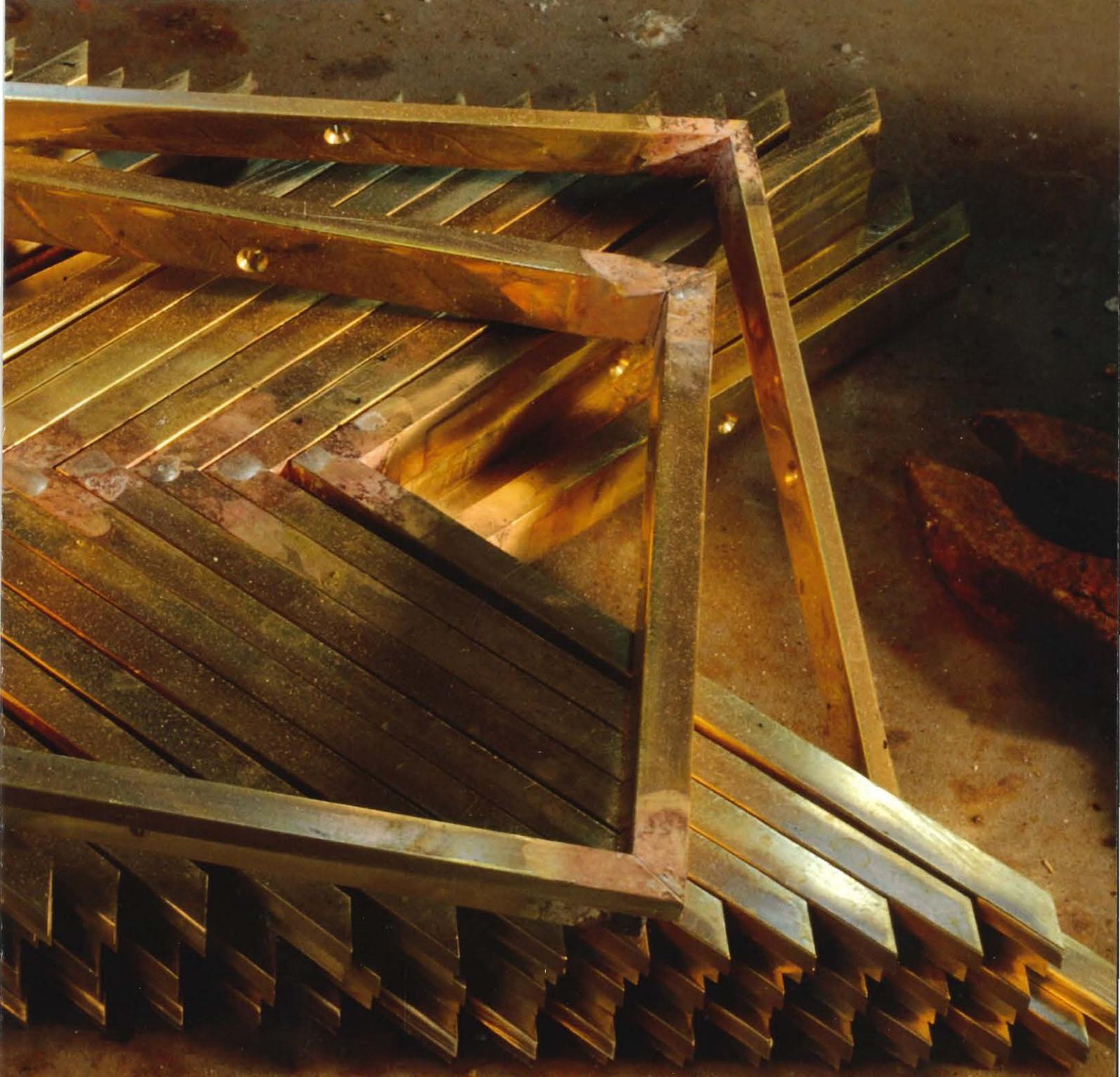


CONNAISSANCE DES  
**arts**  
SPECIAL ISSUE



**VLD** THE ART OF METAL



# A TALE OF LUXURY AND METAL



**T**he story of VLD (Vitrines Lelièvre Driot) began in Paris at the very beginning of the 20th century. At the time, trade was growing in the capital city. Customers were changing; the international elite, avid for haute couture, jewelry, and all of the finest in French expertise, spilled out from trains and ships into the newly-built grand hotels. The world of luxury was now in the spotlight. Ever since major department stores revolutionized sales, window displays, which promoted the latest trends, became strategic. Customers made their purchases the same way they decided to go to a show. This gave rise to specialized artisans: window dressers. In 1905, two companies dedicated to this new form of expertise were founded – Établissements Driot and Léna. Their ateliers produced the finest works in brass. This brilliant copper and zinc alloy lent itself wonderfully to the creation of ele-

gant window façades and furniture designed to display luxury items in stores. Between World War I and World War II, both companies were commissioned by the most prestigious and successful names in luxury goods: luggage and suitcase-makers, fashion designers, leather goods manufacturers... Louis Vuitton, Hermès and Cartier are mentioned in the archives. World War II, however, put the brakes on this flourishing industry. When the war ended, the world had changed. It gave way to “The Glorious Thirty” (three decades of economic prosperity in France following WWII), mass consumption and aluminum frames. Yet the tradition of brasswork persevered thanks to the luxury goods market which, once again, put it in high demand. The industry turned toward creations that were increasingly high-end. Only the finest companies survived by pooling together their experience

**Above:**  
The Bordeaux wine cellar designed by architect Jean-Michel Rousseau for the Galeries Lafayette department store. Enabling 96 bottles to be stored in its racks, the impressive central circular display made out of brass has a bronze finish.

**Left:**  
Washbasin made in 2012 for the Atelier Alain Ellouz, an alabaster furniture specialist. The stand is in brass, with polished nickel decor. The alabaster basin has backlighting.



**Top:** The VLD workshops, in Ivry-sur-Seine, cover an area of over 800 m<sup>2</sup>.

**Bottom:** This 3-D digital drilling machine is used for engraving motifs, cutting out templates and manufacturing railings.

**Right-hand page, top:** Arc welding, a technique that uses an electrical discharge to generate enough heat to melt the welding rod and the metals being welded.

