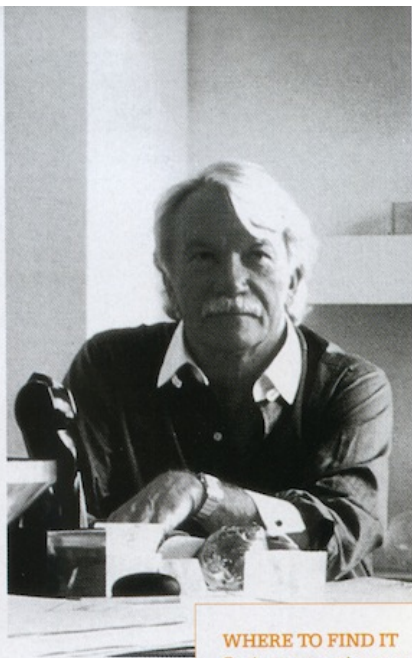
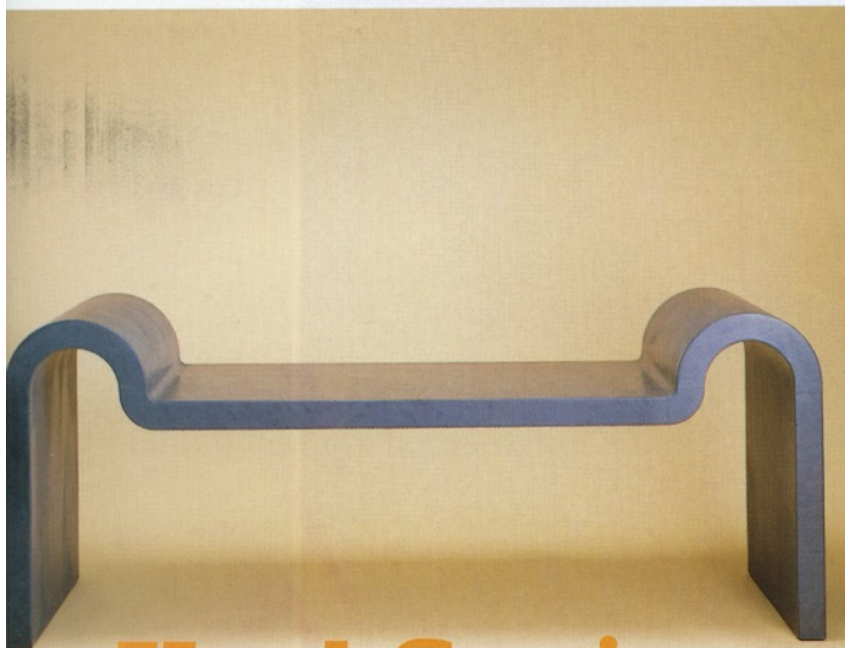


everything you need to know about...



Karl Springer

Python tables, goatskin frames, shagreen wastebaskets—the German-born American’s disco-Deco creations are back on the beau monde’s shopping list

By Angus Wilkie

PETA is bound to protest, but Karl Springer’s radical reptilian chic is having a revival. With their French Art Deco lines and 1970s go-go glamour, the furniture and accessories created by the German-born New Yorker are grand luxe designs for disco divas—with a hefty dose of great-white-hunter style thrown in for good measure. Everyone who was anyone wanted a bit of Springer in their rooms. King Hussein of Jordan, Tina Turner, and Ashford & Simpson, as well as decorators like Pierre Scapula, Valerian Rybar, and Billy Baldwin—all swooned over the chairs, tables, and mirrors, their streamlined silhouettes clad in elephant hide, porcupine quills, and zebra, goat, python, and cobra skins.

“Once I was discovered by the duchess and her circle, I probably could have gone on making little snakeskin phone tables forever,” Springer once said, recalling the career-enhancing attentions of his most important aficionado, Wallis Windsor, and the diminutive table that the near-royal and her friends ordered by the gross. “But you need a challenge.”

