

INSIDE Dorinda Medley of 'The Real Housewives of New York City' just moved to a pricey East Side rental, p.46



Annie Werniel/NY Post (2)

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New York Post, Thursday, November 15, 2018

nypost.com

LIFE IN PLASTIC

Design tastemakers embrace acrylic furnishings once derided as tacky

By JACKIE COOPERMAN

FROM lavish Florentine villas to hip Manhattan nurseries, acrylic is having a renaissance.

A plastic derivative often referred to by its commercial names, Lucite and Plexiglass, the material is increasingly embraced by exacting tastemakers and their peers in high-end design circles. "I love to set a dinner table with my family's antique plates

next to my acrylic glasses," says Mario Luca Giusti, the Florence-based heir to an Italian leather business. A decade ago, Giusti traded his shoe-designing career for plastics, converting his family's Tuscan footwear factories into warehouses for the jeweled acrylic he calls "synthetic crystal." Giusti's eponymous collection now numbers nearly 100 pieces, including lamps and side tables, and appeals to elite customers like Steven Spielberg and the Missoni fashion family.

Stateside, in his Shelter Island weekend home, designer Jonathan Adler uses a 2-inch-thick acrylic pedestal to display a prized possession: revered modern design Nicola L.'s vintage 3-foot-high pine planter, shaped like a human head.

"It's unbelievably expensive, but a big chunky slab of acrylic is a great way to give an object a sense of import," says Adler, a former ceramicist who now uses acrylic in at least 65 pieces of his extensive furniture and accessories line.

His Jacques collection includes acrylic and mixed metal etagères (shelving units) and desks, but the designer showcases his acrylic adoration best in sculptures: an oversized purple foot (\$1,495); an amber hippo (\$795); a 49-inch-tall tusk (\$995) and a series of eye-popping obelisks (starting at \$200).

Events planner Jung Lee commissions textured Lucite dance floors for sophisticated galas at the

Jonathan Adler sells at least 65 pieces made of acrylic — a material previously considered lowbrow — including a giant foot (\$1,495), a 4-foot-tall tusk (\$995) and a sculptural car (\$1,995).



New York Public Library and Ellis Island, where her caterers serve deserts in acrylic goblets, dapper doppelgangers for the costly crystal she once preferred.

"I love acrylic's playfulness and practicality. It doesn't break, but the weight is so good, you don't think, 'This is plastic,'" says Lee, who stocks Giusti's faceted glasses

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CLEAR THE WAY!



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and tableware in her Flatiron showroom, chilling Champagne in his faux crystal — and bright blue — Antarctica Ice Buckets (pictured below right, \$180). “Until a few years ago, you could see the seam in the acrylic. Today it’s seamless, so it looks great.”

Acrylic hasn’t always been so beloved. First marketed in the late 1930s by chemical companies Dupont and Rohm & Haas, acrylic started in designer Gilbert Rohde’s furniture collection for the 1939 World’s Fair (he later played a key creative role at Herman Miller) and was a critical component in military equipment during World War II.

In the 1970s, acrylic furniture enjoyed another swell of popularity before falling out of favor because of what Adler calls acrylic’s “Boca association” — the sense that it was the design element of choice for Florida’s groovy geriatrics, passé for contemporary design, even a bit tacky.

Designers today revel in acrylic’s visual variety and its seemingly endless applications. They combine it with brass in lighting fixtures like Arteriors’ Haskell chandelier (\$4,420) and use it for brightly colored accessories like Alexandra Von Furstenberg’s Fearless Trays (\$155).

“The misconception is that it scratches very easily, but just like wood, fine acrylic can be buffed out,” says Hans Kretschman, owner of



Mario Luca Giusti’s colorful acrylic vessels.



Arigo Coppitz; Mario Luca Giusti



Hans Kretschman and his wife Paulette Massaro head Plexi-Craft, which produces acrylic pieces in its Bronx factory. They’re pictured with the firm’s new crib. Diddy had several Plexi-Craft items in his old Central Park-facing pad (above left).

Plexi-Craft, a high-end acrylic producer based in The Bronx. “It can be bent. It’s clearer than glass, 17 times more shatter-resistant, and half its weight.”

Kretschman, a former banker turned acrylic evangelist, says most of Plexi-Craft’s work is in 4-inch-thick sheets, made in the United States and rigorously tested for toxins.

“The thicker it is, the better it is,” he adds. “We have equipment now that didn’t exist in the ‘60s. We can bend it better, we can glue it better, and what we’re producing is better.”

Better and more adventurous: Kretschman’s artisans have created an 84-inch-long acrylic sofa and other transparent fur-

nishings for rapper Diddy’s Park Imperial apartment and have recently debuted an all-acrylic baby crib (\$2,900). One of Plexi-Craft’s best sellers, a leather-wrapped desk designed by Coffinier Ku Design, has 3-inch-thick legs and weighs 400 pounds (\$14,000).

Most of the company’s creations — sold primarily to designers and architects — are custom, but showroom pieces start at a few thousand

dollars and run to \$25,000 for glass-topped acrylic pieces like the oval Olympus dining table.

As with so many design trends, a little goes a long way.

At the Holiday House, a showcase at 118 E. 76th St. benefiting the Breast Cancer Research Foundation, Ariel Okin included a CB2 reindeer hide acrylic bench (\$899) in the room she designed, which is inspired by modern British royals.



Designer Ariel Okin used CB2’s reindeer hide acrylic bench in the bedroom she designed for the Holiday House showcase at 118 E. 76th St. One reason: Clear furniture can make any space feel bigger.

Seth Caplan

Gilbert Rohde was among the first designers to use acrylic for furniture (below) in the 1930s. Today, Arteriors’ Haskell chandelier retails for \$4,420.



Arteriors’ Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum

“The acrylic base makes the furniture look like it’s floating,” says Okin, adding that it’s particularly well-suited to small city apartments. “It makes the room feel airier.”

To be sure, the material has its detractors. ABC Carpet and Home no longer carries acrylic, unless it’s vintage, because of concerns that it won’t biodegrade.

The environmental issues arise from qualities that were historically prized, says Emily Orr, assistant curator for modern and contemporary design at the Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum.

“In the 1930s and 1940s, acrylic’s lightweight and durable nature was so valuable as shields for airplanes,” Orr says. “Ironically, the exact quality for which acrylic pieces were so valued is what we hold against them, because they’re not recyclable.”

Designers counter that their pieces — seamless, lightweight, and chic — exude enough aesthetic appeal to last generations.

“Acrylic’s a wonder material. It’s sparkly and can be transparent, translucent, colored, clear or opaque,” Adler says. “It has many qualities, all glamorous.”

Finally, a material long rebuffed is merely buffed.