

# House & Home

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**SHOCK OF THE OLD** The new Galerie Historismus in Paris specializes in 19th- and early 20th-century furnishings, which Roberto Polo, the artistic adviser, thinks will soon rival modern furniture, below left at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs, in popularity.





# After Midcentury Modern, What's Old Looks New

By CHRISTOPHER MASON

**D**URING a black-tie preview of the Biennale des Antiquaires, Europe's best-known art and antiques fair, on Sept. 13, Robert Couturier paused at an exhibitor's booth to inspect a small table designed by Jean-Michel Frank in 1938. "It's exquisite," Mr. Couturier, the New York decorator, said later. "But at \$400,000 for three pieces of wood with fish skin and glue, it's a bit much."

The astronomical prices being asked for

PARIS

The 1800's angle for a comeback after a century in the wilderness.

certain pieces of 20th-century furniture were the subject of widespread comment at the preview. Several revelers were agog at the asking price for a 1951 library table designed by Charlotte Perriand, at the stand of Galerie Down Town, a Parisian dealer: 1.5 million euros, or nearly \$2 million.

The fashion for 20th-century furniture — from Design Within Reach to Mr. Frank's sleek Art Deco designs — has been the staple of shelter magazines for the past decade, as collectors at the top end of the market have increasingly vied for masterpieces by 20th-century designers, like the pair of 1920's jardinières made by Armand-Albert Rateau, a French architect and decorator, that sold at Christie's in June for \$5.3 million.

But many observers at the Biennale, which opened to the public on Friday and runs through Sept. 24, were moved to pose

the seemingly inevitable question: Has the fashion for 20th-century decorative arts reached a saturation point, if not yet in the mainstream market then in the collectors' one that generally leads it? And if mid-century modern is finally reaching its peak, what will collectors turn to next?

There was no shortage of speculation.

"I think the mid-20th century is already a little bit on the way out," said Juan Pablo Molyneux, the New York-based decorator. "I believe we're going to go more into Ori-

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## Enlisting a Fortress to Battle the Elements

By MARCELLE S. FISCHLER

**W**HEN Lori and Jeff Cummings and their two teenage sons move into their new house in Fort Deposit, Ala., next week, high winds, escalating energy prices and concerns about mold and termites will not be among their worries.

Their 6,000-square-foot neo-Classical-style house was framed with insulating concrete forms, known as I.C.F.'s, an alternative to traditional wood-frame or stick construction that has become increasingly popular as a way to build a strong, energy-efficient house.

Two years ago Ms. Cummings, 43, a former consumer reporter for a PBS affiliate in Alabama, had just started researching eco-friendly houses when Hurricane Ivan tore through the state. Ms. Cummings's house in Greenville only lost power for a week, but her sister-in-law's house four miles away sustained \$30,000 of damage,

and nearby subdivisions were wiped out.

After that, she said, "I decided to look for not only energy efficiency but something that would withstand hurricane force winds."

The Cummingses are among hundreds of thousands of Americans who have embraced the use of concrete in residential building in recent years. According to the Portland Cement Association, a trade group in Skokie, Ill., concrete homes made up 16.3 percent of the market for new construction in 2004, the last year for which data was available, compared with 3 percent in 1993.

The use of I.C.F.'s — interlocking blocks made of concrete sandwiched between rigid foam panels and reinforced with steel bars — has risen 73 percent over the past five years, said Joseph Lyman, the executive director of the Insulating Concrete Form Association, a

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Thomas McDonald for The New York Times

STEALTH HOUSE

Although it looks like traditional wood-frame construction, Matt and Kimberly Grivner's Connecticut house was built with energy-efficient insulated concrete.



Phil Mansfield for The New York Times

## A High-Wire Master Touches Down

By PENELOPE GREEN

**P**HILIPPE PETIT will tell you proudly that he is a "tenacious little rat." Certainly, as he demonstrated a few weeks ago, he is an exacting guy, relentlessly curious, and thorough to the point of no return.

Rifling through his plans and manifestos for the hand-built timber mini-barn (by his hands only, and with 18th-century tools) on his property just a few miles from Woodstock, N.Y., he brandished (among other enticing particulars), elevations and axonometric drawings of joints, embellished with roman numerals, explanatory notes and poetic asides. Mr. Petit is a man who makes blueprints of his blueprints, and elevations of his elevations. Tenacious, indeed.

