

INTERIORS

Minerals that rock are back in fashion

Adding lapis lazuli, gleaming amethyst or green malachite can add an intriguing look, Emily Brooks discovers

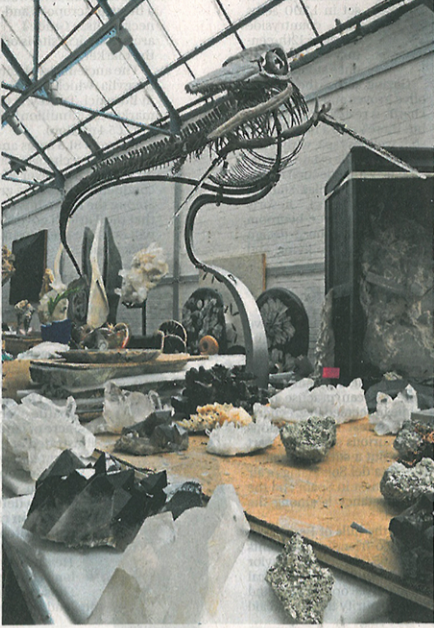
The last time that onyx was a mainstream interiors trend was when smoking was a social pastime, and chunky onyx ashtrays and cigarette lighters adorned many a mid-century modern coffee table. But put those memories aside, because rocks, minerals and semi-precious stones are once more a favourite in design circles, from ultra-rare collectors' items to relatively inexpensive agate slices made into colourful coasters.

Materials such as greener-than-green malachite, or vibrant purple amethyst, are ambiguous and intriguing. They are natural but their saturated colours often look eerily unnatural. There is a little thrill that comes from owning something from a far-flung location, extracted from deep underground, many centuries old.

Lots of semi-precious materials, such as lapis lazuli, have a romantic history that is also intoxicating. Their disordered lines and shapes break up otherwise perfectly ordered, symmetrical design schemes and as well as being beautiful, they are frequently also quite weird-looking – which is part of the appeal.

"I love the irregularity and beautiful imperfections you find in semi-precious stones. Each one is entirely unique and is a one-of-a-kind piece," says interior designer Natalia Miyar.

"I also love their organic earthiness. They bring glamour and a sense of



I love the irregularity and imperfections you find in semi-precious stones'

grounding to an interior. We use them everywhere, from tabletops to accents on furniture pieces.

"I often place rough-cut rock crystal obelisks within a room; their weightiness, combined with their ethereal beauty, creates a perfect balance."

Ornamental stones such as agate have two main design applications: as three-dimensional objects, where a whole geode may be sliced in half to reveal its distinctive banded pattern inside, or as two-dimensional surfaces, with thin slices pieced together to create extraordinary, complex patterns, used for tabletops, furniture and more.

"Integrate semi-precious stones into the home for a touch of sophisticated glamour," says Mark Moussa, the founder and creative director of design company Arteriors, which sells everything from contemporary onyx lighting to quartz-topped tables.

"Stones such as agate and rose quartz, when displayed as a centrepiece, draw attention to a space and make an instant impact. The organic shape and colours found within natural stones make a unique piece of art for the home."

Thinly sliced coloured stone is translucent, coming alive when it is illuminated, so it makes an opulent material for bar-fronts and even for lighting itself. Dar Lighting's Achates pendant, for example, is a striking Sputnik-shaped model with a slice of agate at the end of each prong.

"Backlit stone has an incredibly dramatic effect," says Helen Bygraves of Hill House Interiors. "I have a bar with a smoky quartz front in my own home. We use it a lot in our work as the colour goes well with modern, grey-toned interiors."

Having said that, for a recent apartment in London's Neo Bankside development, Hill House's client had a love

of strong colour, so the bar-front is in a dramatic Dragon Red Onyx, from specialist stone surface company Sheerstone. Its flaming red, orange and yellow tones, when lit from behind, almost seem to flicker and move like molten lava.

While a wider "more is more" interiors trend – a reaction against coolly ordered, pared-down spaces – is also pushing the popularity of semi-precious materials, geological pieces work for all kinds of interiors.

Dale Rogers, who is the design industry's go-to supplier for top stones



and fossils, does not have clients with one particular look. His Belgravia showroom is a treasure trove of objects, from glittering pyrite to thick rose-quartz bowls, but he also keeps a whole warehouse in north-east London to house his full collection, including many colossal pieces that are so big they are perhaps more suited to a bank lobby than someone's home.

