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Mirror, mirror: the infinite charm of reflecting rooms

Turn your house into a temple of reflection

The interior of artist Viola Lanari's showroom at Milan Design Week in 2022, dressed in reflective vinyl and foil

Aimee Farrell JUNE 19 2024

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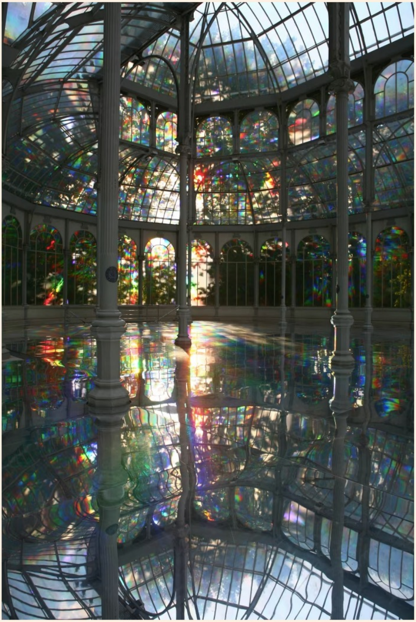
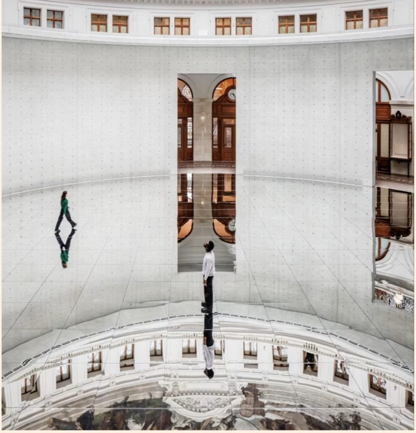
Throwing shine among the shadows, mirrored interiors have dazzled since ancient times. In Rome, Emperor Nero's Domus Aurea – the Golden House – sparkled with fragments of mirror and glass. And a century before the Sun King's Galerie des Glaces spectacularly showcased the French glass-making industry in 1684, the Mirror Hall of Golestan Palace, with its reflective grid ceiling and elaborate symmetry, shone as a beacon of brightness in Tehran.



South Korean artist Kimsooja's mirrored installation To Breathe – A Woman in the Palacio de Cristal in Madrid's Parque del Retiro, 2006

In *Mirrors: Reflections of Style*, author Paula Phipps traces the inception of mirror-lined rooms to Persia and India where, she says, "small mirrored cabinet rooms were installed for contemplative purposes". This idea of shiny surfaces igniting self-reflection remains a rich seam among artists, from Doug Aitken and Yayoi Kusama to Niki de Saint Phalle's mirrored Tuscan *Tarot Garden*.



To Breathe – Constellation, 2024, by Kimsooja, currently installed at the Bourse de Commerce, Paris © Vue de l'exposition Le monde comme il va, Bourse de Commerce, Pinault Collection, 2024 © Tadao Ando Architect & Associates, Niney et Marca Architectes, Agence Pierre-Antoine Gatier © Kimsooja/ADAGP, Paris 2024. Photograph: Florent Michel/Pinault Collection

In Paris (until 2 September), the South Korean artist Kimsooja has covered the vast circular floor of the main dome inside the Bourse de Commerce with myriad reflective squares. Amplifying the grandeur of the rotunda's 360-degree 19th-century ceiling murals, the effect is simultaneously disorientating and clarifying. "A mirror is a fabric woven by our own gaze," says the artist of her meditation on the mirror as a portal into the self and otherness.

