onto vellum with gold, watercolours or dye, Gosling is similarly pushing design parameters by developing techniques to “print” drawings on vellum using laser printers and archival inks. These printed skins are wrapped around panels by master craftsman Gavin Rookledge, whom Gosling describes as a “medieval conjurer with vellum” and whose firm, Rook’s Books, is increasingly turning to interiors. An imaginative example of their work is the library in a Regent’s Park house, designed for developer London Row, where

vellum-panelled bookcases (about £3,000 per panel, pictured overleaf) are printed with the signatures of architects such as Christopher Wren and Norman Foster, while handwritten architects’ letters enliven the library’s vellum-backed doors. A bespoke globe, with hand-wrapped vellum feet, is the icing on the cake.

A miniature library bookcase (£24,000), made for a client in New York, was the charming outcome of further experimentation. Inspired by a neoclassical pavilion in Kensington Gardens, it features a splay of feather quills, with gesso applied to the vellum and the surface hand-gilded to create a truly luxurious finish. Gosling’s collaborations with interior-design company Todhunter Earle have resulted in a magnificent black vellum and lacquer dining table with bronze inlay and a hall cabinet in linear cracked-black lacquer and vellum. “Both designs push vellum’s boundaries and highlight its wonderful patina,” says director and founder Emily Todhunter.

“Vellum feels like no other material,” says Neil Stevenson, founder and managing director of bespoke furniture maker NEJ Stevenson. “It has a diaphanous quality that plays with light, which brings the whole surface to life. It’s a beautiful material with great relevance to contemporary furniture.” His firm recently installed vellum sideboards (about £6,000) on either side of a fireplace in a Georgian town house and has created vellum coffee tables (£3,000) and decorated various designs with vellum panels. Meanwhile, a home-office desk (£10,200) and matching credenzas (£8,400 each), built by bespoke maker Tagg Furniture, employ high-gloss black frames and legs in smart contrast to the creamy vellum-wrapped desktop, drawers and doors.

Still, handling vellum remains a challenge. “There is no single method for laying it, so we’ve developed our own techniques,” says Orrell. “Colours can vary from pure white, heavily bleached skins through to unbleached skins in highly variegated yellows and browns. Joins can be seen as part of the look of variegated skins, but for a perfect white, flat finish, it’s best to butt vellum-wrapped panels together.” Orrell’s bespoke vellum pieces include hexagonal side tables (from £1,000), two-door cabinets (from £4,000), an elegant mirror (from £1,600) and a Serpentine cabinet (from £5,000) with an undulating façade. Meanwhile, a handsome chest of drawers (from £5,000) features a scored inlay, painted and lacquered on unbleached vellum. Another fan of unbleached vellum is Harriet Maxwell Macdonald, creative and executive director of interiors brand Ochre. “We use it in its natural, undyed state on our custom-made screen [£11,700, pictured overleaf] in colours from ivory to pale tan. The bespoke nature of each skin adds to its exclusivity.”

Pure white, however, is interior designer Joanna Wood’s favourite hue. “Few natural materials are as durable as vellum, yet come in the very whitest white,” she says. “Vellum has a wholly contemporary feel. I love its organic eggshell finish. It has character and sophistication. Ivory or cream looks stunning and we’ve also dyed it grey or blue, as it takes colour very well. I often use it with walnut or contrasted with high-gloss nickel or chrome – it works wonderfully with reflective surfaces.”

One client’s request for a very pale counterpoint to a high-gloss Ralph Lauren rosewood cocktail cabinet resulted in a sleek rosewood table with a pure-white vellum top and a cabinet with vellum door panels and nickel details. Wood has also used vellum for wardrobe doors, coffee tables and a fossil collector’s vitrine. Meanwhile, David Collins Studio combined smoky-grey vellum with oak and nickel in a super-smart hall table for Bangkok’s Ritz-Carlton Residences.

Vellum’s versatility is demonstrated by interior-design firm Taylor Howes, which custom-stained it a tobacco colour for the cigar room of a Kensington property. “Our client initially wanted leather, but we suggested vellum, as it has more character, texture and depth,” says founder and CEO Karen Howes. “We used lacquered vellum for the door panels and the cocktail bar’s back panels, where its high-gloss finish contrasted wonderfully with the



From far left: Ochre vellum screen, £11,700. Hermès vellum and beechwood Coiffeuse dressing table, £28,480. Tim Gosling vellum and oak library door, about £3,000 per panel

backlit onyx on the bar." A different look was created in another property, where Taylor Howes used undyed vellum for the cream wall panels behind the master bed.

"In the hands of the right designer and maker, vellum works brilliantly with any number of materials," says Gwen Carlton, co-founder of online design platform Bespoke Global. "Combine it with bleached sycamore and the piece is a study of subtle tonal variations. Use it with metal and the contrast becomes the story. The most important thing is getting the proportions right."

Carlton first encountered vellum as a young girl visiting her great-grandmother's art-deco home in Miami, where she was intrigued by a tactile pair of Jean-Michel Frank's vellum-covered end tables. Now she encourages Bespoke Global's designer-makers to create contemporary museum-quality pieces. Among them is Jeff Newell, a self-taught furniture designer and maker, and his artistic-director wife Beth, whose Denver-based firm Newell Design has handled projects for Trump Taj Mahal and Ritz-Carlton Toronto and San Francisco, plus private residences from Mumbai to Las Vegas. Together they've produced the chic Gazelle sideboard (\$21,500), in which pale, vellum-covered doors contrast with an ebony frame, and the Gazelle desk (\$16,625), whose elegantly minimal shape allows the material's patina to speak for itself. A more decorative approach is taken by Irish artist Seamus Fairtlough of Fairtlough New York, who handcrafts lacquered-vellum screens with patterns inlaid in black resin (Reflection Hinged Screen, \$16,400, pictured on previous pages) or overlaid with antique gold-plated enamel (Reflection Screen II, \$12,980), while black enamel diagonals on vellum give his Reflection coffee table (\$7,600) a bold, art-deco-inspired look.

"What particularly attracts me is that vellum is one of very few materials that remains white over time and

"In the right hands, vellum works brilliantly with any number of materials – combine it with metal and the contrast becomes the story"

resists yellowing from ultraviolet light," explains Oxfordshire-based furniture designer Jonathan Baring. "Apart from cladding furniture and panelling, we've also developed a technique using lasers to produce decorative marquetry inlays. After a great deal of experimentation with adhesives, substrates, pressings and finishes, we've now established methods that make it much easier to incorporate vellum into furniture and further explore potential uses." A particularly striking example is Baring's ebony credenza with vellum marquetry (£14,880, pictured on previous pages), while an ebony desk (£10,320) is supported by vellum-clad plinths, and a slender chocolate oak console table (£4,080) is gently enhanced by an oval vellum inlay.

Where next for vellum? "I've played around with it in black and white, next to mother-of-pearl, chrome and bronze," says Gosling. "Now I think it could be rather interesting to emboss it." Given the material's longevity, these thrilling contemporary developments should still be enjoyed by generations to come. ♦

THE SKIN CROWD

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