**Right-hand page, bottom:** Brazing, punching, cutting, boring, assemblage... metal holds no secrets for the VLD teams.

and know-how. In 1953, the Léna company was sold to Vitaines Lelièvre who, in turn, had already built on their expertise to include decoration. They manufactured windows, glass roofs, as well as elegant furniture and lamps for demanding private clients. In 1974, the firm Berthier joined forces with the Driot group. Then in 1999 the Lelièvre and Driot companies merged to form VLD, alias Vitaines Lelièvre Driot, heirs to the expertise of several generations of artisans.

Today in its workshops in Ivry, on the outskirts of Paris, the company takes on increasingly ambitious projects. Its clients include famous decorators and architects, major jewelers and luxury hotels. In 2010, VLD again expanded its field of expertise by opening a workshop specialized in ironwork and fine metalwork. It is also becoming increasingly involved in the renovation of historic monuments; in fact, its expertise in metals is sought after by national heritage restoration architects. In Paris, VLD was asked to restore the railings, gates and balustrades of listed buildings, notably the Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal (Library of the Arsenal), the Ministère des Affaires Étrangères (Ministry of Foreign Affairs), the Conseil Constitutionnel (Constitutional Council) and the beautiful buildings on Place Vendôme. VLD also restored the Dutch College in the Cité Internationale Universitaire, an avant-garde masterpiece built by Willem Dudok in the early 1930s. The company was able to find the English manufacturer who, at the time, delivered all the metalwork to the site. Their collaboration enabled VLD to carry out a faithful restoration of the building's modern art deco design, while using a range of modern steel sections.

### Expertise on the move

From an 18th-century private mansion to the most contemporary decor, VLD continues its century-old pursuit of excellence. Projects may involve restoring the iconic wrought-iron balustrades with a sunburst on Place Vendôme; manufacturing a luminous alabaster and brass console for a Parisian hotel; an openwork screen set with tortoiseshell for a major decorator; or delivering all the signage for the final tower of a famous architect... Every creation produced by the VLD workshops is unique. Every project is seen as a challenge; a new opportunity to create perfection after listening to the client's specifications and drawing up meticulous preliminary



## A TALE OF LUXURY AND METAL



**Above left:** Samples of made-to-measure brass grids and handles.

**Above right:** Prototype of a polished brass display cabinet, made for one of the showrooms of the British diamond company Graff.

**Right:** Diploma awarded to Mr Léna in 1925 at the International Exposition of Modern Industrial and Decorative Arts, in Paris.

**Far right:** Decorative motifs for handrails, these bronze olive branches and acanthus leaves may be gilded or coated with an antique bronze patina.

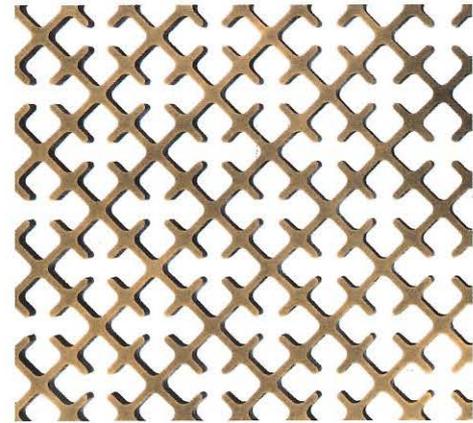
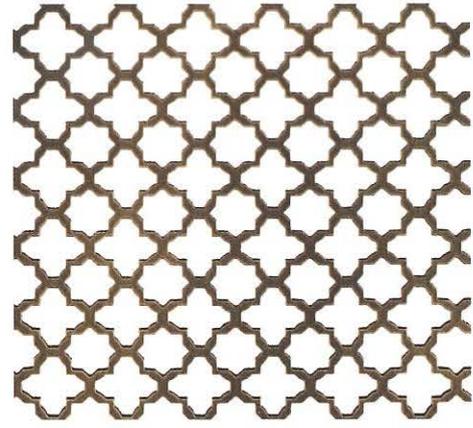


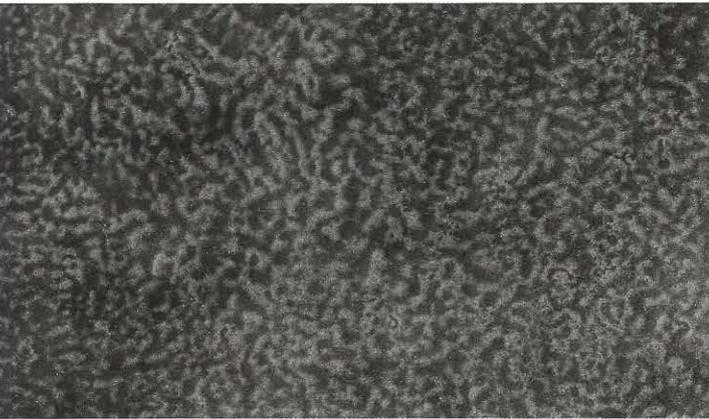
sketches and prototypes. The 25 people on our staff are well aware of their clientele's expectations and ensure the smooth running of operations right down to delivery. Some are graduates of the prestigious École d'Arts Appliqués Boule, but it is, above all, the invaluable years of experience in the workshops that shape all VLD's craftsmen into true specialists. They are responsible for fulfilling the dreams of designers and ensuring the highest-quality standards of their production, complying with whatever specifications they are given. A project may call for manufacturing stylish, functional, customized furniture; or designing an invisible table extension system that can seat up to 24 guests; or making a metal lamp with cut-out decor that plays on light and shadow yet remains an excellent light source. Thanks to a vast network of trustworthy subcontractors, VLD is able to acquire all types of materials, even rare ones, for making beautiful alloys with brass or

ironwork. For its glassware, it collaborates with master craftsmen who deliver it bent, engraved, sand-blasted, or even in pieces like a puzzle. The most elegant of designs are conceivable. The tradition of fine metalwork in French decorative arts is kept very much alive by VLD.









