

ICONS

# A Designer Inspired By Uncanny Images

Philippe Starck, whose designs range from chairs to a space station lounge, finds the paintings of Neo Rauch 'fertile soil' for his imagination.

By J.S. MARCUS

The dreamlike, figure-filled canvases of the German artist Neo Rauch defy conventional interpretations. Mr. Rauch, 60, grew up in communist East Germany, and his work draws on socialist-realist motifs as well as Surrealism, Romanticism and comics. His paintings are filled with people laboring away at confounding tasks, wearing outfits that vaguely suggest uniforms, in the midst of composite, indefinable cityscapes. After the collapse of communism, his work made an international splash and helped to

turn his hometown of Leipzig into a center of figurative painting.

For Philippe Starck, the A-list French architect and designer, Mr. Rauch is a daily source of inspiration. Over the last 15 years, Mr. Starck says, he has surrounded himself with reproductions of Mr. Rauch's paintings, which he likes to rip out of books and tape on walls. "I never go to art galleries or museums, but I make my own Neo Rauch museum," he said from the remote Portuguese retreat where he is seeing out the Covid-19 pandemic. He describes Mr. Rauch's mysterious compositions as "fertile soil" for his own imagination.

In five decades of work, Mr. Starck, 71, has created everything from sculptural faucets and fanciful thermoses to trendsetting hotel lobbies and a baker's dozen or two of museum-worthy chairs. Among his most recent creations is the crew quarters for the world's first commercial space station, currently being developed by Axiom Space, Inc., an American space-tourism company that plans its first launch in 2024. The quarters will offer passengers a womb-like lounge with hundreds of LED lights that change colors in response to the occupant's mood or command.

Mr. Starck is known for his furniture designs, including his Louis Ghost chair for the Italian company Kartell. First released in 2002, it reimagines the classic Louis XVI style in a single piece of transparent plastic. But according to Paola Antonelli, senior curator in the architecture and design department at New York's Museum of Modern Art, Mr. Starck's major accomplishments are his indoor spaces. "He changed the way we perceive interiors," she says, citing two of his celebrated hotel projects, Miami Beach's Delano and London's St. Martins Lane.

Ms. Antonelli sees the roots of Mr. Starck's sensibility in the post-modern movement of the 1980s, when he turned out playful, prankish designs such as a spidery lemon squeezer from 1988. Mr. Starck still regards humor as "a sign of intelligence," he says, and in some of his recent work, mismatched elements can prompt chuckles. In Mama Shelter Lyon, a French hotel that opened in 2013, Mr. Starck let striped floors, a graphic-art ceiling and a wooden sled vie for attention near the reception desk.

The uncanny combinations in Mr. Rauch's paintings, by contrast, tend to provoke unease or confusion. Michael Glover, author of a 2019 monograph on the artist, calls Mr. Rauch "a psychological artist whose vision can be unruly, gothic, and frightening." In his 2007 painting "The Fugue," for instance, oddly dressed firemen bearing eel-like hoses are hard at work, while a man and two women ascend into an overcast sky. "You have to try to understand what is going on here," says Mr. Starck of the painting, "but you never really do understand." He



Above: 'The Godfather' by Neo Rauch (2005). Opposite: the Louis Ghost chair and a lemon squeezer by Philippe Starck, seen here in 2010 in a lounge he designed for the Royal Monceau Raffles hotel in Paris.



FROM LEFT: GIUSEPPE CACCIA/GETTY IMAGES; STARCK-NETWORK; NEO RAUCH/GALERIE EIGEN; ART LEIPZIG/BERLIN AND DAVID ZHINER; BERTRAND LANGOIS/GETTY IMAGES

calls the artwork's stubborn mystery "a mind-opener for me."

Ghostly parent-child relationships have played a recurring role in the work of Mr. Rauch, who lost both his parents in a train accident when he was a few weeks old. His 2007 painting "The Father," hailed as a breakthrough by critics, depicts the giant figure of a young man in 19th-century clothes, cradling a much smaller man who is presumably his father. "The Godfather," a related 2005 work featuring a similar mismatched pair, is a favorite of Mr. Starck, who often cites his own father—an airplane engineer and designer—as a strong influence on his career. "What are they doing?" asks Mr. Starck about the mismatched duo. "Why is one too big and the other too small?" With Mr. Rauch, he says, "there is always a question."

A new show of Mr. Rauch's work at Leipzig's Galerie Eigen + Art, on view through Dec. 12, takes its title from his massive new painting "Handlauf," meaning "handrail." It features a three-legged, double-

**'You have to try to understand what is going on here, but you never really do understand.'**

faceted woman and a centaur-like man standing side by side with clasped hands, each acting as a kind of supportive handrail for the other. Such paintings are "emotional and heavy," says Mr. Starck, but there is something like humor to be found in their use of "the paradoxical."

Mr. Rauch's enigmatic worlds inspire Mr. Starck, who says they are "in my brain." But as a designer and architect, the real world is still his stock in trade: "I am the son of an engineer, with the rigor of an engineer. I am a serious guy, with a laugh on the inside."