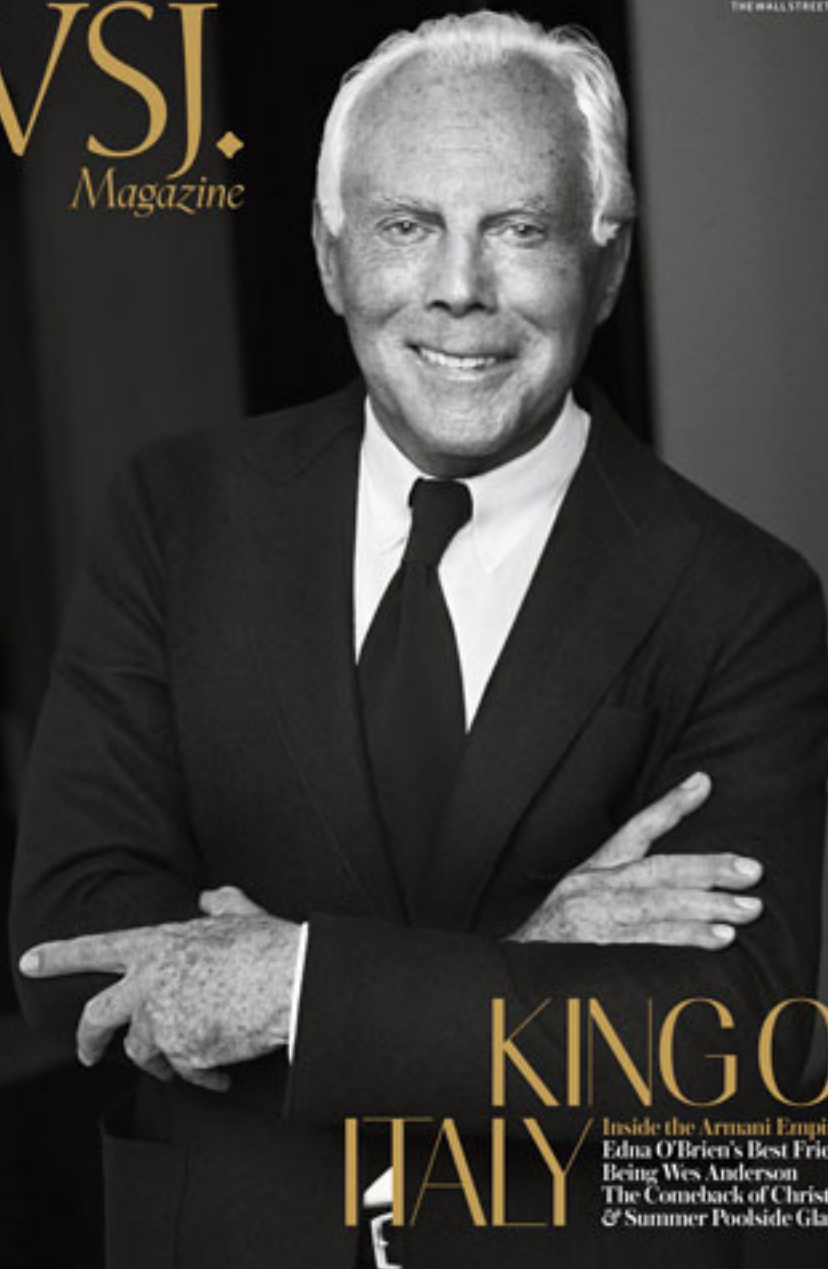


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KING OF
ITALY

Inside the Armani Empire
Edna O'Brien's Best Friend
Being Wes Anderson
The Comeback of Christian Llaigre
& Summer Poolside Glamour



IN GOOD PASTE
From left: 1970s decorator John Dickinson's San Francisco home with his iconic paw-footed table; a Dickinson reproduction, \$1,450, at Sutherland Furniture; Syrie Maugham in one of her signature all-white rooms in the early 1930s; a Serge Roche torchier, \$60,000 for a pair, at Todd Merrill Antiques.

