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Cover story:

London Townhouse designed by Studio Indigo featuring Simon Orrell's Blacklip Two Doored Cabinet photographed by Andreas von Einsiedel Interiors
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Photograph: London Townhouse designed by Studio Indigo photographed by Andreas von Einsiedel Interiors

LUXURIOUS FINISHES

A fresh look is necessary in a world that is driven by a desire to reinvent itself says Simon Orrell

What makes one interior distinct from another is the clever curating by an interior designer of colours, textures, materials and styles to create something that suits the client and their architectural space. Handmade finishes have a huge role to play in that process and can help the design professional achieve a truly original look.

Included in the armoury of finishes that a design professional should have at his fingertips are a number of handmade surfaces that can be applied not just to furniture and accessories, but also to wall finishes and other architectural elements. Shell, shagreen, straw marquetry, mica, parchment, gesso and cracked eggshell offer distinctive effects and are expensive enough to avoid becoming too mainstream.

At the highest end of interior design, there's a lot of interest at the moment in different shells – kabebe, black lip, mother of pearl, hammer shell, tiger brown lip and cowrie to name just a few. Shell offers lustre that makes it very attractive and opulent, but also offers variety since different shells lend themselves to different treatments. Cowrie, for example, can look spotted like a leopard but sand it flat and the surface metamorphoses into a veiny pink marble. Black lip shell is very exotic and sophisticated.

Straw marquetry is going to be more popular as people get to know about it. Straw work is not on a lot of designers' radar at the moment, but those that are using it are loving its intricate patterns and its sheen nonetheless because it feeds into the revival of 1930s finishes.

As a raw material it may sound humble, but with painstaking work it can be magnificently transformed. Its shimmering surface is remarkable and the pattern moves as it catches the light. A sunburst motif or any design

going in different directions has such dynamism. And straw marquetry is never going to be a mass-market finish because it's so hard to do, so its inevitable rarity will preserve its originality.

Mica is another alluring material sometimes seen as a veneer in ultra-expensive refurbishes. It was used by the ancient Egyptians to make mirrors and seen on a luxe desk once belonging to style arbiters Pierre Berge and Yves St Laurent. A type of mineral composed of aluminium silicate, micas can be split into very thin sheets and are prized for their metallic sheen. Multi-layered and resembling filo pastry, the layers come in tones of brown, grey, silver and gold and are ideal for vertical surfaces such as walls, mirrors or cabinet door fronts that aren't exposed to regular traffic.

Shagreen enjoys steady interest and is loved for its texture. Made from the skin of rays, the surface is very grainy because of the spines or papillae and when ground down and polished, the nodules provide contrast. This surface is superb in its natural form and makes any neutral scheme interesting but can also be effectively treated and coloured.

Finishes are vital when it comes to offering the design industry a fresh look, which is necessary in a world that is driven by a desire to reinvent itself.

Scagliola, a composite of plaster, glue and pigments that successfully imitates marble, is a material we are experimenting a lot with along with Selenite. Selenite, wands of crystal made from gypsum, is another new surface for us that could prove to be exciting. We've just made four drum tables for a client in Riyadh that have a luxurious milky finish reminiscent of rock crystal. We love it when experiments can be translated into exceptional pieces of furniture. It makes design so much fun!