

CRYSTALS

Using Minerals in Interior Design

By Joan Chatfield-Taylor



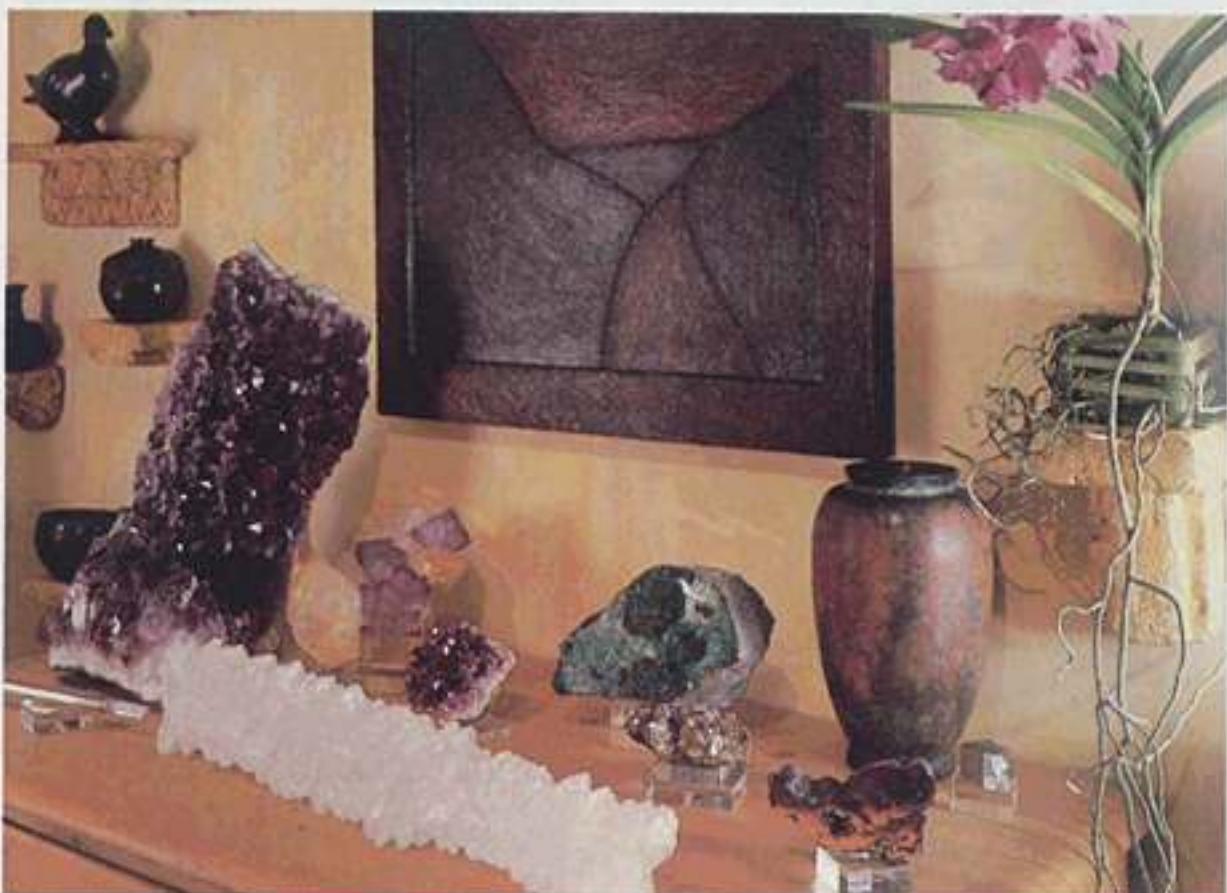
THE ANCIENT GREEKS called rock crystal "frozen light," and the Romans drank from amethyst chalices because they believed the purple stone protected them from drunkenness. In Japanese legend, small crystals represented the breath of the White Dragon. Apache shamans were said to use crystals to induce visions, and the Cherokees to carry fetishes carved of quartz.

Centuries later, natural crystals retain their power to mesmerize us. Even in an age of technology, we continue to associate them with magical and spiritual powers. Bookstore shelves are lined with titles like *Crystal Enlightenment* and *Crystal Power*, and believers are crowding into mineral shows to buy them to use either as a focus for meditation or as an active healing device.

Crystals are also more popular than ever with interior designers, who praise their beauty and respond to the idea of an object that also may have a spiritual aspect.

Beautiful and mysterious, crystals are becoming a common component of modern interior design. LEFT: "They spell magic," says Juan Pablo Molyneux, who uses them frequently. Here he combines Brazilian crystals—cut from a single specimen—with a 17th-century Flemish tapestry.

BELOW LEFT: Along with crystals, Jay Spectre responds to Chinese "spirit stones," which echo the configurations of mountain ranges. BELOW: A collection of crystallized minerals enhances Sam Botero's residence in New York. "They are sculptures made by nature," he remarks.



continued on page 328

CRYSTALS

Using Minerals in Interior Design
continued from page 324

"I love them," says New York interior designer Sam Botero. "They're wonderful to have around, both from the aesthetic point of view and from the point of view of their energy. I believe in them—tremendously. Today you have all sorts of people talking about crystals. Some of them appreciate crystals only on an aesthetic level; some go further than that."

