

# GOLD

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## **THE GOLDEN CHRYSALIS: A STUDY OF GOLD IN THE ARCHITECTURE OF CARLO SCARPA INFORMED BY THE THEORY OF KARL MARX**

*Even after the decoupling of currency from the gold standard, gold in its basic material condition, cannot be disassociated from its 'objective fixedness and general social validity' as the historical money commodity. The enduring significance of gold in social and economic transactions is rigorously explained by Karl Marx in the first volume of his seminal text Capital: A Critique of Political Economy. From the inherent qualities of gold that allow it the position of the universal equivalent, to its ability to be both symbolised and symbolic, Marx lyrically presents gold as both a measure of value and a universal symbol of wealth.*

*Taking as a catalyst the relative absence of studies into Marx's philosophy by architectural theorists, referencing his commodity theory of money specifically, this paper examines Marx's architecturally relevant theses on gold in order to interpret the function and meaning of gold in the architectural detailing of Venetian architect Carlo Scarpa. Drawing on the economic detail of gold this research asks, what function does this historically significant material enact in Scarpa's oeuvre? An analysis of case study details in the context of the social, economic and political conditions of their production will present the apparatus at play in Scarpa's seminal works hinged on gold and gold simulacrum.*

Originating from the Greek word *khrusos* meaning 'gold', the term chrysalis, a preparatory or transitional state, is central to understanding the money theory laid out by economic philosopher Karl Marx in the first volume of his seminal work titled *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*.<sup>1</sup> Throughout his historically significant text Marx developed a detailed thesis on capitalism that is fundamentally hinged on a series of transitions re-occurring and reproducing at an ever accelerated rate.<sup>2</sup> It is in his theory of money that the linguistics surrounding his exposition and the material at the core of his discussion collide. For Marx 'gold' becomes not only a linguistic derivative but the literal material of the chrysalis - which embodies the point of transition - that supports the circulation and exchange of commodities.<sup>3</sup> The architecture commodity is historically tied to this process and to gold not only as a medium of acquisition and exchange but occasionally as a material in the palette of architectural space. Marx's theses on gold as presented in *Capital* offer an insight into the obscure association that contemporary architecture has with gold through a coherent explanation of both the material and symbolic character of gold that affords it enduring cultural significance, particularly within the context of capitalism.

Under Marx's analysis and subsequent critique of capitalism, money can only have value when it is tied to a commodity, inevitably that which has achieved "objective fixedness and social validity".<sup>4</sup> This commodity then serves as the 'universal equivalent' through which the value of all other commodities can be measured and expressed. The necessity for the universal equivalent to be a commodity ties Marx's money theory directly to his labour theory of value. The money theory states that money must be a commodity (or tied to a commodity) if it is to serve its role in the circulation of value, as a standard of value, a store of value and a means of payment.<sup>5</sup> This reasoning is contingent on Marx's definition of what constitutes 'value'. For Marx, just as money is tied to the commodity, the value of the commodity is tied to the human labour time expended in the conversion of raw materials into whatever shape the commodity may take. Therefore, if money is to express the value of a commodity, take for example a piece of architecture, it must hold in itself an equal property through which the two may be compared. Under Marx's principle, that measure is the sum of congealed labour time shrouded by the final appearance of the commodity.<sup>6</sup>

Within each commodity then, there can be an equivalent measurement of the money form, which for Marx is always gold above all due to its uniform material composition and divisibility.<sup>7</sup> He writes of the money form that "[i]t becomes its specific social function, and consequently its social monopoly, to play the part of universal equivalent within the world of commodities... [there] is one in particular which has historically conquered this advantageous position: gold."<sup>8</sup> With this, gold acquires new pivotal characteristics. As the accepted money commodity gold now "sits outside all other commodities on the market."<sup>9</sup> This means that gold can now function as a form of reserve for holding value when it is not required in the circulation of commodities.<sup>10</sup> As Marx explains, gold as money does not "need to be converted into commodities, but can be held as the general embodiment of socialized wealth."<sup>11</sup> This property of gold can be understood as the paramount quality that has allowed it such a broadly accepted symbolic meaning across a range of cultures. This can be seen within the contemporary economic condition where, despite the dematerialisation of money and the onset of fiat currency in 1971, culturally there still exists an accepted inference that gold is symbolic of wealth, which is synonymous with power, in the context of contemporary capitalism.