His "barnette," as his partner, Kathy O'Donnell, calls the structure for its half-peaked shape and diminutive volume (though at 14 feet, the high point of its pitched roof will allow for the juggling of six hoops), is 13 years in the making, and still

A handmade Catskill barn reflects the care of a man used to life on the edge.

counting. But time is of no consequence. Mr. Petit's opening act (still his magnum opus) — the heart-stopping, operatic and illegal walk between the tops of the World Trade Center towers in August of 1974, when he was just 24 — took six years to plan. Since then, he has walked, variously (and legally), over the Louisiana Superdome; over Amsterdam Avenue to the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, where he has been an artist in residence since 1982; and between the Palais de Chaillot and the Eiffel Tower in Paris.

He has also been arrested more than 500 times, mostly for street juggling; published six books, one of which, "On the High Wire" (Random House, 1985), was rejected by 27 publishers; and suffered the sudden death

of his only child, his 9½-year-old daughter, Cordia Gypsy. These are the broad strokes of a lifetime shot through with always vivid "coups," as the 57-year-old Mr. Petit would say, in between which he has been painstakingly making this barn.

Designed as a place to store his high-wire equipment and as a practice space for wire-walking in bad weather (Mr. Petit spends three hours every day limbering up, juggling and walking a steel cable stretched between two wooden X's set on the gentle slope next to his house), the barnette also holds what he calls the "world's smallest stage." This is a demure, seven-by-eight-foot rectangle of maple and chestnut upon which Mr. Petit will soon perform locally the act he's been honing for decades.

"My facetious character," he said. "This is not the Bolshoi, it's for the kids." His is an impish street performance of mime, juggling and pickpocketing. Maybe you've seen him, in a circle of chalk, palming the watches off passersby in front of the Metropolitan

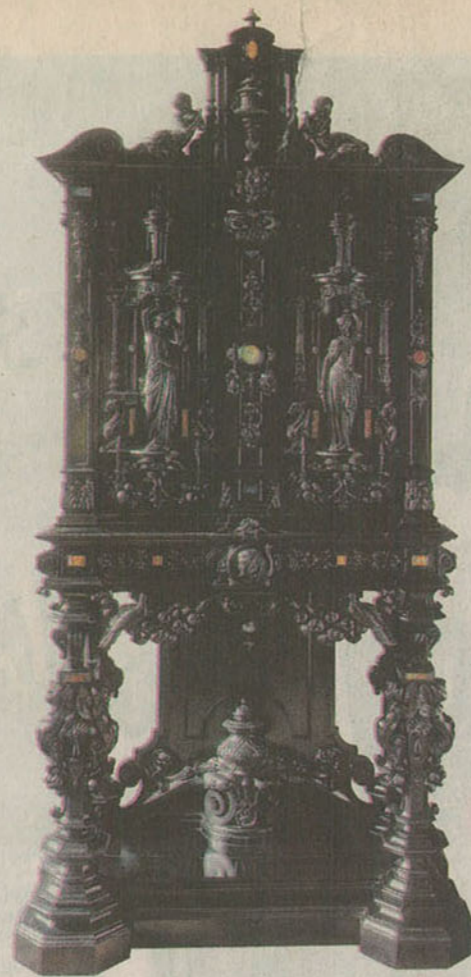
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**THE CABLE GUY** Between his high-wire walks, Philippe Petit has been meticulously building a "barnette," above, using 18th-century tools and methods.



## THE NEW

**MODERN?** From left, an 1851 ebonized pearwood cabinet and a 1902 Peter Behrens oak sideboard at the new Galerie Historismus; a 1906 Josef Hoffmann chair shown by Bel Étage at this year's Biennale des Antiquaires in Paris.



Left and center, Jacques Pepion; above, Jean-Claude Coutausse/Bloomberg News

## After Midcentury Modern, What's Old Looks New

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ental tranquility and simplicity. Open the paper and whatever's going on in the world is related to China. All the great architects in the world are working in Shanghai."