Indeed, the “two-tiered lizard taborets are everywhere,” says David Desmond, a young Los Angeles-

based designer. But so is nearly everything else that Springer, who died in 1991, designed during a career that spanned nearly four decades. His retro-modern fare is showing up on eBay and at flea markets, estate sales, and antiques shops. Can’t find the real thing? Custom reproductions can be had in 12 weeks through the Karl Springer Workshop in Opa-Locka, Florida.

Frank deBiasi, head of interior design at Peter Marino Architects, discovered a giant square Springer cocktail table at the celebrated Irvington Thrift Shop in Manhattan for only \$90. (It cost around \$6,000 back in the 1970s.) Ensnconced in the living room of the Upper East Side apartment he shares with designer Gene Meyer, the white imitation-alligator table is “incredibly hip,” says a beaming deBiasi. And Jean-Yves Legrand, whose Neo-Studio shops in Miami and Sag Harbor, New York, stock mid-century furniture and accessories, always has vintage Springer on hand. “His colors are very Studio 54,” Legrand says admiringly of a purple python wastebasket, a raspberry-red crocodile >

WHERE TO FIND IT

Springer creations crop up at auctions and estate sales and on the Internet, so keep your eyes peeled. For custom reproductions, log on to www.karl-springer-workshop.com.

Dealers who carry Springer designs:
Liz O’Brien, New York, 212-755-3800
Lobel Modern, New York, 212-242-9075
Malmaison Antiques, New York, 212-288-7569
Neo-Studio, Miami, 305-438-9500
Neo-Studio, Sag Harbor, N.Y., 631-725-6478
Palumbo, New York, 212-734-7630
Russell Simpson Co., Los Angeles, 323-651-3992



Clockwise from top left: A Sculpture bench in leather from the 1970s. The German-born Springer in his New York office. One of the designer’s chrome-and-Lucite table lamps.

karl springer

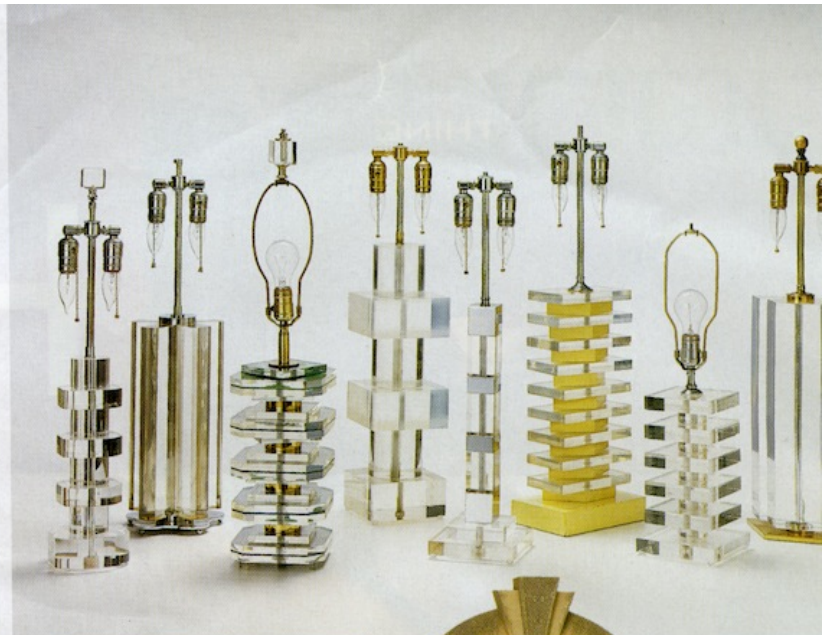
card table, and an Hermès-orange leather table.

Similarly eye-popping pieces filled the Monterrey manse of the Galanos-clad Mexican heiress Cristina Brittingham. The glamorous lady rejoiced in a south-of-the-border pleasure dome outfitted in wall-to-wall Karl Springer. "That house was loaded up with it," says Paul Garzotto, a Dallas designer who visited casa Brittingham. "Lots of Springer tables in blond python."

