

This Designer Likes Objects That Do Things

By William L. Hamilton
New York Times Service

LONDON — It is not as though Michael Anastassiades, 33, a Cypriot-born designer, hasn't designed tables and chairs. He has. But then, they are not just tables and chairs. Anastassiades doesn't have a keen eye for the obvious. His oak dining table has a shallow concave mirror sunk in the center, like a reflecting pool, which provides seated guests a silent, slightly distorted version of themselves — like observers commenting on the party itself.

"I'm interested in the behavior of things," Anastassiades said, "the psychological relationship you establish with objects." A mirrored lamp, designed to hang above the table, lights the eye of it like bright conversation. And the chairs have mirrors for backs, which keep the table occupied defiantly even as people depart.

"You have at least yourself to converse with," Anastassiades said. Anastassiades likes objects that do things, but these are not servile domestics. In his household, you conspire with your stuff, you engage it or ignore it — at your own risk. His Message Cup, a prototype, is a vessel for holding written text, not tea. A thin electronic card embedded in the bottom will record a brief message, storing it when the cup is inverted. When the cup is turned up, ready to pour, the message plays back. It could be instructions for a child home from school; it could be a lover's greeting. The familiar item is being used to question the nature of content. How special it becomes depends on who fills it, why and with what.

Anastassiades has also designed a restless bedside table with a built-in alarm clock that vibrates to wake sleepers. (Like many of the designer's products, it is available by commission; for information: www.michaelanastassiades.com.) He is at work on interactive lighting: an "antisocial" light turns on and will stay lighted only in the absence of conversation, thanks to the vigilance of its concealed microphone. "It's more of a reading lamp," he said. "It glows only during silence." In turn, a "social" light beams when spoken to, as though flattered by attention. "It needs to be talked to, to glow," Anastassiades said. "It's almost therapeutic."

If it sounds exhausting to be living with things that treat you like part of the furniture, Anastassiades has also produced bottle openers and tableware that pretty much do as they're told — no questions asked and no smart-aleck answers.

He has designed an acrylic box light with an exposed silvered bulb, available at Babylon, in London, which also sells

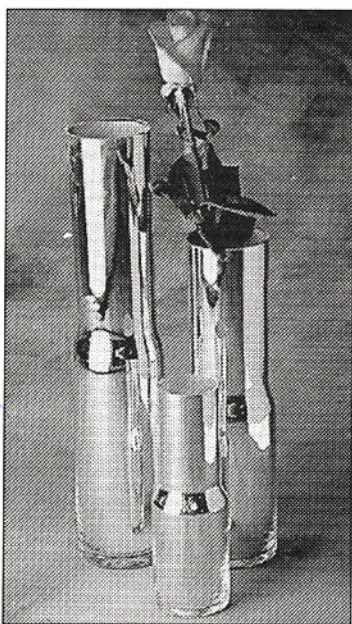


Dining table with concave mirror, top; nested tables, left, and bedside table with removable felt suit.

his silvered lamps, drinking glasses and vases. In his renovated 19th-century house in an as yet ungentrified section of the city, Anastassiades lives at close quarters with design: Guys and Dolls Unisex Hairstyling across the street and a view of the London Eye millennium Ferris wheel out the back. The narrow building, once a shopkeeper's residence, is now a stack of loft-like interiors, executed basically in mahogany and marble. "All the marble — maybe that's the Greek side of me," he said.

Anastassiades studied civil engineering at Imperial College in London. "But I always liked making things," he said, explaining his graduate degree in industrial design at the Royal College of Art. Anastassiades set up his own studio in 1994. Inclusion in several exhibitions, including "Stealing Beauty: British Design Now" at the Institute of Contemporary Art in London in 1999, brought his conceptual work to the attention of the fashion designer Hussein Chalayan. Anastassiades designed runway shows for five of Chalayan's collections, staging them minimally, like art gallery installations — and without runways.

Having put the house on notice that life might never be the same if his more provocative designs proved popular, Anastassiades has been busy in the garden. He participated this year in an exhibition of outdoor follies at Belsay Hall in Northumberland. His contributions included an oak lamppost that, like his antisocial light, would illuminate only silence, and a white column with a concave bowl at the top that upon inspection brimmed over with a sheer veil



A series of Anastassiades vases: time capsules for the home.

of water; a shorter column, which served as a stool, sat to its side: a contemplative cascade presented as a classical take on watching television.

In collaboration with Anthony Dunne, a designer, and Fiona Raby, an architect, both colleagues at the Royal College of Art, Anastassiades has also been at work on "Weeds, Aliens and Other Stories," a long-running project of designs, including a bookshelf with a leafy branch that rustles mechanically, for bringing the wind in the trees and other elements of the garden inside the home. Doris Saatchi, the collector, purchased the bookshelf and branch, having seen it at "Stealing Beauty."

The Cricket Box — a portable wood drawer with a digital recorder and player — collects the sounds of the garden, like an entomologist's specimen box or a Chinese cricket cage, reintroducing them as a lullaby for a sleepy baby, for instance, or chamber music for a midnight meal.

"I think nothing is new," Anastassiades said of the designs. "I like using technology, but my approach is not to make things more complicated, or novel, or loud. Interesting objects can exist subtly too."

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