## THE WONDERS MATERIALS CREATE

**F**or the uninitiated, entering the vast workshops is like watching a conjuring trick.

Neatly arranged on rails, the raw material shines in the sunlight: long rods of brass, aluminum or stainless steel. What connection can there be between this cold rigidity and the objects that the craftsmen are busy completing? This silver-plated lamp, polished like a mirror, whose forms and cut-outs bring the Viennese Secession to mind? This comfortable armchair with pure lines, commissioned for a jewelry store? This gossamer frame for a stained-glass window, which will adorn one of the most beautiful drawing rooms in Paris? This luxurious piece of bathroom furniture, inset with panes of opaline glass? The secret of these metamorphoses resides in the gestures and expertise of the in-house craftsmen, assisted by dozens of machines that sit in state. Some of these are an ancient legacy inherited from the company's splendid past and respected as tutelary figures. Others, the most recent, are high-tech tools that make it possible to create shapes, combine materials and meet deadlines that would have been inconceivable only five years ago.

This is where the artisans stretch, cut, weld, assemble and sand the metal. In the workshops there are many for whom this is a family tradition, carried out for generations since the origins of the window-dressing profession. They know their parts perfectly and, like all virtuosos, they love to outdo themselves. As Mouloud Baba, head of the metal workshop, sums it up, "I would

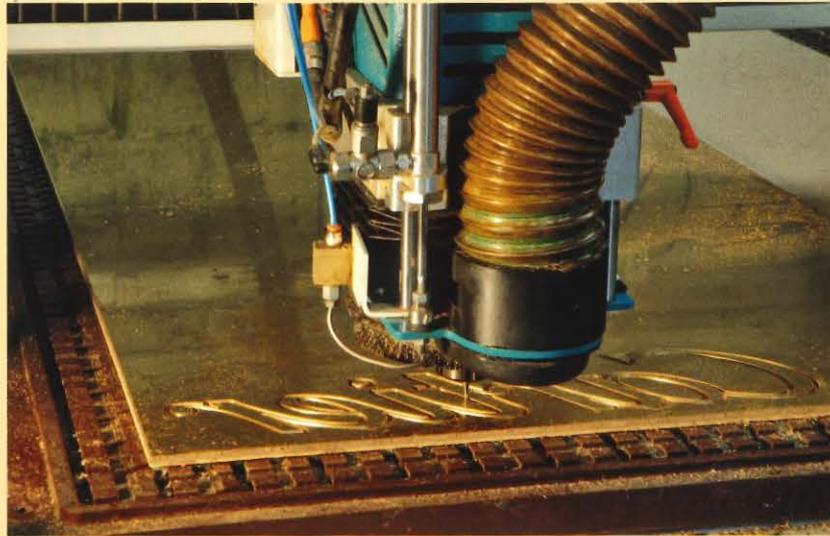
**Left:** Display cases, light fittings, mirrors, door handles, grids or finishes: the extensive range of skills mastered by VLD artisans is clearly illustrated in this mosaic.



never tell a client that a project is impossible to create. It is up to us to find solutions.” He works with the research department, as does the head of the brass workshop, Patrick Fresne.

The material chosen for a project depends on its use. Elegant brass lends itself to structures, such as screens or furniture inset with glass, alabaster or any other material a designer might desire. It can be bent into curves, a delicate process carried out to perfection by the workshop. For other uses or designs, different materials will be used, such as steel, aluminum or other metals. According to Mouloud Baba, “The most difficult thing is to give total solidity to the furniture, which our clients generally want to be as light as possible, free of screws or traces of welding. It is out of the question that even ten years after fabrication, a piece might be returned to us as defective. Here, we even create a prototype for a one-of-a-kind piece.” Infinite precautions are taken to manufacture these pieces of furniture which conceal, beneath their apparent simplicity, remarkable feats of design and construction. It is technical expertise of the highest order, which calls for perfect mastery of the material.

For the teams working at VLD, humility is one of the keys to success. Patrick Fresne explains, “The most important thing to understand is the manner in which metal changes. You have to gradually learn to sense it. As long as you fail to see that brass loses its shape and never recaptures its initial appearance, that a material that is poorly bent, poorly curved from the first gesture is only fit to be thrown out, you have not understood the profession; you will not succeed in working this alloy.” Mouloud Baba goes further, “You never truly master metal. You have to tackle it with great modesty, and give meaning to your labor. Using your mind and your hands to produce objects that will survive us brings great satisfaction.”



**Top:** Guided by a digitized model, the digital drilling machine will cut out or engrave any piece of metal. This machine, the most state-of-the-art piece of equipment in the workshops from a technological point of view, enables VLD to reduce deadlines for both manufacturing and validation by the client considerably. Computer-aided design makes it possible to produce complex pieces in record time. Here, engraving the Cartier logo on a sheet of solid brass will take only a few hours, whereas three or four days would be needed to carry out the same task by hand.

**Bottom:** Working with brass, a malleable alloy as reactive as wood, requires accuracy at every stage of the manufacturing process, especially during the initial cutting phase.

**Left-hand page:** Before being cut, folded, welded, punched and assembled, the raw metal arrives at the workshops in bars and sheets. These are carefully sorted according to their alloys, forms and thickness. Because of its ductility, brass is used for decorative purposes, whereas other more resistant metals are reserved for structural functions.

## THE WONDERS MATERIALS CREATE



A “mock-up” assemblage of the raw metal pieces enables VLD artisans to verify the design principles so as to optimize the construction of the object and avoid any unwanted surprises during the final stage of production. Before being decorated, the pieces are thus meticulously adjusted so as to obtain a visually flawless ensemble, showing no trace of screws or other manufacturing defects. They are then dismantled in order to be decorated, one by one, then reassembled during the final stage. This “mock-up” assemblage of the pieces may sometimes be carried out on the site of their future installation, notably when completing an order for shower doors, glazed partitions and bathroom cabinets, which have to be built into existing structures. Two artisans (top) are working on a brass bookcase, with a polished brass finish, designed by the interior decorators Alexandre and Cristina Negoescu. What makes this design special is that the books its shelves will hold will be accessible from all four sides. Brass table legs, with a medal bronze finish, are being fixed to a green marble tabletop (bottom), after a design by interior decorator Dominique Letellier. These two unique pieces of furniture will soon be delivered to the homes of private clients.

**Top:** This sheet metal roller with a flywheel dating from the 1950s is one of the oldest machines in the workshops. The gestures that are used to control it have remained unchanged: turning the flywheel with one hand causes the rollers to rotate and form the metal.

