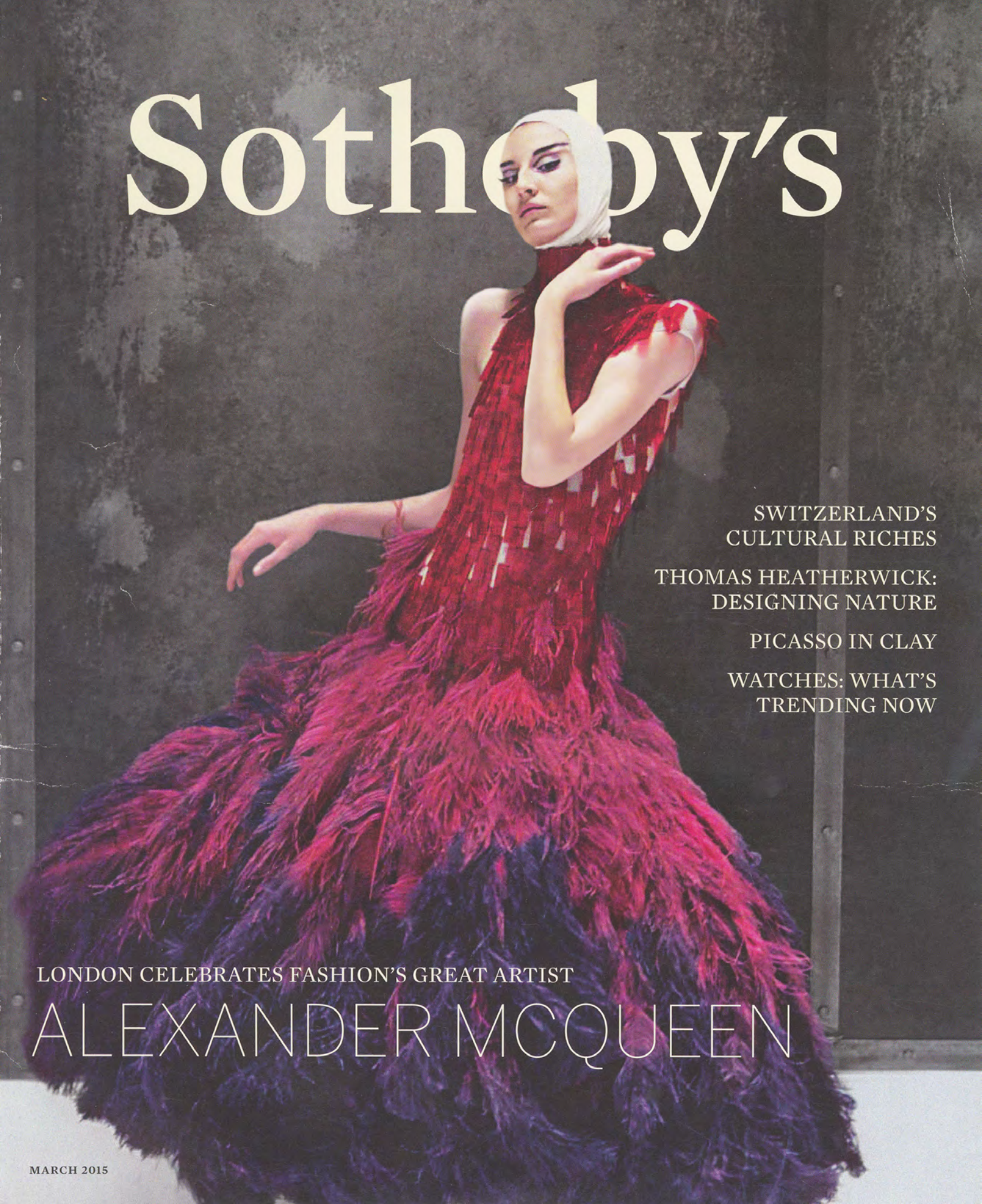
# Sotheby's



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## ALEXANDER MCQUEEN

MARCH 2015

JAMES REGINATO

# LE STYLE CATROUX

Championed by Rothschilds and embraced by royalty and the international jet-set, François Catroux has been one of the elite's most sought-after designers for more than four decades. Today, he is busier than ever, with multiple projects in the works, and a major monograph by Rizzoli underway.

François Catroux in his Paris atelier.

Paris-based interior designer François Catroux's client list is not the longest, but it is one of the best in the business.

He launched his career in the 1960s working for the crème of European society, including Marie-Hélène and Guy de Rothschild and Antenor and Beatriz Patiño. Currently, his clientele includes such international titans of industry and fashion as Barry Diller and Diane von Furstenberg; Leslie and Abigail Wexner; and Robert and Chantal Miller. And on a recent winter day, he had just returned from Riyadh, where he is designing a palace for Prince Faisal of Saudi Arabia.

Even when executing the elaborate "Le Goût Rothschild," Catroux has always brought a modern edge to his projects. He constantly reinvents his interiors. To that end, today he is completely redoing the Left Bank apartment that for decades he has shared with his wife, Betty, the celebrated style icon and longtime muse of Yves Saint Laurent.