Mr. Couturier, for his part, said he believes "people are going to go back to beautiful 18th-century furniture" of the kind that dominated the high-end antiques market as recently as 10 years ago. (The period was the Biennale's original reason for being when it was founded in 1901, but by this year only eight 18th-century furniture dealers were represented, an all-time low, com-



TASTEMAKER François-Joseph Graf,



### Deals From the Turn Of the Last Century

By ELAINE LOUIE

**N**OT all furnishings from the late 19th and early 20th centuries cost hundreds of thousands of dollars. According to Roberto Polo, the owner of Galerie Historismus, a new gallery in Paris that specializes in furniture produced between 1840 and 1910, relative bargains can be found on turn-of-the-century work by Viennese designers like Josef Hoffmann and Kolo Moser. Max Drazen, the president of Tepper Galleries in Manhattan, said that in the last year, he sold a Josef Hoffmann upholstered salon set — a settee and two chairs — for around \$5,000.

Michael Thonet, a German-born Viennese designer, invented bentwood furniture, which was mass-produced at the rate of 4,000 pieces a day in 1900; these early pieces are widely available. "Thonet chairs and rockers are selling for high hundreds, or between \$1,000 and \$2,000," said Mr. Drazen. Last Saturday, Wright, an auction house in Chicago, sold a pair of early 1900's Thonet side chairs for \$250, as well as a 1903 Thonet coat rack for \$550. The prices were listed on eBay's live auction site.



pared to 26 booths offering 20th-century art and furniture.)

But the prediction that came up more often than any other had to do with a period that was glaringly absent at the fair: the 19th century.

"In the Biennale, it's been like that for years: It's like the 19th century never existed," said Daniel Alcouffe, the former chief curator of decorative arts at the Louvre. "But I think things are going to change. I think in the next Biennale we'll have stands about the 19th century."

Odile Nouvel, the curator of the 19th-century collections at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs, which opened last week after a 10-year, \$46-million renovation, pointed to a big auction that Sotheby's will hold in London in October, which includes works of art created for the Great Exhibition of 1851 in London and the Exposition Universelle of 1900 in Paris. "Ten years ago such an auction would be absolutely impossible," Ms. Nouvel said.

One reason for the rising interest in 19th-century decorative arts may be the diminishing supply of high-quality 18th- and 20th-century furniture. According to Louis Bofferding, a New York furniture dealer, "Nineteenth century is the only thing that hasn't already been bought up."

Jacques Grange, a leading French decorator who works in a wide range of periods, has recently developed a taste for the undulating lines of furniture from the 1890's. "The quality's fabulous and the prices are very reasonable," he said, adding that he is beginning to advise clients to "to go in this direction."

♦ And Benjamin Steinitz, a Paris antiques dealer, credited a new French interest in the 19th century in part to François-Joseph Graf, one of France's most famous interior designers. "In Paris it's quite the taste now, because of the taste of Graf," he said.

♦ This month, Mr. Graf's work and influence has been evident all over the city, not only in the lavishly styled booths he designed for some of the most prominent dealers showing at the Biennale, but in the 10 period rooms he created at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs, and in the arrangement of furniture at Galerie Historismus, a new showroom specializing in furniture from 1840 to 1910. During a pre-show visit to the Grand Palais, the newly renovated 1900 exhibition hall where the Biennale was held this year, he spoke of the 19th century as "the most interesting period" in the decorative arts, in part because it's been "so out of fashion."

♦ Mr. Graf, for one, hopes that doesn't change too quickly, "so I can buy and my clients can buy. But it's getting to be very expensive, he added: "A piece by Lièvre" — Édouard Lièvre, a French painter and cabinet maker who died in 1886 — "was \$100,000 just a few years ago, now it's a million."

Ms. Nouvel said that in the renovation of



Above, Richard Harbus for The New York Times; chair, left, Jacques Pepion



**LIGHT AND HEAVY** A turn-of-the-century room, above, and one from 20 years earlier, right, at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs; at Galerie Historismus, left, a white oak armchair.

the museum, space formerly allocated to 18th-century furniture was drastically reduced to make way for new 19th-century galleries. "The public is fascinated by the last two" of these new galleries — those representing 1880 and 1890 — based on her observations from the first week, she said. "They are the two darkest rooms," she went on, "very dark and neurotic, with dragons and animals fighting."

People "are now ready to see the 19th century in a more complex, interesting way than a decade ago," Ms. Nouvel said. "That's a big change."