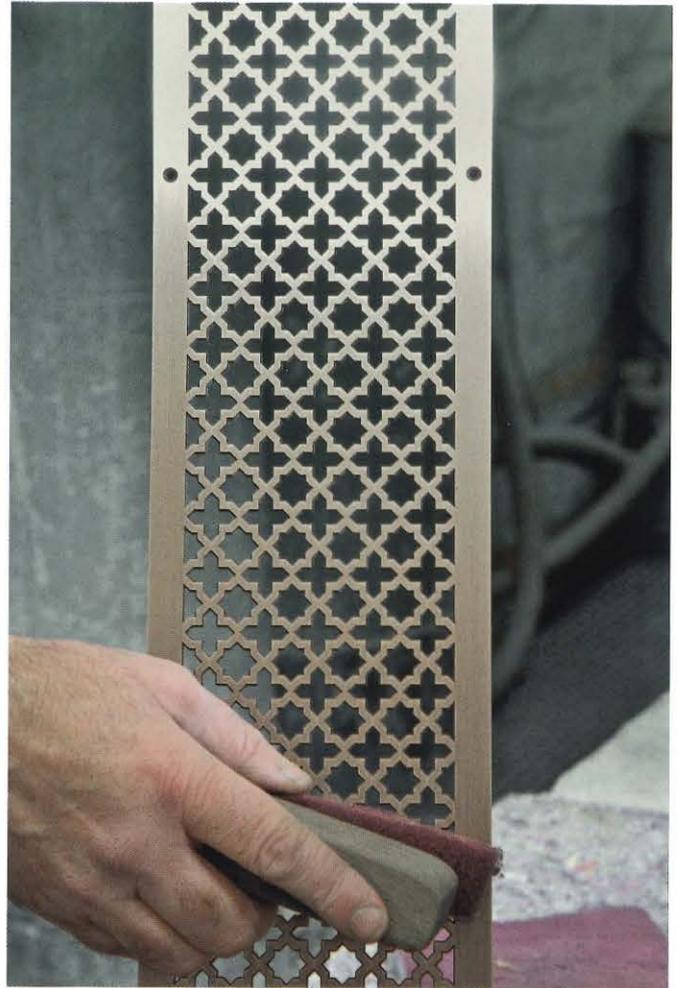
**Bottom:** A series of brass pivots for a cabinet-maker before being decorated.

**Right:** Once a piece has been assembled, it is dismantled so that its elements can be polished and treated one by one. To facilitate the chrome-plating process, the parts not to be decorated are painted red.

**Below left:** Silver brazing relies on capillary action. Waste is limited in this versatile method of joining metal.

**Below right:** Aluminum console stand.





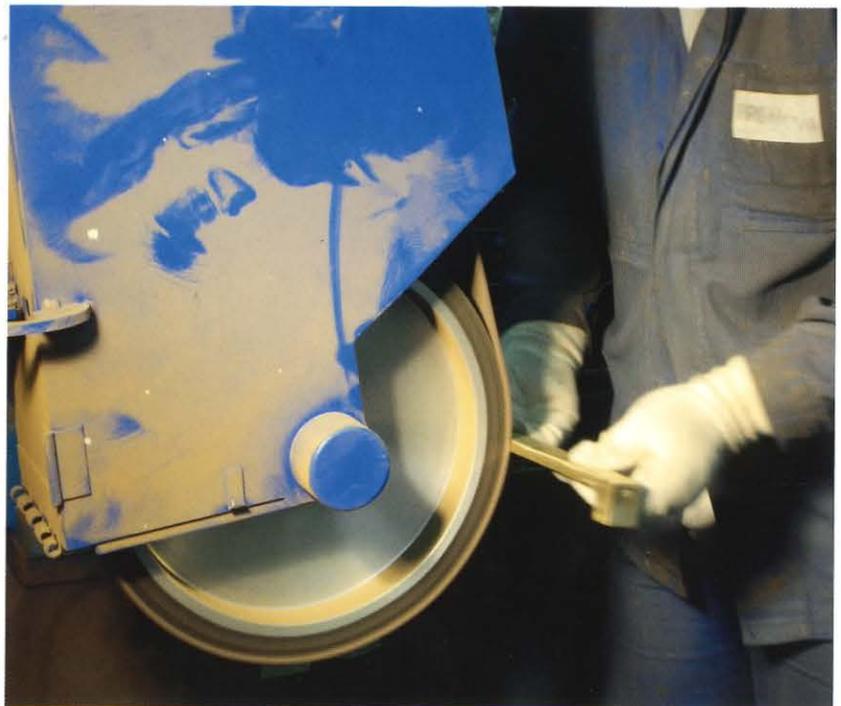
## BRASS DECORATION

Undeniably polymorphic, brass lends itself to many different forms, curved or cubist, and to many different uses, such as furniture, lighting or railings. However, it can also take on different appearances. It can be decorated with a layer of nickel, chrome or gold, or it can even be made to react chemically by creating different patinas, which will give it a bronze medal or gun barrel-type finish. The association of these shades with a polished, satin or brushed finish makes for endless decorative possibilities.