Mirrored doors that once belonged to Madame Claude, now in the home of cocktail bar Serpent à Plume owner Alexander Rash © Valentin Hennequin

> **A mirror is a fabric woven by our own gaze**

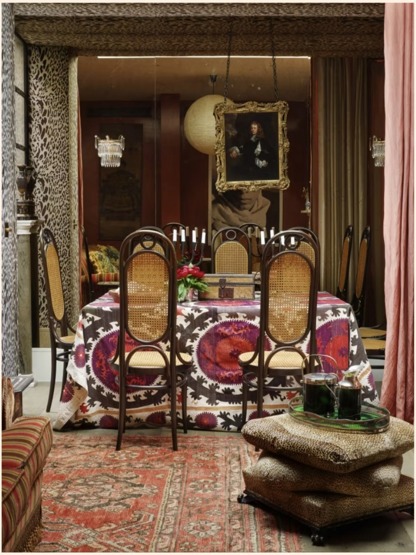
Beyond self-reflection or Liberace-style showboating, mirrored spaces have a practical – and increasingly popular – purpose in interiors. “Mirrors multiply perspectives and possibilities,” says Nicholas Cullinan, director designate of the British Museum, whose 1960s apartment in the Kent coastal town of Margate, conceived with his partner, art dealer Mattias Vendelmans, is an elegantly mirrored fun house in which the reflective surfaces play with perception and perspective, combining plywood panelling and custom-cut strips of reflective acrylic.

“All these surfaces of shimmering light reflect the Margate streetlights and the ever-changing Turner-esque skies,” says Vendelmans of the rooms, which reference everything from Coco Chanel’s Rue Cambon mirrored staircase to Luca Guadagnino’s remake of 1970s Italo-horror *Suspiria*. “From the moment we decided to apply mirrors, we started to see them everywhere.”

Harry Nuriev’s bedroom in his Paris home © Julien Lienard

The key is to opt for something slightly watery rather than filling a space with a standard cut-glass mirror. Opt for antiqued glass, which lends a subtler, softer and more flattering shine. Mirror Works, Rupert Bevan and Dominic Schuster specialise in beautifully hand-worked antiqued mirror glass.

For more contemporary tastes, the Venetian metallisation company Materica creates precision metal coatings of brass, zinc or copper for any material, even cloth. It presented its debut collection of reflective modular panels for the home at the recent Milan Design Week. “People usually think of metal as being cold, but these experimental surfaces have the power to bring a warmth and a very special atmosphere to the home,” says interior architect Luigi Ciuffreda, one of the company’s creative directors.



A dining room by interior designer Rachel Chudley

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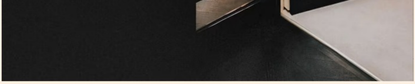
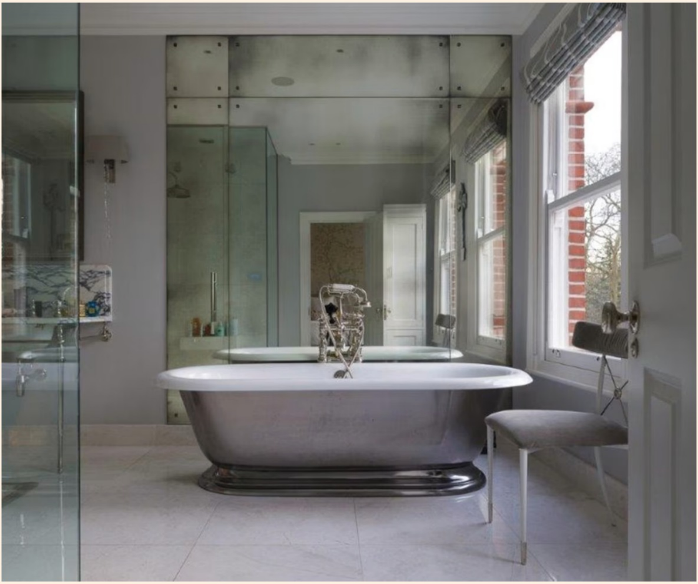
But less is often more. “I think you can overuse mirror,” says interior designer Rachel Chudley. “It can be one of the most powerful tools for transformation, but it has to be done sensitively.” In a client’s London mews house, Chudley turned an awkward corner of an all-white sitting room into “the perfect nighttime party nook” by installing a plush combination of padded leopard-print velvet and mirrored panels. “It’s full-blown trickery,” she says of the resulting dining space.