"This could go anywhere," says Rogers, pointing to a giant cluster of quartz some two feet wide. "In the house of a crazy, eccentric multimillionaire collector who's got stuff everywhere. But

GET THE LOOK

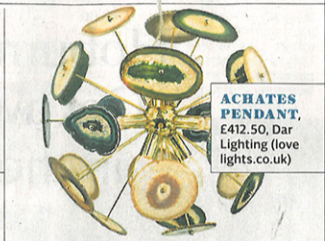
All that glitters'



GOLD/AGATE MIRROR
£149, The French Bedroom Company (frenchbedroomcompany.co.uk)



WOOD/AGATE KNOB
£5.50, Ian Snow (iansnow.com)



ACHATES PENDANT
£412.50, Dar Lighting (lovelights.co.uk)



SELENITE DRINKS CABINET
£24,000, Simon Orrell Designs (simonorell.com)



AGATE COASTERS
£12 for eight, Talking Tables (talkingtables.co.uk)



SPLENDID
A bathroom by Hill House Interiors, left; rose quartz tealight holder, above right, £17.95 (grahamandgreen.co.uk)

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it would also look fabulous on its own, in a completely minimalist space."

Interior designers love Rogers because he sees things from their aesthetic perspective, rather than from a more academic geological viewpoint – prioritising perfect proportions or interesting markings over the sheer size of a piece of stone, for example.

"In every piece, the shape has to be right, the evenness of colour has to be right – I just know how I want the end result to be," he says. Rogers also puts as much effort into the display of objects, with bespoke metal mounts that

TREASURE TROVE
Dale Rogers in his warehouse, main and far left; Scossa crystal salad servers, right, £245, (amara.com)



PERFECT BALANCE
An interior by Natalia Miyar, left

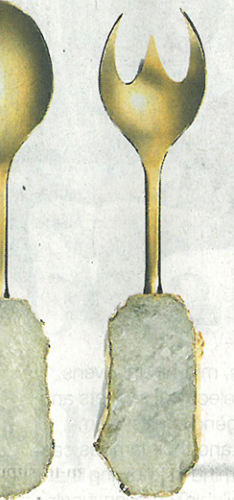
take days to fabricate and polish. He learnt his trade by travelling the world in the days before the internet could help with sourcing, tracking down everything himself. Now, he travels a bit less and relies on a network of contacts, but he still likes to see everything before he buys it. "You can't see the details in a photograph, like whether it's been damaged and stuck back together again."

Rogers is a font of knowledge about where the best of every stone can be sourced: lapis lazuli from Afghanistan (although it is actually sold on via Pakistan), malachite from Zambia and Congo, quartz from Arkansas in the United States, where 20-ton chunks of the stuff are hauled up from the depths of the earth using expensive equipment.

As the popularity of stones and fossils increases, Rogers says: "You have to look even deeper now for the big one-off pieces. But we pride ourselves on going the extra mile and getting those more extreme, rarer things."

Precious materials displayed as specimen objects are one thing, but incorporating them into functional furniture takes a certain talent. Simon Orrell, a furniture designer known for working

A 'more is more' interiors trend is pushing the popularity of these materials



with unusual materials and techniques, has recently developed a series of furniture pieces clad in selenite, a type of gypsum that is a cloudy white colour. It's a brittle material that naturally breaks in one direction – Orrell describes it as having a similar texture to a Cadbury's Flake – so it is hard to work with.

After 18 months of experimentation, Orrell launched his first furniture pieces, including a sideboard and cabinet. The selenite seems to give off an ethereal glow from within that is incredibly alluring. "It looks unique and has an amazing lustre," says the designer. "Selenite is completely off most people's radars, until they see it and are completely wowed by it."

He is currently working on several pieces for interior design firms Douglas Mackie and Collett-Zarzycki, coincidentally for the same ultra-luxurious development, the Glebe in Chelsea.

Artists and designers are also taking the looping lines and fragmented shapes of ornamental stones and minerals to create oversized wall coverings to make a grand statement. Hill House Interiors has several times used the work of Miami-based Alex Turco, who creates huge paintings on aluminium in the style of a swirling piece of agate: they are waterproof so they work as shower screens and in pool and spa areas. For the budget-squeezed, photographic wall murals can make a big impact, too.

What you won't get from a wallpaper or painting are the reported healing effects of crystals and stones, something that many designers buy in to. "I collect semi-precious stone hearts and keep a bowl full of them in my bedroom," says Miyar. "I also try to have a piece of rose quartz with me, which brings love and light. And I love labradorite, which is said to enhance intuition and imagination, which are both key aspects of my job."



PATTERNS
Malachite wall mural, £36 per sq m, (muralswallpaper.co.uk)