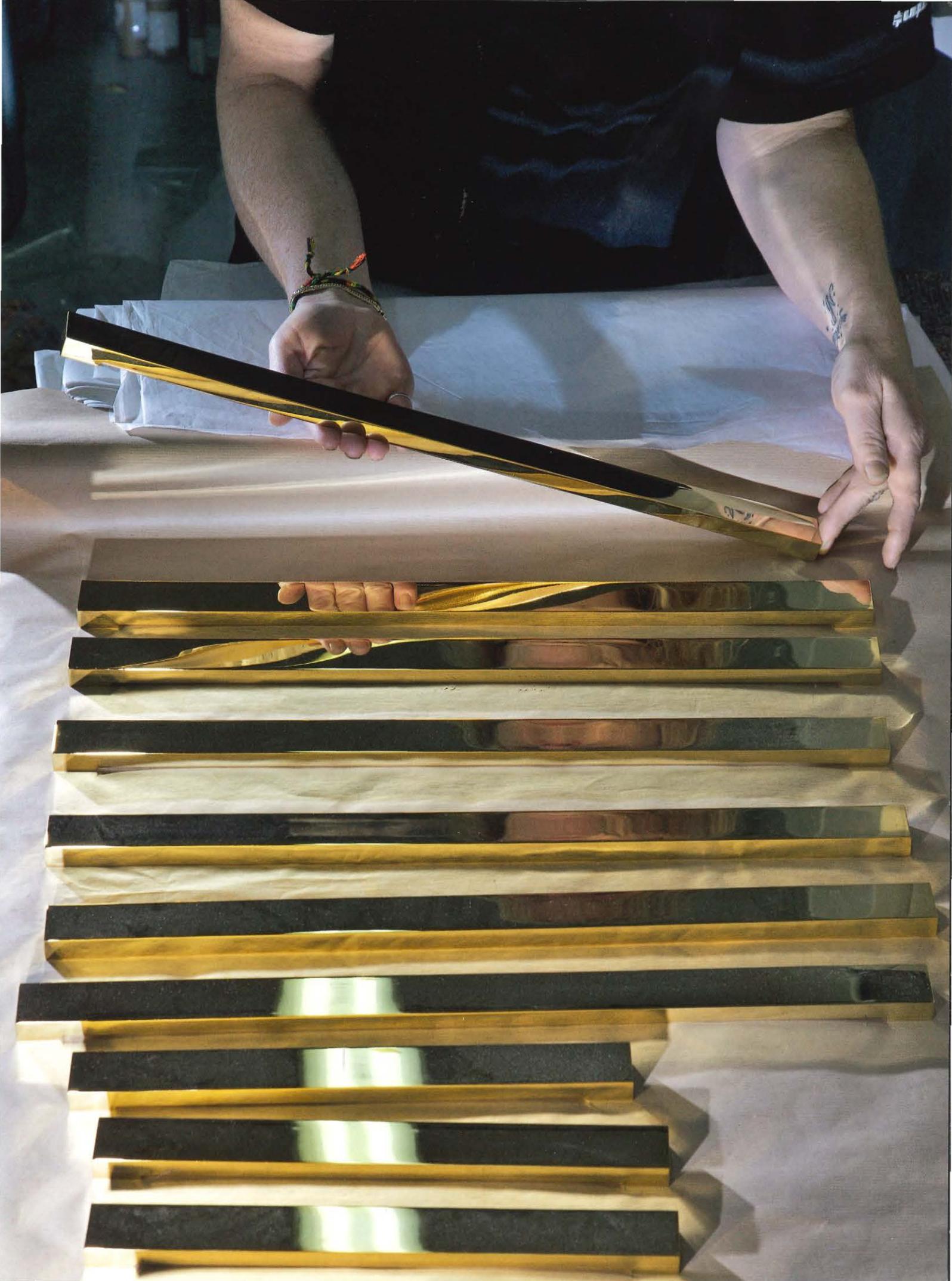
**Above left:** Taking the pieces decorated by electrolysis out of the tank. Here they have been given a lustrous coating.

**Above right:** The brass is oxidized and brushed to obtain the bronze finish on this grid.

**Right-hand page:** Final inspection of pieces after decoration before being returned to VLD to be assembled in the workshops.



**Above:** Polishing a piece of raw brass. This operation removes any scratches by “wearing down” the piece, rubbed against a series of buffers or pads to obtain a smooth and uniform surface appearance.



## THE WONDERS MATERIALS CREATE

Washbasins, doors, bathroom cabinets, mirrors...  
These bathrooms in metal and milk glass were tailor-made in collaboration with the interior decorator Jacques Grange for private clients as far afield as Paris, London, New York, St-Tropez and Tel Aviv.









**Above and left:** Gilt-framed three-panel mirror and chrome and clear glass shower door in luxury bathroom designer Jean-Claude Delépine's showroom, on Boulevard Haussmann, Paris.

**Left-hand page, top:** VLD made a series of shower doors in etched glass and chrome-plated brass for a project designed by interior decorator Rita Bormioli-Faguer.

**Left-hand page, bottom:** Note the finesse of the hammered glass pattern: tiny squares were etched on the glass before their centers were chiselled out with a burin.

## THE WONDERS MATERIALS CREATE

**Right:** Nickel console with backlit alabaster top, designed for Dior in collaboration with the Atelier Alain Ellouz, after a drawing by Peter Marino.

**Below left and right-hand page, bottom left:** For the perfumer Creed's boutique, in Rue des Saints-Pères, Paris, VLD made the floor and wall coverings in satin-finished stainless steel, as well as the furniture.

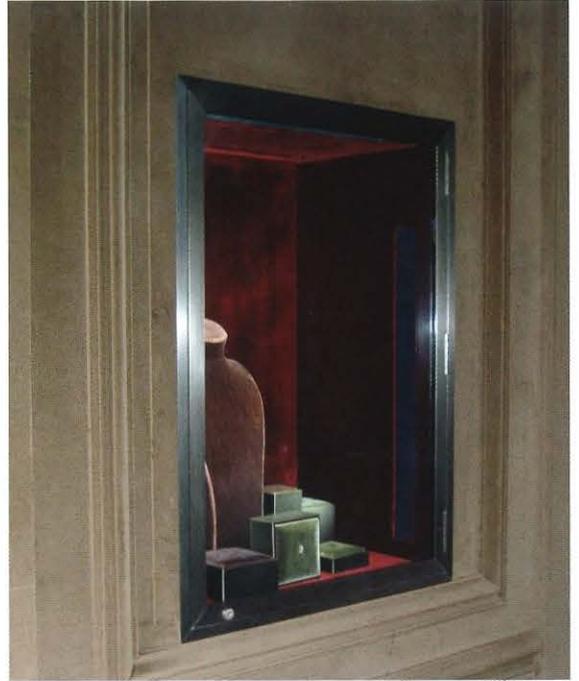
**Below right:** Transparency and mirror effects for the outstanding wine cellar known as the the Bordeauxthèque in the Parisian department store, Galeries Lafayette.

**Right-hand page, top left:** In the Hermès boutique, on Rue de Sèvres, in Paris, no screws are visible in these magnificent oval display cases in solid brass and bent glass.

**Right-hand page, top right:** Display case inserted into the wall for the Cartier stand during the Paris Biennale des Antiquaires in 2008.

**Right-hand page, bottom right:** Table mirror made for Cartier boutiques.









## PRESERVING HERITAGE

**A**s well as being distinguished in its creative capacity, VLD has earned a reputation in the field of building restoration. The company's long history and the experience of its artisans have made it an invaluable collaborator of France's national heritage architects. "People appreciate our 'house' philosophy, which is to preserve the maximum of original features, even if we are able, if need be, to recreate identical elements," explains Pierre Gomez, head of VLD's activities related to historic monuments. Its prestigious achievements in Paris include the 18th-century wrought-iron balustrades on the buildings in the Place Vendôme, the 19th-century windows of the Conseil d'Etat (Council of State), the railings on the Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal (Library of the Arsenal) and the façades of the Conseil Constitutionnel (Constitutional Council). While each project relies on an in-depth preliminary study of the history of the building, the discerning eye of the teams involved in its restoration also plays a fundamental role.