Roberto Polo, the artistic adviser of Galerie Historismus, is counting on it. Mr. Polo, who is widely celebrated for his extraordinary eye and taste, is also known for a spate of legal problems in the 1980's and '90's, including jail time in Switzerland on charges of embezzling tens of millions of dollars from clients when he was a financial adviser. The showroom is his comeback venture, and a departure from his focus on 18th-

century pieces at his New York antiques store in the 1980's.

Mr. Polo's legal imbroglio does not appear to have diminished his credibility among Parisians who admire his taste.

Ariane Dandois, a leading Parisian dealer of furniture of the 18th and early 19th centuries, echoed many others in saying, "No matter what has been done or said, I don't care. He's always had a fantastic eye, and fantastic taste."

Nevertheless, the project is not without risk. "Most people have a terrible impression of the 19th century; they make a face," Mr. Graf said, scowling to illustrate. "They think it's a bad copy of the 18th century."

Despite her praise for Mr. Polo, Ms. Dandois cast doubt on predictions that 19th-century furniture was due for a revival. "I don't think people are ready for that again," Ms. Dandois said. "The one thing everyone wants is contemporary paintings," she said, which are seen to be incompatible with 19th-century furniture.

Above and left, Richard Harbus for The New York Times  
**GILDED AGES** Galerie Historismus, above, shows a range of 19th-century styles; left, an 1835 table, at the Biennale.



Above, Philippe Chancel; table, above, Jean-Claude Coutausse/Bloomberg News

Furniture from the Aesthetic Movement, which includes designs with Japaneque motifs, will be offered at Doyle New York's next Belle Epoque Auction on Sept. 27. Three maple chests of drawers, each embellished with faux bamboo, are valued between \$5,000 to \$7,000. "We don't know the designer," said Malcolm MacNeil, the specialist in charge of the auctions. Doyle is also offering a gilt and marquetry inlaid table, attributed to the Herter Brothers, which is expected to sell for \$5,000 to \$7,000.



that's going to become very popular is the stuff that presages modernism," Mr. Morris said, "the more radical simplified forms that are the precursors of 20th-century design."

Mr. Morris also predicted a renewed interest in Art Nouveau, a movement that flourished in France and Belgium, and which has long been out of fashion.

In Paris, Hervé Aaron, a leading 18th-century dealer with galleries in Paris and New York, seemed to be thinking along the same lines. "Art Nouveau was very much in fashion 20 years ago," he said. "I believe it will come back."

Philippe Garner, the international head of Christie's 20th-century decorative arts department, was struck by the absence of Art Nouveau at the Biennale and anticipated a resurgence. "It's a market that's currently being overlooked," he said.

Mr. Garner seemed intrigued by Mr. Polo's efforts to promote 19th-century furniture. "Polo is a wonderful phoenix, isn't he?" Mr. Garner said. "It seems like a canny move, a clever thing to do. Some of the 19th century schools are undervalued and the work is wonderfully imaginative and beautifully crafted."

But Mr. Garner sees no end to the market's enthusiasm for 20th-century modernism. "I don't think we're anywhere near saturation," he said. The current mania for contemporary art is likely to endure, he said. "And 19th-century furniture and contemporary art don't make natural bedfellows," he observed.

Interest in the 19th century may be on the rise. "I think it's plausible," he said, "but I don't think it will be at the expense of the beautiful simplicity of 20th-century design."

"Fashions change, and one goes through different moods and needs," Mr. Garner added. "Twentieth-century modernism is a wonderful setting to live in, very Zen. But sometimes you want the mind and eye to be richly entertained."

Mr. Molyneux was also dubious. It's something that might happen, he said, but "personally I dislike" the period, he said. "There are extraordinary pieces, but it's like a theme park. Why would you go through that again?"

And Mr. Couturier said he was unmoved by the 19th-century period rooms at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs. "I found them dreary to a maximum," he said. "I hope this isn't going back into fashion or I'll have to retire. It's so heavy, so middle class, and it's dark, too. I can't stand it."

Even so, he does not discount Mr. Polo's chances for success. "Roberto Polo has wonderful taste," Mr. Couturier said. "Maybe he can make it happen."

Mr. Polo said that while some people may be resistant to the charms of late 19th-century furniture, one period that he shows, 1890-1910, is more likely to appeal to contemporary tastes. Daniel Morris, a founder of the Historical Design Gallery in New York, agrees. "The work of the 19th century