Kicky colors and kinky textures aside, not all of Karl Springer's creations were hatched in a bestial *wunderkammer*. The designer was also a facile manipulator of glass, leather, wood, and metal. Though his furniture was often directly inspired by Art Deco icons, their finishes were one part *Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom* to one part Regine's. Showroom diva Holly Hunt sold Springer's line at Chicago's Merchandise Mart, and she remembers the works best for their confident scale and sumptuous combination of exotic woods and other natural materials. "Like Michael Taylor and Angelo Donghia, Karl had a voice of his own," Hunt says. "He was a true gentleman who understood elegance and had [enough of] a dose of appropriate reverence to be a brilliant, creative force."

Born in Berlin in 1930, Karl Springer started out humbly, toiling as a window dresser at the city's premier men's clothing store, Nelles, while he studied after hours as a bookbinder. He emigrated to California after the end of World War II, and moved to New York in the mid-'50s, where he worked as a stylist at Lord & Taylor. In his apartment-cum-atelier on Washington Square, he applied his bookbinding skills to small decorative objects sheathed in fabric, vellum, gold leaf, parchment, and hide.

The animal-skin agendas, jewelry boxes, desktop accessories, and wastepaper baskets caught the eye of Robert Fleischer, an accessories buyer at Bergdorf Goodman, and it wasn't long before bold-faced tastemakers were entranced. Buoyed by his success, Springer opened a studio on West 29th Street (he later moved to East 53rd Street), employed a Russian-born assistant, Valentina Jivotowski, and wasted no time winning accolades in *Women's Wear Daily*. ▷



WHAT TO LOOK FOR

- Furniture and accessories in wood, polished metal, and lacquer that imitate the classic lines of Art Deco; some combine Asian and African motifs
- Unique finishes such as lacquered goat, alligator, python, and cobra skins; shagreen, zebra, and elephant hides; coral, pen shell, horn, and porcupine quills
- Springer had a neon attitude, so look for orange, red, green, and purple
- Numerous designs were made entirely in Lucite or feature clear plastic accents like drawer pulls. Springer also created a wide range of Lucite lamps
- Exotic woods, including reddish burlwood, macassar ebony, petrified wood, and inlays



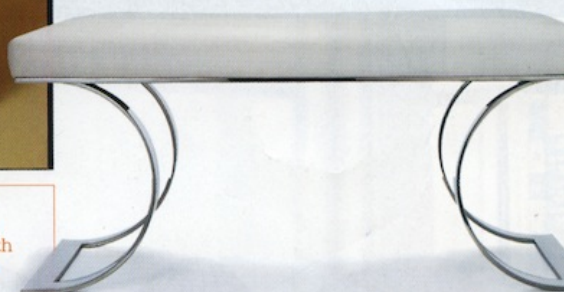
Clockwise from top: Metal and Lucite table lamps. A keystone-topped, reptile-embossed leather mirror designed in the mid-1980s. Moroccan-style games table of hand-colored leather with brass feet. A lacquered chinoiserie cocktail table from the 1970s (it will be featured at Palumbo's Springer exhibition in November).



karl springer



Left to right: Popularized by the Duchess of Windsor, this example of Springer's hallmark telephone table was once owned by restaurateur Glenn Bernbaum. A shagreen-and-ivory box with a hinged lid. A leather-padded bench with curved chrome legs.



AUTHENTIC SPRINGER

Karl Springer rarely bothered with an official stamp. Once in a while a leather flap was tacked to the underside of the little telephone table that won him the Duchess of Windsor's devotion. In the early 1980s more permanent marks were introduced, from stamping Springer's name with a metal press to branding it onto hide surfaces. Ilene Springer-Watson, a former sister-in-law, suggests that if Springer had had a brass nameplate made, she would track down his early designs and affix the authenticating plaques herself. "There are major one-of-a-kind pieces out there without identification," she says.

The dashing young German never looked back.

In its heyday, from the mid-'70s until the end of the '80s, Karl Springer Ltd. employed close to 100 people, including the designer's brother, Joachim. In addition to a principal showroom on East 61st Street, which was established in 1969, the company was represented worldwide, from Los Angeles to Munich to Tokyo. "Karl had a hands-on approach, working with us to invent new types of lacquer on linen, snakeskin, and embossed leather," says Stephen Alvarez, a Springer employee who collaborated with Howard Whitmore and a dozen workers at a studio in Lake Huntington, New York (the prototypes were made at a woodworking shop in Long Island City, Queens). "He was all about quality, always encouraging us to slow down as we worked."