VLD artisans have a love of beautiful architecture and take pleasure in discovering another work to be restored, be it the superb glass roof of the 19th-century mansion owned by the great collectors Nélie Jacquemart and Édouard André (now the famous Musée Jacquemart-André),

**Left:** Restoration work on an 18th-century balustrade in the Place Vendôme, Paris.



**Above:**  
Lower part of a gate from the Bibliothèque de l' Arsenal, Paris, before restoration, showing the damage caused by metal corrosion (detail).

near Parc Monceau, or the amazing ceramic decoration on a marine theme (seaweed, shells, starfish, etc.) adorning the façades of an industrial building dating from the 1900s, recently rehabilitated in the Rue de Hanovre, a stone's throw from the Paris Opera. Metal corrosion is the most frequent cause of deterioration. VLD artisans carry out restoration while respecting the work of those who preceded them.

First, the rust is brushed off and a long cleaning process is undertaken to reveal the effects of time. Only then can repairs begin. Rivets are changed; holes in the metal are filled in using welding techniques. Parts of the metal sometimes prove to be irreparable and have to be cut out. Identical pieces are then made and inserted. Exact copies of missing or irretrievably damaged decorative elements from balustrades or handrails are also made in bronze or brass by VLD craftsmen or founders and metalworkers in partnership with the firm. In the wrought-iron workshop, artisans can reproduce anything from colossal

volutes to the most delicate foiled scrolls. This is why individual clients and institutions alike call upon the company's expertise. VLD's loyal clientele is made up of the owners of châteaux, mansions or apartments in exceptional buildings, who are concerned about preserving the original features of their homes. The company's masterly skills in a wide range of fields is valued highly by lovers of beautiful buildings. The rehabilitation of prestigious buildings often involves making adjustments so as to comply with current norms. Changing the level of a floor, for example, entails altering the handrails on the windows for safety reasons. On outstanding pieces of architecture, such modifications must remain invisible, must not upset the harmony of the work. Meeting such a challenge requires both an expert eye and hand, skills that VLD has recently applied to a sumptuous early 20th-century building on the Avenue Gabriel, in the Élysée district, one of the French capital's future luxury hotels. Paris owes part of its timeless beauty to companies such as VLD.



The restoration of the balustrades on buildings in Place Vendôme, Paris, was carried out in several stages. Once removed from the façade, and their decorative schemes carefully noted, they were dismantled. The missing or damaged bronze parts were then recast, the volutes reproduced in the forge. Tenons were used to readjust and fix the original assemblages, before the missing parts of the foliage were remade in embossed sheet metal. Lastly, the decorative elements were replaced and fixed onto the railings.

DEBIT DE TABAC  
VENTE du PALAIS RO

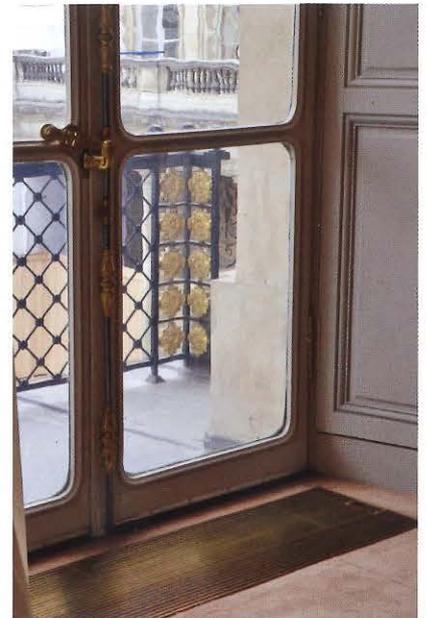




**Above:** The automatic sliding door installed at the main entrance to the Conseil Constitutionnel, in Paris, respected the structure of the historic building.

**Right:** Bookshelves and bronze grid in the library of the Conseil d'État, on Place du Palais-Royal, Paris.

**Left:** Steel framework and polished brass finish: an exact replica of the façades of the Palais-Royal, restored by Pierre Fontaine in 1814-31.

