

COUNTRY LIFE

POLISHED PERFORMERS

by MICHAEL HALL

NO ONE can doubt that Britain possesses furniture designers of great skill and inventiveness. All too often, however, their work is seen in isolation, and little consideration is given to the requirements of patrons, who will rarely be furnishing a house from scratch and often want new pieces that will sit happily with antique furniture. Where should they turn?

COUNTRY LIFE has always argued that informed appreciation of the past is the best preparation for making worthwhile judgments about the present. We therefore invited four distinguished furniture historians, who are all contributors to the magazine, to nominate a contemporary designer whom they admire. Each works in a very

different setting—Clive Wainwright at the Victoria and Albert Museum, Gervase Jackson-Stops at the National Trust, Sebastian Pryke at Historic Scotland and John Hardy at Christie's—which may help to explain the remarkable diversity of their choices.

That diversity is also a reflection of the complex history of British furniture design in this century, for Modernism and the Arts and Crafts tradition have co-existed—albeit rarely on speaking terms—with theatrical flamboyance and a respect for Classical values. All strands are represented here, offering exciting opportunities for anyone who is searching for an outstanding ready-made piece or planning a special commission.

GERVASE JACKSON-STOPS CHOOSES

Derek Frost

ONE appealing aspect of the reaction against the clinical look of so much modern furniture has been the inspiration drawn by designers from the natural world. Few, however, have produced results as complex and original as Derek Frost, whose furniture memorably unites playful wit with sculptural power.

Mr Frost set up his interior design company in 1984, having worked for eight years with David Hicks and Mary Fox Linton. It is an unusual firm, deliberately kept very small: there is no shop and no fabric range, just an airy office hidden in a Pimlico mews, where he produces "customised results for each job". Furniture design is an important element of his work and is

always done in close collaboration with the client, which helps explain its often startlingly individual character.

His original outlook may also be due in part to his Far Eastern colonial childhood. A weekend home near the sea has fostered the inspiration of natural forms, such as pebbles or driftwood worn smooth by the waves. He looks at such objects rather as a Japanese artist does: as shapes which reveal a spiritual essence.

However, he quickly dismisses any hint of the other-worldly: "I've recently got less stoney and more furry," he says, referring to a move away from the pebbles which inspired some striking tables, to the animal forms of his recent work. These first

appeared in his Riding Chair, a tall, up-holstered dining-room chair with hooved feet, originally designed for Sir Edward Heath (Fig 6). Its basic form is Queen Anne, but the design of the legs was inspired by Ancient Egyptian furniture. One characteristic touch is the gilt stripe down the back of each rear leg, both a nod to the gilded detailing of early-18th-century furniture and a racy reference either to military trousers or a tart's stocking, according to taste.

Some of Mr Frost's most exciting recent work has been for the London house of a couple who have been loyal patrons for several years. For a library setting, they commissioned a remarkable lectern (Fig 5) which bears out Mr Frost's description of himself as "a furniture designer playing at being a sculptor". Its bird-like form, which alludes to the traditional eagle lectern, stands on a base of marble. The rippling "breast", which contains drawers, is of quilted maple, laminated to fit the carved body, which has been



4—A bed by Derek Frost. Its swaying forms are of cherry tipped with purple heart. (Right) 5—A bird-like lectern, made for the clients who commissioned the bed. (Below) 6—One of Mr Frost's Riding Chairs



gessoed and then gilded with copper-leaf.

Even more extraordinary is the bed made for the same clients (Fig 4). The swaying forms of laminated and carved cherry, incorporating a silvered disc, were inspired

by windswept grass in front of the moon. But the piece fascinates because of the ambiguity of the forms, which also suggest spears and a shield, or tusks and horns. Characteristically, Mr Frost summons up images of

talismanic power, then banishes them with a laugh: "It's just very Rider Haggard really."

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