Symbolism and representation are abundant in the Marxian realm of gold: from the position of gold as the representation of value - of man hours embodied in the commodity - to paper and coins as representative of the money commodity. Similarly, within the architectural realm of gold, representation is pivotal to achieving the desired material quality that echoes that of gold and thus alludes to parallel symbolisms. Historically, gold has been used within ideologically operative architecture such as churches, temples, palaces and monuments while more recently the precious metal as a solid element or as plating has been substituted with gold leaf and gold simulacrum such as pyrite, paint and brass. As an illustration of wealth and abundance, otherwise read as neo-capitalist excess, gold-like materials appear in contemporary architectures of consumption such as shopping malls, office buildings and high-rise apartments. Outside of these follies a sustained exploration of gold as an architectural material by any one practitioner is scarce. As one of the few architects who consistently used gilded materials during the period of mid-twentieth century modernism,

Italian architect Carlo Scarpa's projects invite a re-examination, hinged on the commodity theory of money. The gilded materials used sparingly but consistently throughout Scarpa's work, most notably in the Olivetti Showroom (1957-1958), the Querini Stampalia Foundation (1961-1963) and the Brion Family Cemetery (1969 - 1973), can be used to draw allegory, meaning and insights into how the unique context and method of Scarpa's gold detailing is theoretically loaded and exemplary of a Marxian approach to the use of gold as a material in architecture.

Scarpa's projects are consistently described as being inherently tied to Venice and as such it can be argued that his work is also tied to an ingrained history of gold as both an aesthetic and an economic base. During the 9th century Venice gained political and economic independence from mainland Italy.<sup>12</sup> The turn of the 15<sup>th</sup> century saw Venice emerge as an influential trading centre with Venetian merchants sharing control of major maritime trading routes. As such, commerce has been cited as the principal source of Venetian power.<sup>13</sup> The politics and economics of Venice have traditionally been centred on the gold-based trade of commodities. Conducted across all levels of medieval Venetian society from the very wealthy merchants to those who traded locally throughout Venice, gold was central to early Venetian civilisation. The wealth that trade afforded served as the foundation for the splendid architecture that can be found in Venice from the Basilica at Piazza San Marco to the stately canal houses that line the intricate waterways that run through the city. Further to the importance of gold in the context of Scarpa's adult work and life, it is likely that his childhood origins in Vicenza, one of the largest manufacturers and exporters of gold jewellery internationally, also exposed Scarpa to the cultural and economic significance of the material.<sup>14</sup>

Extending the palimpsest-like narrative between Scarpa's work and the city of Venice, to the explicit details of his projects, the most pertinent point of focus for gold in Scarpa's architecture is his repeated use of gold hued glass tiles. Running at datum heights across the in-situ concrete walls that enclose both the garden at the Querini Stampalia Foundation in Venice and the Brion Family Cemetery in San Vito d'Altivole, bands of square gold and coloured tiles create a visual logic in each garden and act in their deliberate locations, adjacent to water, as secondary sources of reflection and light play. Similarly to the approach of architectural theorist Marco Frascari, who draws a parallel between the prevalence of the numerical value eleven found in Scarpa's work and throughout the built fabric of Venice,<sup>15</sup> it is suggested here that gold simulacrum included in Scarpa's architectural detail stems from his own understanding of how gold has existed historically both in the built fabric and in the social political conditions that have shaped the aquatic city.

Scarpa's commitment to understanding the historical significance of materials and their operative power concurs with the theory of both Marx and architectural historian Manfredo Tafuri, who argue the importance of a broad reading of social histories as a means of understanding the particular present in which an individual or architecture operates. Drawing on the vernacular of Venetian architecture, the 'mosaic' Scarpa uses can be regarded above all other gilded materials he employs as a direct connection to Venice's historical architecture and its history as a commercial destination centered around transactions using gold as the medium of exchange.<sup>16</sup> Featured on the floors, walls and ceilings of Byzantine churches and monuments throughout the city, mosaicked 'tesserae' have been used decoratively as adornment on both the interior and exterior of buildings. The tradition of Venetian tesserae connects Venetian architecture and in turn Scarpa's architecture, directly to the history of gold as the penultimate medium of exchange. In a recent study tesserae were analysed for their material composition and were found to contain gold alloys matching those of historic gold coins. This analysis suggests that the gold leaves set into glass that give the tiles their golden lustre were formed from mint gold via the production process of beating circulating gold coins.<sup>17</sup>