Thus we meet for a chat at his office, a stylish space on the Faubourg Saint-Honoré. Catroux's staff numbers just ten people – not large compared to many of his peers. "But three of my people have been with me since 1975 – they are so good they do the work of fifteen people," he says.

Before taking on a new client, the interview process is mutual. "When they come to see me, I know after the first ten minutes if it's going to work. If not, I say I'm busy until 2017. And I'm never wrong.

"In the 45 years I have been in business, after the clients have approved the first proposal I have given them, I have never been rejected."

The grandson of a French general, Catroux was born in colonial Algeria, where his parents owned farms and vineyards. After serving in the French army for two years, Catroux arrived in Paris at age twenty. "I began to visit people living in beautiful apartments and houses and, without knowing it, I was learning. I never studied interior design. I don't believe in school for that. Schools can teach you only technique, not taste or flair."

In 1960, Catroux ventured to New York, where he was a correspondent for *ELLE* magazine, and where he mixed with the social lions of the day, including Kitty Miller, Cole Porter and Pamela Hayward. But he gravitated most often to decorator Billy Baldwin and architect Philip Johnson. "I was very much influenced by America and the modern style I saw. I used to go to New Canaan a lot to visit Philip Johnson at his Glass House. I was so impressed by that."

After Catroux returned to Paris, his own career got off to a fast start when Italian couturier Mila Schön asked him to design her palazzo in Milan, which was featured in a cover story of *L'Œil*, the influential art magazine. At the same time, the Op Art-inspired apartment he decorated for himself and Betty was soon photographed by Horst.

"It was a *boule de neige* – it snowballed from there. Voilà, my career started."

PHOTOGRAPHY BY DENIS ROUVRE

Though Catroux then and now considers himself a modernist, he was taken up and championed by the Queen Bee of Parisian society, Marie-Hélène de Rothschild, for whom he did several projects in the opulent style for which that family is famed.

"Le Goût Rothschild," says Catroux, can only be pulled off by Rothschilds – though many others have tried, and failed. "It looks ridiculous when others try to do it, especially in New York, where you usually don't have high ceilings and the right proportions.

"It is something you can not succeed in copying because it is a mixture of the very best and the very best. Not just objets, but art – with the Rothschilds you'd have a Rembrandt and a Frans Hals combined with this decor.

"In the 1980s there was a huge taste in New York and elsewhere for this 19th-century look, which I hated. All those tassels and lampshades, and cheating with second-rate furniture and fabrics. It was awful."

In reaction, Catroux reached back to the 18th century for his interiors. "I went into the direction of neoclassicism, which is much more strict and pure, much nearer to modernism. The 19th century was heavy and full of details that were not necessary."

Catroux's streamlined taste no doubt accounts for his numerous nautical and aeronautical commissions. For Limited Brands founder Wexner, he has over the years outfitted ten jets, and a 320-foot yacht. For Diller and von Furstenberg, he has also decorated a jet and a 300-foot, three-mast sailboat, as well as a house in Los Angeles, an apartment in Paris, and – under construction now – an addition to the couple's house in Connecticut.

"François understands how to live luxuriously in the most comfortable way," says von Furstenberg. "He is a magician and I love him. He made us the ultimate dream boat. Our house in LA is totally original, striking and an oasis of peace. My Paris apartment is what you dream to have in Paris. He is simply the best!"

*"SCHOOLS CAN TEACH YOU ONLY TECHNIQUE, NOT TASTE OR FLAIR."*
*—FRANÇOIS CATROUX*

A Los Angeles living room designed by Catroux.

PHOTOGRAPH BY FRANÇOIS HALARD

*"FRANÇOIS UNDERSTANDS HOW TO LIVE LUXURIOUSLY IN THE MOST COMFORTABLE WAY."*
*—DIANE VON FURSTENBERG*

At the moment, Catroux is also designing a house in the Bahamas for DFS (Duty Free Shops) co-founder Robert Miller and his wife, Chantal, for whom he has previously done projects in Hong Kong, Paris, Gstaad and New York. Currently in Manhattan he is working on the 79th-floor apartment of a client he cannot name at One57, which has become a favoured address of the world's billionaires. "The windows are floor to ceiling and when you are up there the planes landing at LaGuardia are lower than you are."

Surprisingly, given the length and success of his career, a monograph on the designer has never been published. "I resisted doing one. I wasn't interested." But next year Rizzoli will finally bring one out, with text by writer and designer David Netto.

Catroux has lately been combing through his archives to choose which projects to publish. He is happily surprised by how well most of his interiors hold up when viewed today. "The projects from the 1960s look fresh today. My best projects I hope look timeless.

"To me, you achieve timelessness by removing unnecessary things, without being a minimalist. It is about keeping just what is essential."

James Reginato is writer-at-large of *Vanity Fair*.

A monograph on François Catroux's work will be published by Rizzoli in 2016.

(Opposite) A sitting room in Paris designed by Catroux. (Top) Betty and François Catroux photographed by Horst in their Paris home in 1970. (Right) A London dining room designed by Catroux.

(OPPOSITE) PHOTOGRAPH BY FRANCOIS CATROUX (RIGHT) PHOTOGRAPH BY FRANCOIS HALARD (ABOVE) PHOTOGRAPH BY HORST P. HORST © CONDÉ NAST ARCHIVE/CORBIS