



Maison du Wow!

Hervé Van der Straeten's Paris atelier brings luster, magic, *modernity* into the living room.

By Christine Muhlke

I**N HIS TWENTIES**, Hervé Van der Straeten was designing jewelry for the runways of Jean Paul Gaultier, Yves Saint Laurent, and Christian Lacroix. Soon his delicate bronze creations—sculptural cuffs, brass necklaces depicting cavorting nudes—grew more experimental and Van der Straeten's eye started to wander. He dabbled with designs for Bernardaud china and took a detour to sculpt the bottle for Dior's perfume



Clockwise from above: Van der Straeten; marble- and glass-top tables; bronze chandelier; Tornado lamp; and bronze pendant light.



J'Adore. Then a few years ago Van der Straeten began thinking bigger: He started making jewels for the home. Today his six-year-old Marais furniture and lighting gallery has become an essential resource for the likes of interior designer Muriel Brandolini and architect Alberto Pinto, along with the rest of the beau monde that is attuned to his remarkable aesthetic.

Even as a student in Paris, Van der Straeten always followed new creative fantasies. His early interest in engineering quickly faded; he then enrolled at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts to study painting. After a year, at 19, he dropped out to become a jewelry designer. Now that his decorative ideas have taken a more solid shape, he's been seduced by the idea of combining





In Van der Straeten's Paris gallery, rectangular pillar lamps flank more organic forms, such as the Black Beauty table and a pair of lacquered stools.

materials in bold and surprising ways. "I like to mix opposites," he explains. "Soft, shiny, sensual lacquer, for example, with rough, strong bronze. The mix can be very intense."

Van der Straeten's inspirations and techniques are a sly combination of Asian minimalism and French Baroque. All his forms grow out of the twin concepts of geometry and movement. "You will see blocks of lacquer stacked up in one console," he says, referring

to a piece with wood planes piled at precarious angles. "It looks a little random, but it's precise in the way it's made." Other works possess an organic, birdlike delicacy—such as the side tables with tree-branch legs that appear as if they might get up and walk away. One of the designer's most popular creations is a bronze bull's-eye set in a penumbra of sculpted, tangled branches.

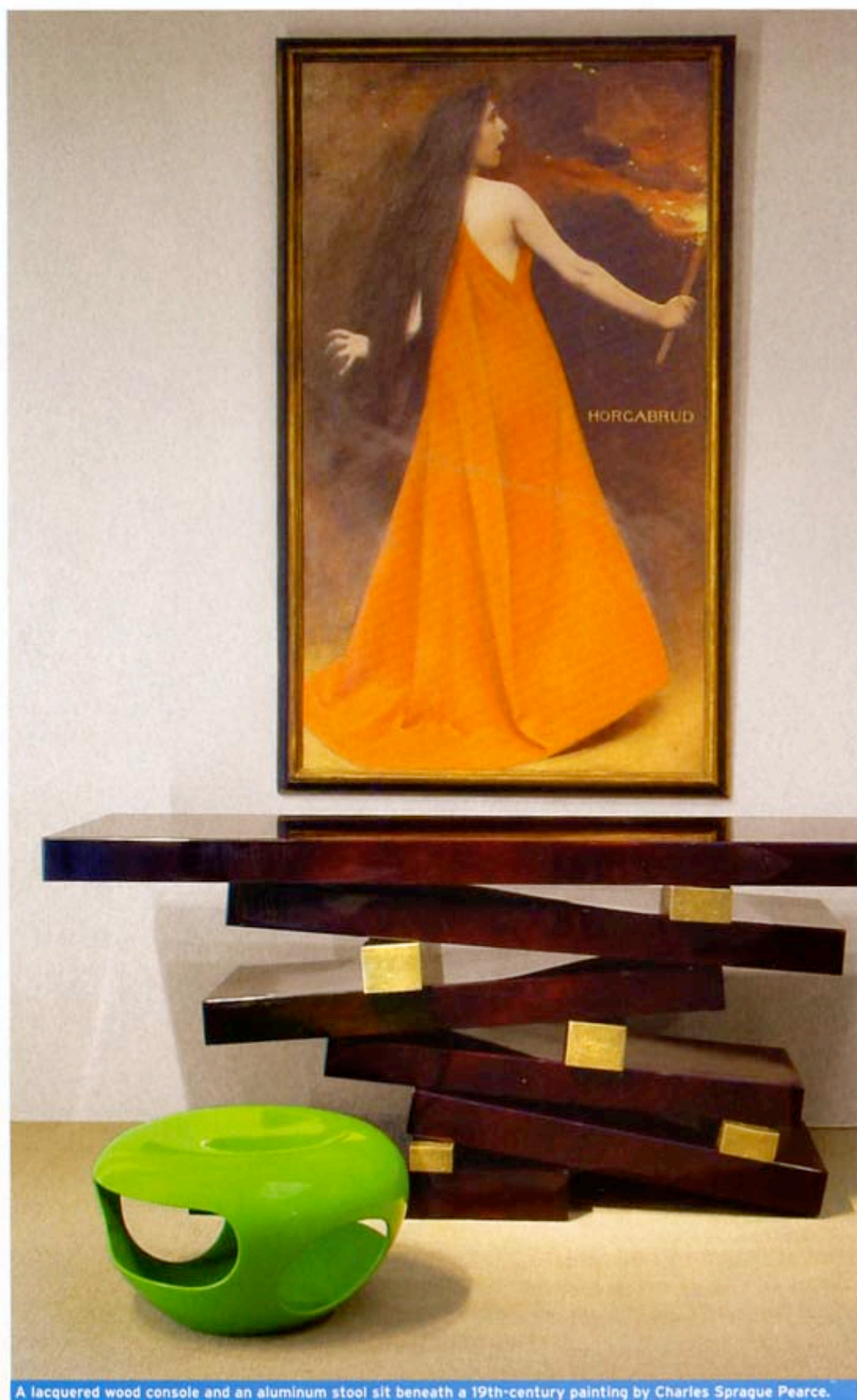
"I like my designs to be bold and simple," continues