Other popular finishes originated abroad. Lacquered goatskin furniture was made in Mexico by Maria Mendez and her daughter Paulina Morales. Shagreen, coral, and pen shell (a mollusk whose piebald patterns resemble tortoiseshell when polished) were sourced in Asia, Indonesia, and the Philippines.

Not surprisingly, given Springer's penchant for animal hides handled with artisanal expertise, the late decorator Robert Metzger hailed Springer as America's own Jean-Michel Frank. Constantin Gorges, a young New York-based decorator, remembers the designer's delight when financier Laurence Rockefeller dubbed one of Springer's tables among "the antiques of tomorrow" at a charity auction.

"Springer had an academic approach that was never compromised," says Evan Lobel, owner of Lobel Modern, a vintage-furniture gallery in Manhattan. And the designer's fans, he recalls, were willing to dig deep into their wallets. In the 1970s, Lobel says, "a customer of mine was offered a \$15,000 option: a built-in ebony-and-mahogany liquor cabinet designed by Karl Springer or a brand-new Cadillac." General Motors' loss was Springer's gain: The lady, sensibly, chose the bar.

Today's jury, however, is divided on the value >

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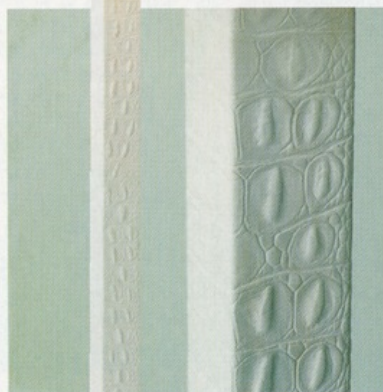
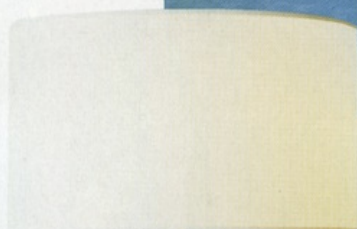
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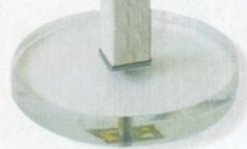
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Top: Springer's printed-leather desk with a matching wastepaper basket. Left and above: Mounted on a round Lucite base, this floor lamp is sheathed in white leather embossed with a faux-crocodile finish.



of Springer's furnishings. "The secondary marketplace hasn't even caught up with the cost of original pieces," says Liz O'Brien, a Manhattan dealer who advises clients to hold on to their Springers, "at least for the time being." And while prices often remain attractively low, not everything is being snapped up. At Christie's Los Angeles' recent "Innovators of 20th-Century Style" sale, for example, a games table of alligator-embossed white leather with chrome mounts (estimated to bring as much as \$4,000) failed to sell, in spite of its exquisite craftsmanship and silver-screen provenance: It was formerly owned by Oscar-winning actress Loretta Young. Nevertheless, says Jason Stein, the specialist in charge of the auction, "The trend is on the upswing, and there's increasing interest in his early work."

Roger Prigent, owner of Manhattan's Malmaison Antiques—where Gianni Versace bought and Jacques Grange shops—treasures a black leather agenda with midnight-blue marbled endpapers. "It's so beautiful, I've never used it," Prigent says of the mint-condition piece, which Springer designed in 1959 and personally monogrammed. However, the dealer is blunt when asked to quantify Springer the designer. "Accessories and Lucite lamps were his forte, but the furniture is very hit-or-miss," he says. "It ages well, but after all, he's not Samuel Marx."

Naysayers notwithstanding, fashionistas are saving their pennies for the inevitable Springer blitzkrieg. Patty Palumbo, another New York dealer, has been stockpiling Springer pieces for three years and will mount a retrospective in November at her ground-zero-hip Lexington Avenue gallery, Palumbo. Expect every chair, table, and lamp to fly out the door to a pied-à-terre near you. "I can't keep his designs in stock," she says. "At any price." ■