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INTERNATIONAL STYLE

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# The French Connection

*With his smart, au courant mix of design, art, and fashion, dealer Pierre Passebon seems to be getting things just right.* **BY BROOK S. MASON**

**W**itty, erudite, and gifted with two of design's most demanding and daring eyes." That's how Paris dealer Pierre Passebon is trumpeted in a snappy catalogue of the furnishings and art created for The Mark, the storied hotel on Manhattan's Upper East Side that is undergoing a \$140 million renovation. Passebon and his longtime partner, French decorator Jacques Grange, are doing the interiors, which will include 118 superluxe hotel rooms and 42 co-op apartments when the building reopens this summer.

The blue-chip project was a coup for the 55-year-old Passebon, whose Galerie du Passage serves up a highly personal mélange of design, art, pop culture, and fashion. His outside-the-box tastes run from midcentury Alexandre Noll sculptures and ceramics by Georges Jouve to *Krazy Kat* comics and the whimsical, nature-inspired furniture of Claude and François-Xavier Lalanne.

At The Mark, Passebon and Grange have commissioned a series of works from A-list designers for the hotel's lobby, bar, and restaurant. Mattia Bonetti, Patrice Dangel, Paul Mathieu, and Guy de Rouge-mont are among those who have contributed designs. Passebon is also overseeing a temporary gallery at The Mark, where related pieces by the same designers are for sale. "With art and design coming closer together," the dealer says, "more clients are



Passebon photographed in his Galerie du Passage (below), with Paul Landowski's circa-1925 bronze *Le Héros* in the background



FROM TOP: IVAN TERESTCHENKO; COURTESY GALERIE DU PASSAGE

drawn to distinctively designed furnishings—pieces that are like sculpture.”

It's just the latest venture for Passebon, whose career has taken a profile-raising turn. Last fall, when he wasn't bounding between fairs in London and Miami, he was organizing attention-grabbing exhibitions. For starters he orchestrated a provocative collaboration between shoe designer Christian Louboutin and filmmaker David Lynch. Louboutin made sculptures of bizarre, unwearable stilettos while Lynch shot photographs—à la Carlo Mollino and Guy Bourdin—of nude models cavorting suggestively in them. When Passebon showed the sexy, surreal series, titled “Fetish,” at his Paris gallery and at the Design Art London fair in October, the photos (\$17,000–\$29,000) and sculptures (\$17,500) sold almost as rapidly as discounted Manolos.

In early December Passebon turned up at Design Miami with a trove of intergalactic chic: furniture and objects from CBS Paramount's *Star Trek* archive. Among the highlights was a \$50,000 curvy Formica desk with a faux computer console that looked like a precursor to Zaha Hadid's digitally rendered designs. Most of the pieces sold, nearly a dozen to Simon de Pury, chairman of the auction house Phillips de Pury & Company, who was buying for his new London office.

A couple of weeks later Passebon was back in New York, staging an exhibition of twenties neoclassical-style cast-iron furniture and ceramics from the collection of his good friend Karl Lagerfeld at the DeLorenzo gallery on Lafayette Street. Within 40 minutes of opening, the show had racked up a bevy of sales, including three benches priced at around \$30,000 a pop.

“What I like about Pierre is the lightness and freshness of his taste, his choices,” says Lagerfeld. “He knows how to create the mood of an elegant bohemian past. The way he mixes things is never retro—it's always done in the spirit of now.”

Passebon grew up in a 15th-century farmhouse in Touraine and attended a Jesuit school in Poitiers. “Even at fourteen, I was smitten with art and antiques,” says the dealer, whose early purchases included an Art Nouveau bronze of a nude. Although he first made his mark editing books by Chester Himes and Pascal Bruckner at Editions des Autres in Paris, Passebon quickly turned to antiques. By the age of 25, he had a stand in the Clignancourt flea markets. **CONTINUED »**

Guy de Rougemont designed The Mark's curving bar, and Vladimir Kagan did the sofas and chairs.



## Interior Dialogues

### The Project

This summer **The Mark** on Madison Avenue at 77th Street will reopen after a \$140 million renovation, with 118 hotel rooms and 42 new co-op apartments. Izak Senbahar, president of Alexico Group, the building's owner, describes it as the “ultra European living experience.”