Van der Straeten. "As you look closer, you discover the detail, you see the texture of the material." One breathtaking example of his obsession with such fine points is a six-foot-high lantern, a simple skeleton of bronze embellished only with slim, hammered bronze panels that glow golden from within. Van der Straeten does lighting particularly well.

"One of my favorite things I bought from him was a floor lamp," explains Brandolini,

who met Van der Straeten 20 years ago, when she used his jewelry in fashion shoots she was styling for Italian *Vogue*. "The base is lacquer patchwork and the shade is a huge pom-pom of amethyst. It's really like a jewel."

The gallery is itself a fanciful expression of the designer's unorthodox method: minimalist displays, maximum impact. "I like my pieces to talk together, like people meeting each other," he says. "There is



A lacquered wood console and an aluminum stool sit beneath a 19th-century painting by Charles Sprague Pearce.

a rapport between them”—take, for example, the interplay of filigreed bronze lights hanging above a massive lacquered wood console. Van der Straeten has total dominion over his output, which, luckily for his clients, allows him to offer pieces made-to-measure (the designer once joked that some of his wealthy patrons commission so much, they forget which house a piece is for).

Van der Straeten furnishings have also made their way to the States. Benoit Drut, a partner in the venerable Manhattan gallery Maison Gérard, was so taken with them that he asked if he could carry a few in his store; before adding Van der Straeten, Drut had dealt only in the Art Deco period. “His work is not a copy, it’s from his own mind,” Drut says. Among Maison Gérard’s selection are patinated bronze planters, chandeliers, and tripod side tables. The demand, according to Drut, has been overwhelming. (Next May, the Ralph Pucci gallery in New York will also hold a sale of the designer’s furniture, lighting, and mirrors.) But don’t expect a flood of reptilian-looking lanterns and table legs resembling rose thorns. Every single piece is made to order in Paris. You will only see so many Van der Straetens.

“He’s really mastering his talent now,” Brandolini says of the designer. The beauty of his work is more than visual, more than a passing trend. “It’s not just made,” she says, “it’s perfectly made.”

Lighting starts at \$1,700, mirrors at \$2,000, and tables at \$4,500. Available at Galerie Van der Straeten, 11 Rue Ferdinand Duval, Paris, 33-1/42-78-99-99, and Maison Gérard, 53 E. Tenth St., New York, 212-674-7611.