

FINANCIAL TIMES

# HTSI

30 SEPTEMBER  
2023

On the ranch with  
**RALPH  
LAUREN**

How one man harnessed  
an empire of style

PLUS

ISABEL ALLENDE  
TALKS TASTE  
LUDOVIC NKOTH'S  
LE CORBUSIER MOMENT  
DEAFNESS AND ME  
INSIDE DIOR'S HIGH-  
JEWELLERY ATELIER



THE FIX



MARK STURKENBOOM OVERGROWN CHANDELIER, €21120, GALERIE- PHILIA.COM

the light in such a beautiful way," he says. Ariane de Rothschild agrees; the CEO of Edmond de Rothschild Group recently bought a vase (pieces available from £4,000 from Spazio Nobile).

Monté is not the only artist at the fair to exhibit works in salt. "For the first time this year, we are seeing a strong presence of designers and artists using salt to make furniture and sculpture," says Patrick Perrin, president and founder of PAD. As well as being valued for its aesthetic appeal, salt is also being used "to encourage the public to see its value and potential".

Salt was once a precious commodity. There is evidence of Aeneolithic salt cellars. The word salary comes from the "salarium" (salt) that Roman soldiers were often paid in rather than money. Wars were fought over control of the Yuncheng salt lake in the Shanxi province of China as early as 6000BC. And in 1930, Mahatma Gandhi protested against the salt tax imposed by Britain on India, kickstarting the independence movement.

French designer Roxane Lahidji uses salt in many of her creations: "We now have freezers; global warming means we use less salt to de-ice roads; and rising sea waters mean that salt is becoming more abundant." Her work with design research program Atelier Luma has been to find "different design applications for it". Lahidji makes sculptural furniture, including striking milky-white marmoreal side, console and occasional tables (from £4,500 from 88 Gallery), using salt harvested from marshes in the Rhône delta. "It has such strong parallels with marble," she says, adding: "The fact that I have taken something fluid from the sea and transformed it into something solid and rock-like, I find quite poetic."

The alchemical process of turning salt into art is a closely guarded secret – not least the precise recipe for the saline solution, which can take years to perfect. During development, Monté's studio was covered floor to ceiling with Post-it notes with different temperatures and volumes of minerals. Both he and Berlin-based designer Lukas Wegwerth (furniture from £12,000 at Gallery Fumi) deploy a process that, broadly speaking, suspends an object in a heated salt solution, gradually cooling the tank over a week to form crystals. The object is re-dipped and cooled to create new layers. It is a slow

and uncertain process: each piece can take weeks to develop and may not always emerge as the artist imagines. "I have abandoned pieces after working on them for weeks," Wegerth says. For Monté that's half the point: "These objects hopefully make people realise that the rate that we mass-produce items is unsustainable."

Lahidji has a different method. She uses a salt solution mixed with tree resin, which allows her to press pieces into moulds. Spherical pendant lights have become a rich seam. "You can invent virtually anything," she says.

And so you can: take Israeli designer Erez Nevi Pana's Crystalline sculptural tables and stools or Utrecht-based atelier Mark Sturkenboom's Overgrown series of chandeliers and candelabras. Architects have taken up the material, including Frank Gehry, who commissioned salt panels to line sections inside The Tower in Arles, unveiled in 2021 (also an Atelier Luma project), while Mále Uribe Forés used salt tiles for a 2020 project, Salt Imaginaries.

While Monté is interested in crystals to explore ideas around the concept of time, Wegwerth came to salt by way of a conversation with the Japanese sculptor Yoshimi Hashimoto about the notion of *kintsugi*, or golden

joinery. When he suspended a much-loved but cracked teapot into a salt solution, he saw crystals forming along the fault lines. "It was fascinating," he says, "as if the crystals had an intelligence about where to grow and heal the piece." Collectors now come to him with found and broken objects, including curator Alice Stori Liechtenstein, who asked Wegwerth to work with damaged antique Meissen porcelain she found in the attic of her castle in Austria.

It's the ultimate transformation story: taking something commonplace and turning it into a glittering prize. Monté concludes: "In creating gallery objects, I feel I'm putting the material back on its pedestal." ■HTSI

Above: the Wall of Salt created by Atelier Luma on Frank Gehry's The Tower in Arles. Below: Roxane Lahidji sea-salt and resin Sensai console, £8,500, 88-gallery.com



PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF ROXANE LAHIDJI AND 88 GALLERY/PAD LONDON. DOR KEDMI, MARK DOHAGE, SANDRA GRAHNI, THORFAT SODIN/CHRISTOPHER WRIGHT OF PENGUINS EGG LTD FOR GALLERY FUJI

TREND  
**FLAVOUR OF THE MONTH**

Jessica Salter finds out how salt became the design world's favourite ingredient

As a child, Isaac Monté would spend hours in his grandmother's damp, hillside basement in Zottegem in Belgium, captivated by the stalactites that grew on the ceiling. "I would watch tiny drips of water fall from their tips and wonder how long it would take them to grow down as far as the ground," he says. His fascination never left him. Now, trained as an architect and product designer, he grows salt crystals in giant stainless-steel tanks in his low-ceilinged studio in Rotterdam, the walls splattered with formations and his hands stained berry-red from the oxides he uses to colour his work.

One of his latest pieces, which he is showing at design fair PAD London this month (10-15 October), is a bulbous vase of pink crystal with delicate ribbons of magenta running through, like sticks of rock. Another is a coiled, glittering pendant light. "Each piece is unique; forming differently and reflecting



LUKAS WEGWERTH CRYSTALLIZATION NO 177 VASE, POA



Top: Salt Marble by Erez Nevi Pana. Above: Lukas Wegwerth Crystallization No 162 vase, POA. Above left: Isaac Monté Crystallized vase, €3,800