©JOHN VAUGHAN, SF A CERTAIN STYLE (DICKINSON INTERIOR); COURTESY OF THE CECIL BEATON STUDIO ARCHIVE AT SOTHEBY'S (SYRIE MAUGHAM); COURTESY TODD MERRILL ANTIQUES 20TH CENTURY (TORCHIER); COURTESY OF DAVID SUTHERLAND INC. (TABLE); PHOTO BY PAUL COSTELLO, COURTESY OF MILES REDD (MILES REDD INTERIOR, DICKINSON REPRODUCTION, TO THE TRADE ONLY, 800-717-8325; SERGE ROCHE TORCHIER, MERRILLANTIQUES.COM)

DESIGN

WHITE MARKET

Its history starts in ancient times and spans Paris in the '30s and San Francisco in the '70s, but plaster just might be the medium of the moment

LAST SUMMER, DECORATOR MICHAEL SMITH³ called artist Stephen Antonson with an unusual commission: a pair of Queen Anne side tables, entirely coated in unfinished white plaster. "There's something very clean and American about them, but then you have those great Queen Anne lines," said Antonson recently, on the phone from his Brooklyn studio. "I was inspired by the work of John Dickinson," says Smith. "I've been really into his work lately. And I've always loved the design of New England tea tables." An unlikely pairing, perhaps, but, says Smith, "plaster has the ability to blend nicely into any design scheme."

Let's get it out of the way: Plaster is old. Ancient, even. It goes back to Mesopotamia and wends its way through history via Western European architectural details like columns and moldings and pilasters. "Plaster was always in use," explains antiques dealer and decorative arts historian R. Louis Bofferding. "These kind of pastelike substances were around presumably before anyone learned how to quarry a stone."

Nevertheless, the simple medium—it's still just gypsum powder and water—in all its chalky glory seems to be having a moment. Antonson recently made two large plaster dining tables, both six feet in diameter, for designer Tory Burch's Southampton home. New York City furniture shop *Démiurge* is selling petal-cup plaster chandeliers inspired by 1930s Swiss plaster master Diego Giacometti, brother of sculptor Alberto Giacometti.

Meanwhile, for several years decorator Miles Redd has been lining clients' hallways with plaster palms and taking, say, a Louis XV-esque chest of drawers to Antonson to dunk in the white stuff. "It's like encasing everything in a marshmallow wrapper," says Redd. Appropriately, that candy-sweet piece was headed for a little girl's room. And in Redd's own Little Italy townhouse, a plaster console has been made to look like a cloth-draped table. What's currently taking shape in his imagination is a heavily swagged canopy bed...in plaster. "Decorators don't think of it unless they think kind of like an architect," says Redd.



TRICK TREAT
Decorator Miles Redd created a trompe l'oeil draped table for his New York City home.



CAST ENSEMBLE

From left: Jean-Michel Frank, Diego Giacometti (seated) and Emilio Terry (standing) with Alberto Giacometti (seated in front), in Frank's Paris shop in 1939.

PLASTER MASTER

Clockwise from below: Swiss designer Diego Giacometti; a Carole Gratale lamp for One Kings Lane, \$1,499, and Démiurge chandelier, \$10,000, both inspired by Giacometti; the Picasso Museum in Paris, with furniture and chandeliers designed by Giacometti.



MILK MADE Clockwise from above: Stephen Antonson's Circle Dexter Mirror and Ring Lamp, both for Dessin Fournir; and the Queen Anne table created for Michael Smith.



The story behind this literally off-the-wall use of plaster actually began in the '30s. Serge Roche, a second-generation antiques dealer, began making ornate Rococo plaster tables, mirror frames and palm-frond torchiers during the Great Depression to bolster the stock of his Paris shop.

"Business was bad, so in order to keep going, he decided to design furniture," says Bofferding. "Not everything was done in plaster, but most of it was." Along with fellow Parisian Jean-Michel Frank—who sold the work of Emilio Terry and sculptors Alberto and Diego Giacometti—Roche became the go-to plaster resource for the decoratrices of the day, such as Elsie de Wolfe, Frances Elkins and particularly Syrie Maugham, who snapped up pieces for her signature all-white rooms.

In that era, plaster had a touch of whimsy and the surreal—Maugham collaborated with Salvador Dali on a plaster lobster phone—but it was still mostly focused on traditions past. It's no surprise that as the forward-looking '60s rolled in, plaster took a backseat to steel

and glass. San Francisco decorator John Dickinson was part of its revival in the '70s with his almost cartoony animal-footed stools and tables. Michael Bruno, founder of 1stdibs.com, reports that around 2008, Dickinson pieces started selling to serious collectors for up to \$50,000. (For any decorator who wants the look without a five-figure commitment, furniture company Sutherland now has a line of Dickinson reproductions made in fiberglass-reinforced concrete.) "That probably leaves more of a mainstream following a few years behind," says Bruno. "But I think it's always going to be popular on some level. It's clean; it's modern. If you have a white room, it looks great. If you have color, it looks great."

Original pieces from Roche and Giacometti are doing well too, while artisans like Carole Gratale and Démiurge are doing a brisk business with pieces in their style. Plaster clearly isn't going anywhere. If anything, it's just getting bigger. Consider Antonson's dream project: He wants to cover New York City's Guggenheim Museum in plaster. Talk about great lines.

By Meenal Mistry