This direct tie to currency holds symbolic significance in the case of Scarpa's Olivetti showroom located on the edge of Piazza San Marco in Venice. The showroom is divided across a narrow plan by variations in level. The level of entry, a mezzanine level and a lower level at the rear of the site where the floors are tiled in a variegated grid of gold tesserae embedded in concrete. In addition to the gilded floor, the windows are framed in brass and at the right of the entrance a geometric emblem for the Olivetti company is proudly displayed in gold hues. Constructed from brass plate and gold leaf applied to teak panels the motif is a fitting introduction to the richly crafted space and suggests that the commodities displayed in the showroom are to be desired and revered like the objects traditionally found in other gilded spaces in the city that are historically tied to the bourgeoisie. In the same way, the wealth of the Olivetti company, who commissioned the showroom, is reflected in the space through the prevalence of gold simulacrum which can be read in the context of Marxist theory, as a symbol of the companies stored excess value or capital. While it is possible that the brass elements and fixings were selected for their ability to withstand corrosion in the saline Venetian air, it is highly likely, due to Scarpa's sustained use of such materials even in non-coastal environments, that he employed gilded surfaces due to their social power as a representative medium.

Egle Trincanato, the President of the Querini Stampalia Foundation for whom Scarpa and his team of labourers conducted work in 1963 remarked that “above all he [Scarpa] was exceptionally skilful in knowing how to combine a base material with a precious one.”<sup>18</sup> This attitude reflects the general acceptance of gilding as a process that applies a rare kind of worth. Along with the convenient material properties of gold and brass such as their non-corrosiveness and malleability, which make them desirable additions to sculpted architectures, they also transfer to the architecture and those who have access to it, an intrinsic social value that has been attributed to these materials trans-historically. These properties along with its position as the historical money commodity has seen gold, and materials that appear in its image, elevated within the collective consciousness from a metallic substance to a symbol itself. Marx was acutely aware of the power of such materials to alter social perceptions evinced when he surmises that “some men count for more when inside a gold braided uniform than they do otherwise”.<sup>19</sup>

When reviewing the way that Scarpa employed gilded surfaces particularly in projects that are directly associated to an institution or an ‘important’ individual, it would seem that he was also aware of this ‘power’ of gold. Creating emblematic architecture similar to that of the Olivetti company, Scarpa also included gilded motifs at the entry to the Brion Family Tomb. The family cemetery was commissioned by the Brion family after the death of Giuseppe Brion, the founder of the internationally recognised Brionvega electronics company.<sup>20</sup> When describing the project Scarpa is quoted as saying:

Someone died, here in Italy, and the family wanted to commemorate the achievements of this person, who came from a humble background – ‘dalla gavetta’, as we say – and who, through his work attained a certain importance...Well I did what you have seen.<sup>21</sup>

To commemorate the life and metamorphosis of Brion, Scarpa designed a truly remarkable series of buildings. The estate is comprised of a chapel, an entry building, a meditation pavilion and the tomb itself. The four structures, while spatially detached, are brought together through materiality. The three concrete structures and the timber and steel pavilion all feature a unique brand of Scarpa iconography translated into brass and gold leaf. From the brass pulpit in the chapel to the spiralled brass corner details of the pavilion, each moment of meticulously crafted gold-substitute communicates the importance of the place and those who rest there, while also prompting the respect required by those visiting.

