



In celebration of our 50th issue marking the magazine's golden anniversary, *Glass Man* explores our enduring use of gold in art and design

# GOLD STANDARD

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To mark a commitment of 50 years – 50 issues in our case – with gold proves the high esteem we place on this precious metal. It has enchanted humanity since the fourth century BC when Egyptians began dealing with gold before they had even established a written language. More than 3,000 years later, King Tutankhamun was buried in a solid gold coffin weighing 110kg.

First discovered by English archaeologist Howard Carter in 1925, the coffin housed one of the most significant artefacts of ancient history, King Tut's golden death mask inlaid with enamel and precious stones. Elizabeth Taylor reincarnated the Egyptian love affair with gold in the 1963 Hollywood blockbuster *Cleopatra*, in which she hypnotised the Romans in a cape made of 24 carat gold. To this day, Taylor's wardrobe budget is the highest dedicated to a single character in film history.

Over the aeons, gold has been used across all religions to adorn their respective places of worship. The gilded dome on the Temple Mount in the old city of Jerusalem was commissioned in the seventh century to capture Muslim attention and distract from neighbouring Christian churches. Similarly, the sanctum of the Gurdwara in the city of Amritsar in Punjab, considered to be the home of Sikhism, was overlaid with gold leaf in 1830 and renamed the Golden Temple to dazzle worshippers. The Bible refers to gold more than 400 times, so inevitably we find it in the blinding halls of the Vatican and the glittering mosaic ceiling of the Lady Chapel in Westminster Cathedral.

Gold bleeds off the walls and onto clothing, too, most evident at the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art's 2018 exhibition, *Heavenly Bodies: Fashion and the Catholic*



*Imagination*, which included a display of papal robes and accessories. The Met's curator of fashion, Andrew Bolton, guided the viewer through the "wonderful tension when you juxtapose art from the different mediums. Fashion enlivens the more historical pieces, and the historical pieces give context and embolden the fashion."

When Gianni Versace founded his glamorously empowering brand in 1978, he chose the golden face of Medusa for his logo because, as legend tells it, once you cross paths with her, you cannot love another. In 2018, Donatella chose none other than its signature Oroton chainmail gold dresses that clung to supermodels Claudia Schiffer, Naomi Campbell, Cindy Crawford, Helen Christensen and Carla Bruni in memory of the 20th anniversary of her brother Gianni's death. Through the gold lens, humans are deified. Just look to award winning actress Charlize Theron emerging from a golden glowing pool in the J'Adore Dior perfume advert.

Female icons of past and present collided at the recent 2022 Met Gala when Kim Kardashian wore Marilyn Monroe's infamous gleaming gold "naked" dress, which she wore to sing *Happy Birthday* to President John F Kennedy in 1962, sparking rumours of an affair between them. In 2008, visual artist Marc Quinn played on the notion of idolatry in *Siren*, an 18 carat gold sculpture depicting Kate Moss in a yoga pose. "Gold is a metal that humans have decided is one of the most valuable materials in the world, but like their invented images of perfection, gold itself is a belief system – inherently no more valuable than any other metal," he said.

Similarly, US artist Jeff Koons explored celebrity when

he cast *Michael Jackson and Bubbles* in gilded porcelain in 1988. Here, Jackson lies with his pet chimpanzee, playing on the notion of Madonna and Child. Meanwhile, British sculptor Thomas J Price worked with gold in his 2017 *Icon* series, using methods found in Greek and Roman statuary for the modern-day stage. Gold, he said, denoted "prestige and sense of a higher power". He added, "For thousands of years, it's been considered a special material that brought civilisations closer to their gods and goals, and I find it fascinating how this continues today in terms of historical objects, luxury goods and in terms of the way gold is used in high tech applications like space exploration. All these connections add to the seductive power of gold, which I try to harness to carry the themes of my work into the minds of the viewer."

Austrian symbolist painter Gustav Klimt also applied historic techniques learnt from his gold engraver father throughout his "Golden Period" between 1901 and 1909. Inspired by the medieval gold mosaics in Venice and Ravenna, Klimt elevates his sitters to Byzantine icons. His 1907 portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer appears regal as she sits gazing out at us, enthroned in patterned gold. The rushing immediacy of desire found in Klimt's 1908 *The Kiss*, transcends a moment of intimacy to sacrosanct, heady heights. Thanks to the shimmering surrounding palette, the lovers are lifted out of the 2D and immersed into the 3D.

It's this texture gold leaf adds "that flat colour lacks" that persuaded silkscreen artist Constance Read to make use of in her most recent show, *Polychromatic Rainbows*. "Obviously a rainbow implies that every shade is included, so how can we forget about the gold at the bottom?" In this series, Read's chromatic coloured circles are centred with gold, making "them seem almost like they have a vortex, or a 3D element".

Gold universally translates to wealth and prosperity but as J R Tolkien in *The Fellowship of the Ring* warns, "All that is gold does not glitter." Gold-painted Bond girl Jill Masterson (played by Shirley Easton) was horribly killed by skin suffocation in the 1964 film *Goldfinger*.

While our appetite for gold might stretch to the unhealthy, there's no question that gold is a safe bet for a statement (and financial investment, too). There is good reason why the nine-strong supermodel strut at the London 2012 Closing Olympic Ceremony bewitched the audience in gold attire created by British designers like Paul Smith, Alexander McQueen and Vivienne Westwood.

On the surface it might seem brash to adorn one's home or wardrobe with gold, but there's no denying our never-ending obsession for it. As Read ponders, "Maybe I am just a magpie, in search of all things shiny, trying to create works that catch your eye with that golden lustre, satiating my appetite for bling."

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