"Crystals are the physical manifestation of a spiritual concept. They're a tool to help us start listening to our hearts," says Dallas designer and crystal importer Stephen Stefanou. When Caroline Hunt celebrated the opening of the Crescent Court, her luxury hotel in Dallas, Stefanou provided glittering chunks of natural crystal for the centerpieces. The result, he says, was "a great party, because the crystals intensified the energy in the room."

Crystals are not the only minerals considered sacred or magical. Jay Spectre prefers the curiously shaped rocks the Chinese call "spirit stones." Found in certain caves and riverbeds in China, they often have holes created by wind and water. Spectre says, "The spirit stones have a life of their own, a rhythm, a beat that is almost human. With the spiritual and moral chaos in the world, we need anything we can cling to that gives us security. If wearing an amethyst does it, I'm all for it."

Richard Berger of New York's Crystal Resources notes, "In the last three years there's been a tremendous upsurge in the use of crystals by corporations." A three-foot amethyst geode decorates the office of Dreyfus chairman Howard Stein, while Alan Talansky, president of First Atlantic Investment, has a weighty rock crystal in his office.

Los Angeles designer Mimi London says that she supplies many crystals to hotels, "because they don't require a background in art to appreciate. Crystals are so dazzling that anyone can relate to them."

New York designer Juan Montoya says, "I started using crystals about five years ago, and I've been utilizing increasingly large ones ever since." For a Long Island client, he created a fountain in which the water sparkles over a mammoth piece of rock crystal.

While the big, unpolished specimens are the most spectacular, smaller carved and polished pieces are also popular. Crystal balls, obelisks and pyramids sparkle in the houses of people who simply like the way they look, or believe the stones carry a special kind of spiritual energy.

For some designers, using crystals is a relatively recent development. For others, crystals are nothing new, and they often credit the influence of the late Michael Taylor, who loved natural objects and used them boldly in his work.

LEFT: Crystal importer and Dallas interior designer Stephen Stefanou juxtaposes a natural quartz-crystal cluster and assorted polished crystals with a Thai "spirit house." The painting is *Chinese New Year* by Ollor.

BELOW: "I've had this superb piece of Brazilian rutilated quartz—distinguished by its amber color—for many years," says Mimi London, who displays it with a Sumatran deer sculpture in her Los Angeles house.



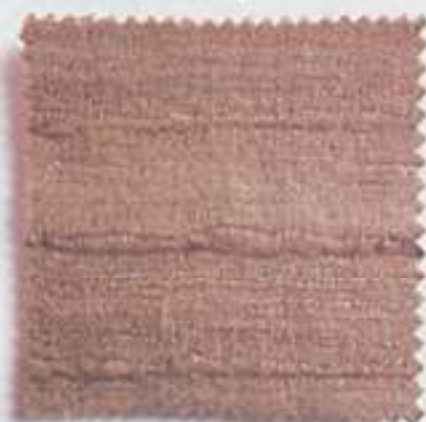
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CRYSTALS

Using Minerals in Interior Design
continued from page 328

"Let's face it, we've all been influenced by our friend Michael," says Los Angeles designer Val Arnold, who has giant chunks of topaz glowing in front of his own fireplace. "In a contemporary setting I like them polished," he says. "In a rustic setting I leave them natural."

Sally Sirkin Lewis, another Los Angeles designer, says, "I find I can use them on every job I do. They mix beautifully with all styles—from Chinese porcelain to contemporary furniture. I recently used a piece of crystal in a window of a beach house since it didn't block the view."

New York designer Arthur E. Smith recalls that rock crystal has long been popular in Europe, particularly in the 1920s and 1930s, when it was favored by style setters like Coco Chanel. Syrie Maugham liked to create a cooling effect in summer by putting huge hunks of rock crystal in empty fireplaces. Jean-Michel Frank created lamps of crystal hollowed out to make space for a bulb.

Crystals can be as bold as an amethyst geode big enough to stand in, or as delicate as a tiny obelisk made of phantom crystal, a clear rock crystal with an internal cloud of opaque particles that echoes the mineral in form. Whatever the size, each piece of crystal diffuses and attracts light in its own way.

Some primitive peoples believed that crystal was ice compressed underneath the weight of the earth. The truth is no less lovely and astonishing: Like other crystals, quartz crystal grows, infinitesimally slowly, beneath the earth, its internal atomic structure always expressing itself in the same arrangement of faces. A rock crystal the size of a finger may have taken a hundred thousand years to form; one two feet long is probably millions of years old.

Although many of the earth's three thousand mineral species crystallize, quartz crystals are among the most attractive, and since quartz is the most common mineral in the earth's crust, its crystals are found worldwide.

Because of their growing popularity, crystals have soared in price in the last few years. While small specimens can still be obtained for less than a hundred dollars, large pieces may cost thousands, depending on their size, beauty and clarity. Importers make frequent visits to crystal mines, especially those in Brazil and Arkansas, to obtain the showiest pieces as miners dig them from the ground.

Of course, some designers scoff at the idea of crystals as powerful, magical objects. "I wish it were true, but I don't believe it," says Fort Worth designer Joe Minton. Minton would not argue, however, with the power of crystals to fascinate people; after he installed some geodes in the Midland, Texas, offices of oilman Perkins Sams, Sams became so interested that he went on to acquire one of the world's largest mineral collections, now on display in Houston.

Juan Pablo Molyneux remembers being fascinated by the rock crystal chandelier in his grandparents' house in Chile and has always used minerals in his work. "They look magical, and that's why I'm interested. They're more than just objects. They say things." □