In the discussion thus far, the accepted argument that gold embodies a socially perceived allusion to wealth, power and money has been reinforced. As such there is an inclination to read gold in the architecture of Carlo Scarpa as a purely ideological apparatus that elevates architecture and the institutions with which they are affiliated to a level of economic and social empowerment.<sup>22</sup> However, in returning to Marx’s theses there arises an opportunity to challenge a reading of gold in Scarpa’s architecture as a purely ideological support of traditional power structures and instead see it as a moment of subversion expressed in built form. Scarpa said that “when a thing is well expressed its value is high.”<sup>23</sup> In the Marxian sense, this is exactly so. To produce a commodity, an object or ‘thing’ that is well expressed there has typically been a subsequent series of human manufacturing and labour processes in its production that are held by the commodity as a vessel of value, that is human labour time. It is this value holding property of gold that allowed it to operate as the money form under Marx’s theory. When materials that echo the aesthetic qualities of gold are used within architecture, a unique opportunity arises wherein built form may be used to highlight the labour time that goes into the design and construction of the architecture commodity. This notion is echoed by Edward Ford, who suggests that when architecture holds unusual properties the humanity that is embedded in the building becomes evident.

There are the imperfections of nature – the weathered surface, the wood joint that creeps open due to shrinkage, the concrete joint that cracks with curing. These add character and the sense of material reality to abstraction, but more importantly they enable buildings to embody labour and history as much as they embody capital.<sup>24</sup>

While Ford’s argument is slightly incongruous with the Marxian proposition of labour and capital, his intention is to highlight the expression that is possible when considering material conditions in architecture. Scarpa’s buildings are grounded in his knowledge of construction, craft and materiality. Within his spaces, gold materials are always used in a deeply considered manner, embedded in the language of the materials that surround them and often placed at the joint between two surfaces. At the Querini Stampalia Foundation brass is used as the connection point between the travertine slabs that clad the internal walls. Instead of concealing the joint Scarpa expresses it using gilded material,

drawing attention to the architectural moment of construction and to the gravity of the stone slabs being fixed vertically adjacent to their natural position on the earth.

By juxtaposing the architecture commodity that in Scarpa's work is predominantly constructed from traditional building materials such as concrete, masonry, stone and timber with expressions of gold - the traditional money form - a tension arises within his architecture whereby those who encounter the spaces are confronted by a challenge to their own perception of what constitutes value and how it is derived. Visitors are invited to see and feel the gold in conjunction with other materials such as concrete and stone and question the respective value of the materials and ask what makes the 'gold' more valuable than the other materials when they are products of the same sources, the earth and human labour? Scarpa's unlikely inclusions of gold detailing, particularly in secular building typologies highlights the making of the building. This is explicitly so when he highlights construction methods in brass and gold leaf. Here gold becomes an illustration of value and thus an illustration of labour in the built environment. When harnessed by Scarpa as an arresting design element, gold and gold simulacrum invite those who experience his architecture to lift the veil of fetishisation and ask, why is this gold? Who placed it there? And who ordered it to be so? In this way gold detail emphasises the human processes of production that are behind Scarpa's architecture.

The gilded surfaces, used by Scarpa in his architectural compositions, reverberate with meaning when studied in conjunction with Marx's ruminations on gold. This paper has endeavoured to answer the question of what function gold holds in Scarpa's body of work. However, the conclusion drawn is that gold and architecture have a symbiotic relationship in the case of Scarpa's buildings, whereby the mixing of the two provokes further inquiry into the meaning conveyed by both. The meaning communicated by the case studies is seen to transform from ideological apparatus to subversive opportunity as the examination of Marx's theses is expanded. Just as gold is the literal point of transition in Marx's economic theory, Scarpa's architecture holds the power of transfiguration, transforming gold from a symbol of wealth to a moment of empowerment and de-fetishisation of the architecture commodity. By investigating Scarpa's architecture from this theoretical basis embedded in one of the foremost historical studies on the material and symbolic, social, cultural and political implications of gold, this paper suggests Scarpa's use of gold is an empowering medium for recognising the value embodied in contemporary architecture.

## Endnotes

- 1 Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* (London: Penguin Group, 1990).
- 2 It is the cyclical transition of value, from the human, to the commodity, to the money form, and back to the commodity, which often serves as the means of subsistence for the human being (who is repeatedly implored to continue the cycle at an ever accelerated rate) that according to Marx forms a basis for the capitalist political economy.
- 3 Marx, *Capital*, 207. For Marx, the commodity goes through a state of metamorphoses in circulation from a commodity to money and back to a commodity ad infinitum. Here he refers to gold as the chrysalis stage, the moment of waiting for conversion into exchangeable values. Gold is the chrysalis of the commodity holding value until it can be transformed into another commodity.
- 4 Marx, *Capital*, 162.
- 5 John Weeks, *Capital and Exploitation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 113.
- 6 "It has already been remarked above that the equivalent form of a commodity does not imply that the magnitude of its value can be determined. Therefore, even if we know that gold is money, and consequently directly exchangeable with all other commodities, this still does not tell us how much 101b. of gold is worth, for instance. Money, like every other commodity, cannot express the magnitude of its value except relatively in other commodities. This value is determined by the labour-time required for its production, and is expressed in the quantity of any other commodity in which the same amount of labour-time is congealed." See Marx, *Capital*, 186.

