

DESIGNER

FROST ON HIGH GROUND

by Claudia Cragg



A petite and exquisitely well-presented young man, interior designer Derek Frost met me for tea in the shabby-genteel surroundings of London's Hyde Park Hotel. It was not altogether the most suitable setting for someone who appreciates the finer things in decorative life. Said by some to be to the eighties what the doyen of designers, David Hicks, was to the sixties, Frost is fast making an impact on London interiors with his textured-steel surfaces, clean spaces and, latterly, the furniture with which to fill them.

A former clerk and the son of a banker, the British-born Frost regards interior design as "a way of being creative without being a fine artist", he says, though it soon becomes apparent that he is not to be dismissed as a simple aesthete. Within moments of embarking on our mid-afternoon chitchat, I was enlightened as to the Frost sales rationale with the aid of the glossy, expensive-looking brochure which he produced in the best tradition of American marketing presentation. Derek Frost and his associates, it trumpeted, offer "a new approach to design".

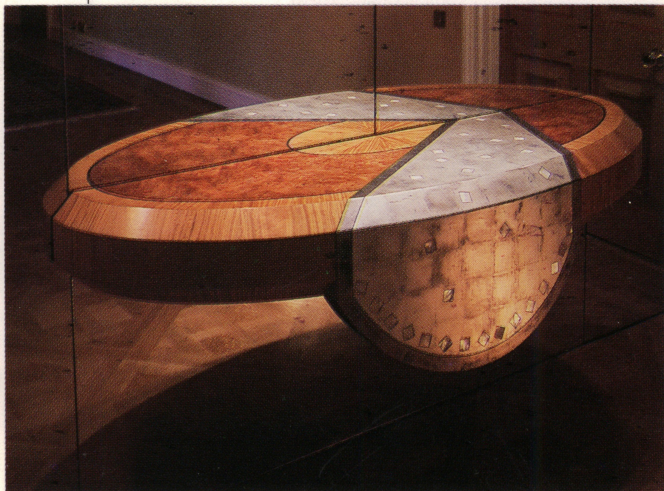
Formerly a design director of the renowned firm of Mary Fox Linton Associates (which, in turn, was associated with David Hicks), Frost leapt into the limelight through a joint project with nine other designers who were asked to furnish a John Nash house in Cornwall Terrace in London's Regent's Park. He transformed the staircase into a gallery for a collection of contemporary art, winning critical plaudits in the process. But perhaps his greatest work to date is Moreton Terrace Mews North in south-west London, home to his eponymous firm. With beautiful proportions, high ceilings and generously sized rooms, Frost created a light, spacious and uncluttered interior, perfectly in harmony with the design mood of today and the architectural legacy of yesteryear.

But Frost is nothing if not versatile. Noted for his classic-contemporary approach, he is also capable of the odd foray into the offbeat, such as his scheme for the disco club, Heaven, opened in 1979 and run by his friend and partner Jeremy Norman, of Embassy Club fame. In the downstairs bar, black-painted brick walls are punched by a row of construction workers' yellow hard-hats and blown-up colour photographs of pick-up trucks parked on San Francisco streets. So far, he has barely put a foot wrong, though there was one commission — a huge house in Cheyne Walk, Chelsea — where he misconstrued a client's

brief and overdid the spotlights. "I thought they wanted to light their pictures brilliantly, but instead of being praised, I was thrown off-site." The owner was subsequently seen, in an alcoholic haze, shooting down all the spotlights with a gun. "He was de-Frosting," says the designer philosophically.

A de rigeur occupation for all the best people nowadays, including Princess Margaret's son, Viscount Linley, is furniture design, and Frost himself found it the natural follow-on to interiors; in fact, the impetus to start his own design group was a result of the growing number of requests for more of his furniture. Affluent members of society are becoming increasingly keen to commission contemporary pieces, it seems, and Frost is happy to oblige, given that he sees it as a less ephemeral form of creativity than interiors. "What I really like with furniture is that you can design something that people pass on from generation to generation. Interior design is only temporary." He also firmly believes that he can help restore the art to the heights of excellence from which it has, in his opinion, plummeted since the thirties. "I've never felt that much of consequence came out of the forties, fifties and sixties," is his appraisal.

He has established a network of designers and craftsmen who gild, carve and turn out metalwork and marquetry



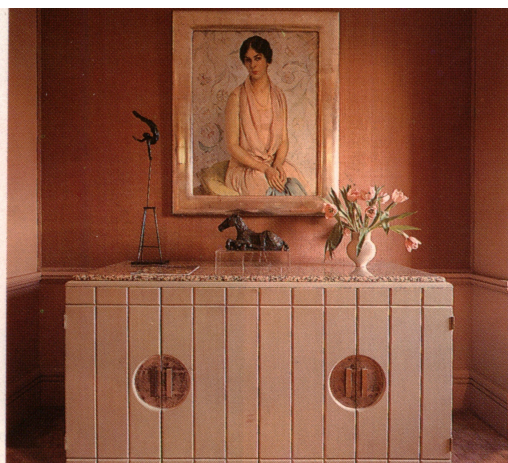
Cantilevered on steel pins off a mirrored wall, the scarf console table typifies Frost's new-look classicism.



Architecture meets furniture — columns are used as supports for an end table.



A leg to stand on — a lacquered console table with a single side leg is supported on a clear perspex triangle.



Flush pink — commode topped with rose granite.

with the skill and vocational ardour of artisans of the past. Combining materials such as mother-of-pearl, silver-leaf gilding, lacquer (shades of Eileen Gray), exotic wood veneers and custom metalwork, his creations are often derivative in their inspiration, but suggest a boldness which belies their origins. He encourages clients to commission special pieces and they respond by opting for striking and adventurous ideas. "In fact, I make my clients work very hard. The more they are prepared to give of what they think and feel, the more the end product is tailored to them. I like to express individuality, personality, excitement, fun and drama. Oh yes, and comfort."

This summer, Frost held a show of his pieces at London's Leighton House, the residence of the 19th-century classical painter, Lord Frederick Leighton, a former president of the Royal Academy. The richly decorated rooms are said to constitute one of the most important expressions of the Aesthetic Movement in Britain and offered exhibition visitors what Frost called a unique opportunity to view highly individual items in lavish, albeit temporary, surroundings. Typical of his work is the recently launched "racing chair" (the originals were made

for former British prime minister Edward Heath's period home near Salisbury Cathedral), which is fashioned in mahogany, with perspex detailing on the carved legs. "It's stylised, created from my imagination," said Frost. "I added a sort of coquettishness by setting a scarlet stripe of PVC in the mahogany, rather like a cross between a pair of military trousers and a tart's stocking."

Each piece is dated and stamped, giving it added "limited edition" appeal, as if the kudos of sharing the same good taste, and good money, as Frost's other customers — The Marquis and Marchioness of Salisbury, Lord Charles Cecil, and Mr. and Mrs. Hugh Sassoon — was in itself not sufficient. That Frost has succeeded in having his own creations rub shoulders with the antique pieces owned by such a venerable clientele would seem to indicate that his name has been assured for posterity. But apparently he has his own acid test for immortality: he would like to see one of his furniture designs find its way into the permanent collection at London's Victoria and Albert Museum. "Only then," he says, "will I know that my work has the character to stand up against fine antiques."

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Art Deco lines rule in Frost's lacquered drinks cabinet.