A big part of the sales and marketing pitch has been playing up the design team behind the interiors, dealer **Pierre Passebon** and his partner, decorator **Jacques Grange**. Throughout The Mark, the duo has banished

the dated neo-Georgian clutter and provided their own sparks of haute style. Bold geometric stripes and diamond-shape patterns abound on carpets, draperies, and wallpaper. Many of the furnishings are modern twists on classic French forms.

Passebon's role has been to oversee much of furniture and art, including commissions from top designers for the hotel's public spaces. He's also running a temporary gallery in The Mark's sales office, offer-

ing a selection of designs by many of the same names.

### The Designers

**Mattia Bonetti** He designed crystal wall sconces and gilded X-form benches for the hotel's lobby. A sculptural cabinet in cast resin and wood that he created with his partner, Elizabeth Garouste, is for sale at Galerie Mark. \$110,000

**Anne and Vincent Corbière** The Mark will feature the couple's tables, lamps, and fabrics. Passebon has similar examples, including their ornate cushions. \$1,500–\$24,000

**Patrice Dangel** He created a plaster chandelier for the living rooms of some co-op units. The gallery is offering a number of his sculptural bronze lamps, andirons, and tables. \$5,600–\$72,000

**Paul Mathieu** His Sister Margaret sofa and club chairs, specially covered in gold velvet for the lobby, are available from New York dealer Ralph Pucci. Passebon has an elegant daybed in blond maple by the designer. \$45,000

**Guy de Rougemont** The curvy bar and tables in the hotel lounge are based on the same cloud form used in his signature brass-and-Plexiglas Nuage table. \$42,000

Galerie Mark, at 992 Madison Avenue, New York, is open until the co-ops are sold (212-772-1600; themarkhotel.com).



The striped lobby features velvet seating by Paul Mathieu (detail right) and artwork by De Rougemont, above.



## CULTUREWATCH

"From the start, everything Pierre did was memorable," says Roger Prigent, who heads Malmaison Antiques in New York. "There was always an extraordinary sense of discovery when you visited him. One time it was robust Latin American silver, another time French forties furniture and cartoons."

Passebon's partnership with Grange has played a pivotal role in his success. Grange has long-standing ties to the fashion world through his friendship with Yves Saint Laurent and Pierre Bergé, whose homes he decorated in Paris, Normandy, Morocco, and New York. Today his clients include financial titans such as Leon Black and Ronald Lauder as well as Princess Caroline.

Once Passebon opened Galerie du Passage in the Véro-Dodat gallery in 1991, he quickly ascended the ranks of French society and style. His own star-studded client list—often overlapping Grange's—features Isabelle Adjani and Catherine Deneuve.

Terry de Gunzburg, a former cosmetics specialist for Yves Saint Laurent who heads her own company, By Terry, calls Passebon and Grange "incomparable" partners. "Where Jacques's input ends and Pierre's begins is often impossible to distinguish," she says. The duo has done four homes for De Gunzburg and her husband, with Passebon providing much of the furniture and art. "Even in the early years of Pierre's gallery," she says, "he commanded attention."

Passebon gave Lagerfeld his first photography show in 2004. He was key to the market's rediscovery of Jouve ceramics and Noll's furniture and sculpture, which languished in the shadows 15 years ago. These days a single Noll chair runs north of \$500,000.

The current show at Passebon's gallery is devoted to the legendary French decorator Madeleine Castaing (on view through March). Meanwhile he's searching for a U.S. venue for the Louboutin-Lynch "Fetish" collaboration. He is also assembling prized works of 20th-century design for his booth at the prestigious Paris Biennale des Antiquaires in September.

How does Passebon view his shifting role, from dealer to tastemaker in the upper echelons of style? "Naturellement," he says with slight bemusement. "Design, art, and fashion have evolved to embrace each other." ■

Galerie du Passage is located at 20–26 Galerie Véro-Dodat, First Arrondissement, Paris (33-1/42-36-01-13; galeriedupassage.com).

A Xindi control console from *Star Trek*; A David Lynch image from his "Fetish" series with Christian Louboutin, right.



Verner Panton's UFO hanging lamp and an illuminated Nuage coffee table by Guy de Rougemont, below

Garouste & Bonetti's Etoile settee and metal cabinet with terracotta doors