- 7 “Only a material whose every sample possesses the same uniform quality can be an adequate form of appearance of value, that is a material embodiment of abstract and therefore equal human labour. On the other hand, since the difference between the magnitudes of value is purely quantitative, the money commodity must be capable of purely quantitative differentiation, it must therefore be divisible at will, and it must also be possible to assemble it again from its component parts. Gold and silver possess these properties by nature. The money commodity acquires a dual use-value. Alongside its special use-value as a commodity (gold, for instance, serves to fill hollow teeth, it forms the raw material for luxury articles, etc.) it acquires a formal use-value, arising out of its specific social function.” See Marx, *Capital*, 184.
- 8 Marx, *Capital*, 162.
- 9 Weeks, *Capital and Exploitation*, 111.
- 10 Weeks, *Capital and Exploitation*, 111. The money commodity is a commodity of its own type in that it is essential for the circulation of capital. The amount of money in circulation is relative to the number of commodities in circulation. The money commodity can be exchanged or remain dormant without compromising on its value. It is accumulated as a store of value/wealth.
- 11 Weeks, *Capital and Exploitation*, 111.
- 12 Diego Puga and Daniel Trefler, “International Trade and Institutional Change: Medieval Venice’s Response to Globalisation,” *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 129, no.2 (2014): 755-6.
- 13 Anne McLroy, “The Rise and Decline of the Venetian Empire,” *Agora*, 50, no.4 (2015): 49.
- 14 Valentina De Marchi, Joonkoo Lee and Gary Gereffi, “Globalization, Recession and the Internationalization of Industrial Districts: Experiences from the Italian Gold Jewellery Industry,” *European Planning Studies*, 22, No. 4 (2014): 867.
- 15 Marco Frascari, “Architectural Traces of an Admirable Cipher: Eleven in the Opus of Carlo Scarpa,” *Network Nexus Journal: Architecture and Mathematics*, 1, No.s 1/2 (1999): 7-22.
- 16 Anne-Catrin Schultz, *Carlo Scarpa – Layers* (Stuttgart/ London: Edition Axel Menges, 2007), 77.
- 17 Elisabetta Neri and Marco Verità, “Glass and metal analyses of gold leaf tesserae from 1st to 9th century,” *Journal of Archeological Science*, 40, No. 12 (2013): 4597.
- 18 *Carlo Scarpa* directed by Murray Grigor (1996; Ipswich, GB: Concord Media, 2012), DVD.
- 19 Marx, *Capital*, 143.
- 20 Robert McCarter, *Carlo Scarpa* (New York, NY: Phaidon Press Limited, 2013), 240.  
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 recognisingngor empowering architects to reconnect with the value embodied in contemporary architecturehat makes the 'the spaces
- 21 Sergio Los, *Carlo Scarpa* (Koln: Benedikt Taschen Verlag GmbH, 1999), 131.
- 22 Scarpa also produced a commission for the Banco Popolare in Verona that interestingly features gold simulacrum in a less dominant manner than in his other works, despite it still playing a key part in the aesthetic of the building. Marx states that “Money is realized abstract labour.” In this he is making clear that the agenda for any form of abstract labour, which is that human labour carried out in the pursuit of exchange value, is conducted to manifest an excess of value expressed in the money form. See Marx, *Capital*.
- 23 Patrick Lynch, “Carlo Scarpa’s Elaborate Work takes you to a Higher Place,” *Architects’ Journal*, 227, No. 12 (2008): 18.
- 24 Edward Ford, “The Grand Work of Fiction: The Detail as Narrative,” *Architectural Design*, 84, No.4 (July 2014): 33.