

Collecting [+ Add to myFT](#)

Feathers, bones and human hair – the new materials for design

This year's PAD art and design fair showcases work using unusual means to create otherworldly pieces



Unlock the Editor's Digest for free

Roula Khalaf, Editor of the FT, selects her favourite stories in this weekly newsletter.

[Sign up](#)

It was while eating oxtail stew that sculptor Emma Witter discovered her material. “The bones looked like orchids,” she says. “They reminded me of the maquettes in Henry Moore’s studio.” Recognising that here lay an abundant resource, in 2014 Witter began an intensive period of experimentation with the bones of chickens and restaurant waste animals. Besides nutritious broth, once cleaned they provide a lightweight, strong material that can be carved and drilled to create elaborate structures. “They are beautiful, like ready-made sculptures,” she suggests.

Witter is one of a number of designers and artists showing work created from a wide range of unusual materials used in unorthodox ways at this year’s PAD London art and design fair. Besides a box that Witter has made from a giant oyster shell, there will be stools from sisal yarn, lights from beech twigs and human hair, cabinets from silk worm husks, tables from copper wire and paper, and wall pieces from feathers, shells, raw cotton and jute sacks covered in Chinese lacquer.

Luxury has often turned to unusual organic materials. In Renaissance Europe artisans created wonders for princely *kunstkammer* out of rare shells or exotic skeletons, and a century ago Art Deco designers used lacquer, crocodile skin, stingray hides (shagreen), mother of pearl, ivory and tortoise-shell to spectacular effect.

Today, however, flaunting the pillage of natural resources is no longer fashionable. Instead, an alternative interaction with nature has emerged, confronting audiences more directly with the materials their objects are made from and encouraging them to turn from intrigued delight at the wizardry of makers to concern for the environment that surrenders these materials for our use.

Nilufar Gallery in Milan will show a chandelier by Maximilian Marchesani made from soil, fine beech branches intertwined with human hair, acrylic and 15 LED light filaments. Marchesani explains that beech trees resemble human beings in their colonising voracity, dominating the woodlands they inhabit, their leaves smothering the undergrowth. But both are alike too in our shared vulnerability to climate change. He hopes his chandelier offers a model of “a hybrid creature that can combine natural and artificial elements in a benign way, in a new aesthetic”.

Brazilian designer Tiago Braga, meanwhile, has created for the Paris gallery Brazil Modernist a series of seven light sculptures, the Arandu Estelar Collection, in collaboration with the artisans of the Ladrilã Association in southern Brazil. They have taken the fleece of the local sheep, usually viewed as worthless, then hand-felted and sewn it into more than 300 petals, from which the poetic lights are constructed. Their form is inspired, Braga says, by “the organic shapes of clouds and the star culture [[knowledge of the night sky](#)] of the Guarani Indigenous people — the original inhabitants of the Brazilian pampas”. Both the shearing of the sheep and the return of the nutrient-rich wool-washing water to the soil serve to maintain that challenged environment.