Martin Brûlé's studio in Paris © Matthieu Salvaing

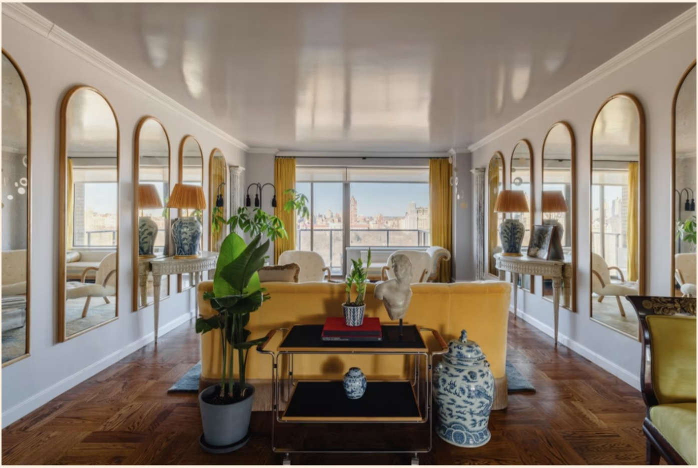
“Mirror is very useful in dark rooms to bounce light around and play with proportions,” says designer Adam Bray, who added a mirrored wall to his kitchen. He cites as inspiration the American decorators Billy Baldwin and Frances Elkins, who created mirrored dressing rooms in the 1930s, and French designer Alain Demachy, who employed mirror to line the insides of window reveals. There is a caveat: “It can create unexpected views that are not always welcome,” says Bray of its frequent use in bathrooms. “I’ve never understood why people add mirrored panels to the sides of the bath.”

For Duncan Campbell, one half of the design duo Campbell-Rey, the mirrored bathroom should hint at the unexpected. “When you’re using soft, Venetian mirror, it’s not about getting a view of yourself from every angle, it’s more about glimpses of light and things reflecting and twinkling,” says Campbell, who with Charlotte Rey is working on the extensive restoration of a 1920s villa on the Ligurian coast. The principal bedroom adjoins a lounge-like bathroom soon to be encased entirely in panels of mirror, right down to the cast-glass cornicing and architectural pilasters.


Mercury patina antique mirrors by Mirrorworks

“You don’t want their surface to be perfect, but you want them to be reflective, so they have a lovely soft wobble,” says Campbell. “The effect in a bathroom with views out to the Ligurian Sea, and the scent of pine forest wafting in, will be silvery and ethereal.” The space draws on the theatrical spirit of English decorator Syrie Maugham, who conjured all-glass bathrooms and glass-screened sitting rooms in resplendent London homes in the 1920s and ’30s.

As that era's spare art deco elegance swings back into vogue, so too has the popularity of mirrored interiors magnified. Fiona Sutcliffe, co-founder of London's Sterling Studios, a specialist decorative-arts company, recently worked on the upgrade of the mirrored ballroom and anteroom at London's Claridge's, replicating its amber-hued glass and etched floral motifs, as well as the magnificent interior of the private members' club Oswald's.



An apartment on Fifth Avenue, New York, by Rachel Chudley Interior Design © Maximillian Burkhalter Photography

Sutcliffe is drawn to the medium's technical and mathematical demands. "With a mural you can paint over it," she says. "But with glass, once it's done, it's done – it's more controlled." The company has an archive of more than 20,000 samples ranging from antiqued mirror to carved glass to elaborately engraved verre églomisé.

"Mirror has its own rhythm," she says. "You no longer see the walls and it opens everything up, which is especially useful in the city where you need a bit of space." Sutcliffe advises sticking largely to mirrored dining rooms, downstairs loos and narrow corridors, and softening their luminescent effect by layering the space.

For those wanting to dip their toe in Narcissus's reflective pool without going all-out, there's a proliferation of mirrored objects – from thrones to tables – that bring smaller hits of light. There's also the efficient yet effective option of simply lining two opposite walls with symmetrical mirrors.

Foil is also a fun, albeit more DIY, option. "It's all about playing with the light," says Viola Lanari, who has covered everything from the ceiling of her studio and the hallway of her former flat to the showroom she created for Milan Design Week in 2022 in foil and reflective vinyl. Though she says it works best in a small space, all you need is some supermarket foil, spray glue and a steady hand. Fortune favours the brave: the true wonder of an all-mirrored room comes alive at night in seemingly wall-less rooms studded with stars.

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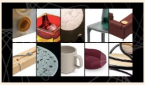

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