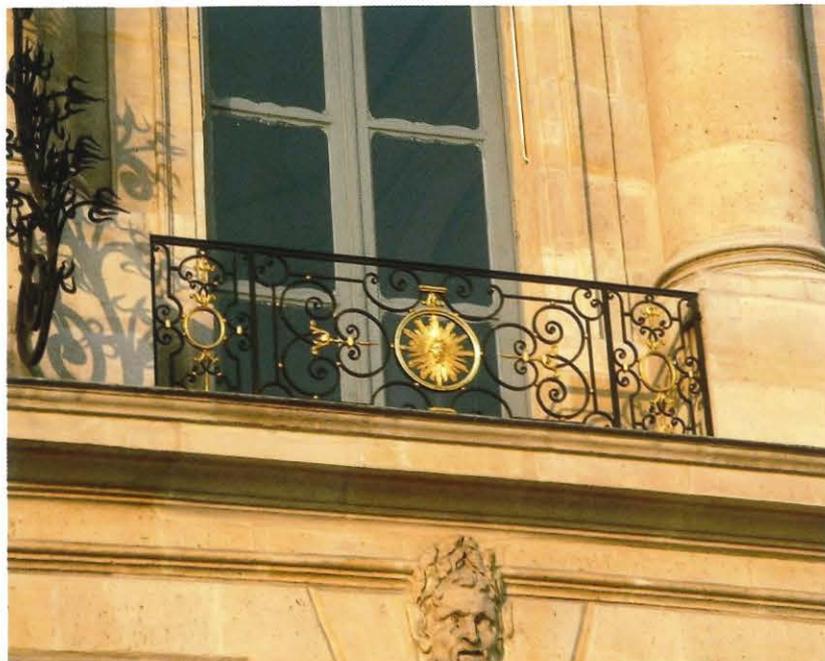
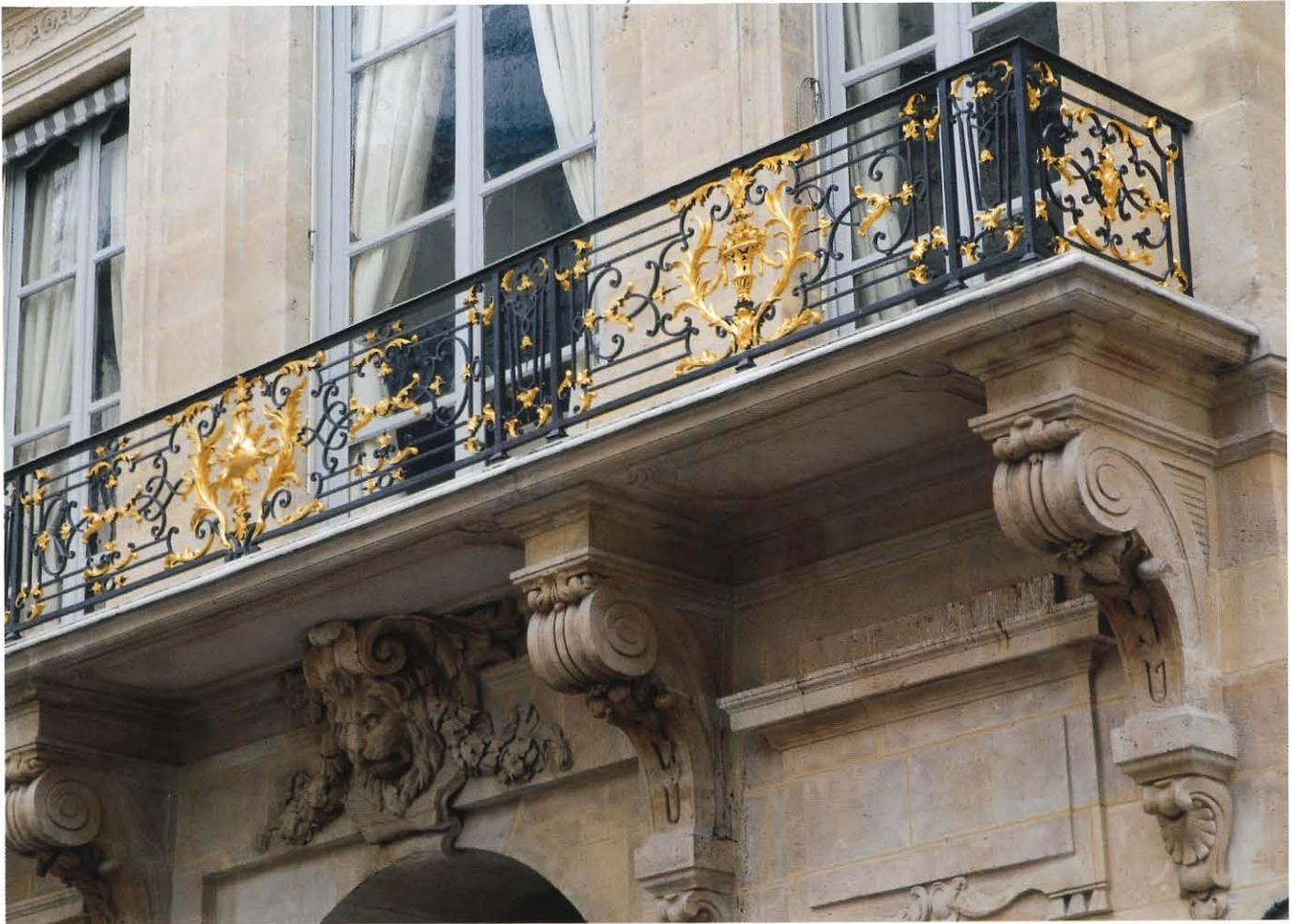




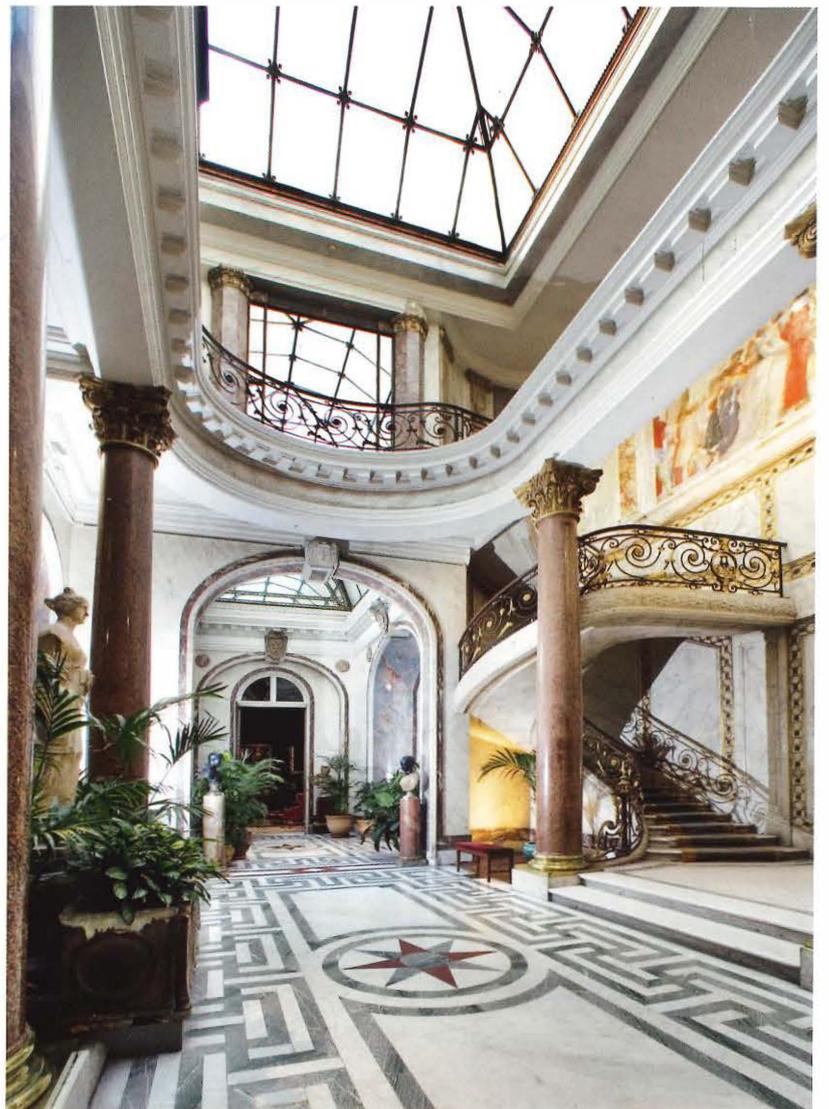
**Above:** Restoration of the glass roof (5 x 11 meters) lighting the General Assembly Room in the Conseil d'État, Paris. The steel framework was filled in with a brass grid and frosted glass.

