



The Art Of Patina

How fine materials age gracefully



Fast furniture is getting a bad press in the US and the UK these days, and rightly so. WRAP, a British organisation dealing with waste, has calculated that people in the UK throw away twenty-two million pieces of furniture every year – six hundred and seventy thousand tonnes. Cheap chipboard has a lifespan of five to seven years. Not because it breaks down in any dramatic way. It simply ages badly, and ageing badly is the most costly design flaw possible in the furniture industry.

In the metalwork industry, the term 'living finish' has long been in use. This refers to brass or bronze deliberately sold unvarnished, in the full knowledge that within a few months they will darken, develop a patina, change colour in places touched by the hand, and remain unchanged where the hand cannot reach. This is not a fault that needs to be rectified with a protective coating. It is the very essence of the product. Someone in this industry must once have sat down and formally documented it: this material is meant to change, and that is its advantage – please include this in the product specification.

In fact, the world's most famous example of patina is an object that nobody associates with interior design. The Statue of Liberty was cast in copper with a colour reminiscent of a new penny – shiny and reddish. It took her some thirty years to develop that characteristic green hue, which we now regard as her true, natural colour. No one is organising fundraisers to restore it to its original hue. Today, the green is more the Statue of Liberty than the copper ever was.



Furniture follows the same path, only on the scale of a desk rather than a monument. American walnut, oiled rather than high-gloss varnished, darkens over time and acquires a depth that freshly cut wood never has. The brass on a drawer handle, touched every day by the same hand in the same spot, will become polished locally to a lighter shade, whilst the rest remains darker – creating a sort of fingerprint of the whole family, developed over the years, which no designer could ever plan in advance. One can only anticipate it and let it happen.

The Japanese have their own technique, kintsugi, in which a cracked vessel is mended with gold rather than thrown away, so that the crack becomes the most visible part of the object, rather than a shameful scar. However, you don't need to travel to Kyoto to reach the same practical conclusion: an object that is allowed to change is cheaper to maintain than one that pretends not to change. You don't need to protect it from life. It is enough simply to live with it.



In Otto's desk, the brass drawer fittings are deliberately left unvarnished for exactly the same reason. In the Ico sideboard, the hand-cast and chiselled brass hanger is designed to have its own unique patina, which will deepen with use rather than be hidden beneath it. This is not an aesthetic whim. It is partly a nostalgia for the past and partly rational materials engineering. This is where the whole difference between a good and a bad material lies: a bad material fears touch and loses out because of it. A good material gains from touch.

A door handle in an old house, polished by thousands of hands whose names no one can now recall, shines brighter today than on the day it was fitted – not in spite of all those hands, but thanks to them. Otto and Ico, like the rest of the collection, are designed with the intention that they will remain in a home for longer than just one season of good taste. Anyone wishing to see them up close will find them in the online studio, alongside the rest of the items that do not ask to be protected from the passage of time, but simply for a little patience.