

ForbesLife

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The Style Issue

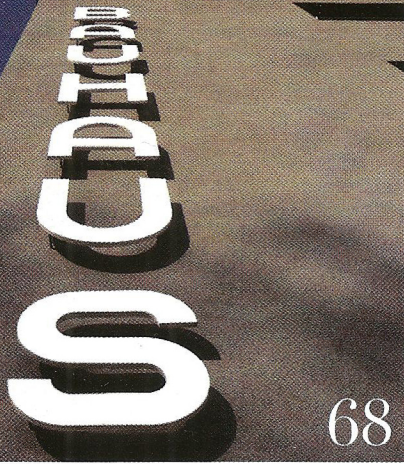
CELEBRATING THINGS THAT LAST

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Taking stock of the Bauhaus on the 90th anniversary of its founding, which will be marked with major exhibitions in New York and Germany, in Berlin, Dessau, and Weimar. BY JONATHON KEATS



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Now, it's all about blue-chip dressing: fine fabrics, classic shapes, hand tailoring. Here's a portfolio of fall and winter garments that showcase all three—and will be in style long after this season is over. BY GARY WALTHER

POLO'S LOUNGE 84

Roberto Polo sells a unique trove of museum-quality furniture from an exquisite showroom in Brussels. BY JOSHUA LEVINE



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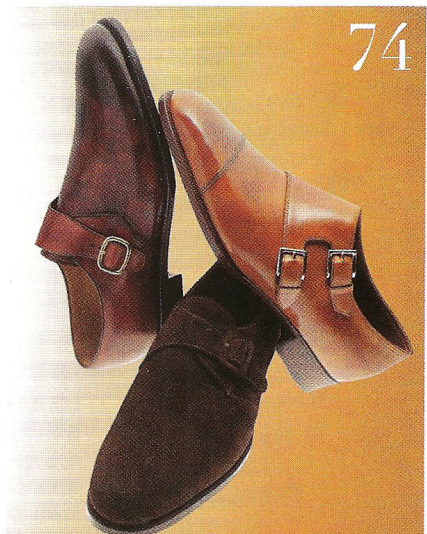
The world of luxury products, double-distilled. BY THE EDITORS OF FORBESLIFE



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Polo's Lounge



The Galerie Historismus in Brussels is an expression of its artistic advisor's magisterial take on European furniture design from around 1840 to the 1920s. His name is Roberto Polo, and to Polophiles like Kathryn Hiesinger, curator for European Decorative Arts at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, he's a giant of the profession.

"He has maybe the best eye in the business," says Hiesinger, who first met Polo in 1978 when she was curating an exhibition on French decorative art. "He had it as a collector, and he has it as a dealer."

Galerie Historismus occupies four floors of a 1910 building that was once the headquarters of Brussels' most fashionable hatter. It's not far from the Grand-Place, one of the most beautiful squares in Europe. Open the door and you understand immediately what Hiesinger means.

A table lamp designed by the great Dutch architect Gerrit Rietveld in 1925—basically a sphere and two lines—sits on a small pedestal. It's the only one extant of the two made (approximate price: \$533,000), and it was all set to be purchased by a major American museum when the financial crisis hit and scotched the deal. "It's like a Mondrian painting but much rarer," says Polo of Rietveld's modest (but perfect) exercise in pure geometry.

Nearby there's a French cabinet (approximately \$1.2 million) made for London's Crystal Palace Exposition of 1851. It is a monument to old-fashioned ornament, the ebony and pearwood covered top to bottom with carved portraits, cherubs, fruits, and finials, not to mention encrusted stones. (The piece is currently on reserve to an American museum. Polo says that the market has picked up since January.)

Each piece is exquisite on its own, and they are even more so together. The seamless period juxtaposition is the product of Polo's erudite eye, which was trained in art history at Columbia University in New York. (Polo was born in Cuba and emigrated with his family to the United States as a child.) Subsequently he joined Citibank (1974) and helped launch the company's art-investment division, leaving in 1981 to start his own invest-



ment company, Private Asset Management Group.

"In addition to following my own taste, I'm really trying to trace the history of design, starting with the great French and English designers of the 1830s," says Polo, who has strong opinions and isn't shy about sharing them. Like this one:

"The French missed the boat in design after 1890." His 20th-century pieces come mostly from Germany, Austria, and Eastern Europe. Among the choice items is a funny little wood sculpture by German master craftsman Oskar Schlemmer: \$4.95 million—a very rare Schlemmer, you see.

Polo isn't finished. "Robert Mallet-Stevens was repeating what Josef Hoffmann did ten years earlier, and I don't want to see one more piece by Charlotte Perriand or Jean Prouvé," he says, pooh-poohing three prominent members of France's modernist pantheon.

No one ever accused Polo of playing it safe. Indeed, he spent nearly four years in preventive detention in Swiss, Italian, and American jails in the late '80s and early '90s awaiting trial on charges of misinvesting client funds at Private Asset Management Group. To this day, Polo says he did no such thing. The episode nevertheless wiped him out. Among the casualties was his own sizable 18th-century French collection.

It was an old friend and client, English businessman John Dean, who gathered investors to finance the first Galerie Historismus, on Place des Vosges in Paris. Last May, Polo reestablished the gallery in Brussels under a new owner for reasons ranging from aesthetic ("Brussels is the cradle of European modernism") to financial ("It's a quasi tax haven that attracts important international fortunes") to social ("Belgians tend to be modest, open-minded, enthusiastic, and well mannered").

The gallery is an insider's address and worth visiting as a small museum. "You don't go there for a bargain, but you do go for a rare, historically important piece," says the Philadelphia Museum's Hiesinger. "Roberto's a man deeply in love with objects—he's a kind of cult figure." —JOSHUA LEVINE
Galerie Historismus, rue du Lombard 47, Brussels. By appointment Tuesday through Saturday, 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. 32-2-512-6850 or galerie@historismus.org



The main floor of Galerie Historismus (above and left) is a striking display of European furniture from 1840 to the 1920s. The eye behind the gallery is Roberto Polo (bottom right). Among his prize pieces are a bookcase (bottom left) of solid jarrah (an Australian hardwood) by Hector Guimard, widely considered the most prominent French Art Nouveau designer, and a chair (top left) by his contemporary Émile Gallé. Opposite: A bust of Belgian king Leopold III on a breakfast table by Koloman Moser, a giant of the Vienna Secession movement.