**Right:** Stairway railing in a private building project in Paris. The handrail and foliage are in brass, the volutes and main structure in steel.





The restoration of the balustrades at the Ministère de la Culture (Ministry of Culture, above) and a building on Place Vendôme (left) required a prolonged period of meticulous work.



**Right and far right:**

The Musée Jacquemart-André, in Paris. The restoration of the glass roofs over the main staircase and the winter garden provided an occasion to ensure that they were entirely waterproof. All the clear glass panels of the outer structure and the frosted glass of the inner structure had to be replaced after the framework was restored.

Templates of each of the glass panes had to be made: not one of them was the same. The railings on the grand staircase were also refurbished.







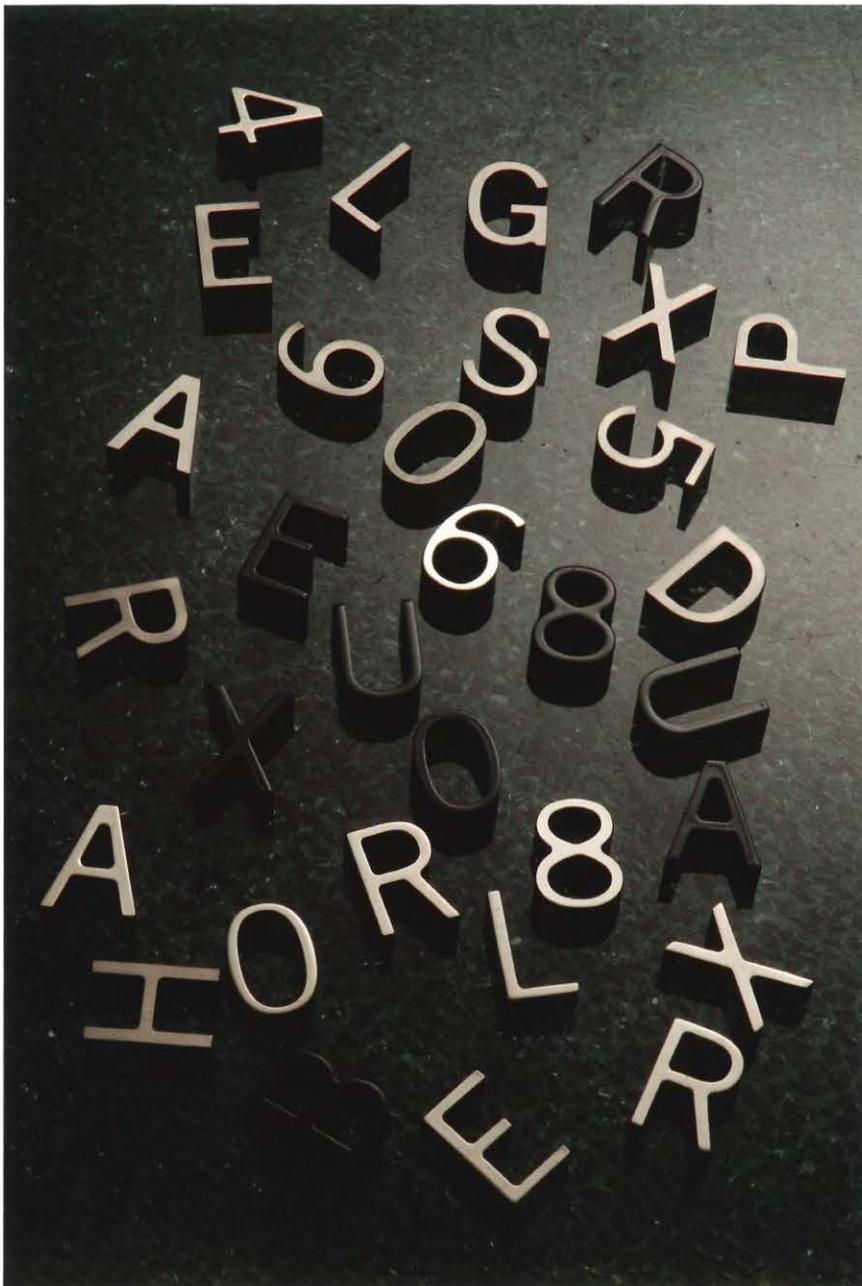
**Above left:** Restoration of a wrought-iron herse composed of volutes and spikes to stop people climbing over the balcony, at 8, Place Vendôme, Paris.

**Above right:** The lamp posts outside the Ministère des Affaires Étrangères (Ministry of Foreign Affairs) were fully restored and coated in a new patina. Since they weighed nearly 300 kg, a crane had to be used to dismantle them prior to restoration.

**Right:** The glass canopy over the main entrance to the Ministère des Affaires Étrangères was also restored. The structure was stripped, the glass panels were replaced by laminated glass, the guttering and decorative course were replaced by exact replicas.

**Left:** Restoration of the steel structures, railings, and lamp posts at the Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal. The missing spikes on the railings were recast.





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**Left:** Brass letters and figures made for the signage of the Horizons Tower in Boulogne, designed by the architect Jean Nouvel. Three types of finish – lustrous nickel, satin nickel and glossy black paint – were retained.

**Right:** Prototype of a screen made in collaboration with the interior decorator Jacques Grange for the Parisian restaurant Caviar House & Prunier. Inspired by art deco, the etched and sanded glass is set in a brass frame with a satin nickel finish.

**Back cover:** Detail of a screen made in collaboration with the interior decorator François-Joseph Graf for a private client. The brass framework enhances the noble materials in this exceptional ensemble: alabaster, tortoiseshell and mica.

**Front cover:** Welded brass frames being made in the silver brazing section (detail). Traces of the welding will be invisible after the decoration is applied.

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