

# ot small things...

French design guru Philippe Starck has recently moved to London. Is he a genius, or does he just have a knack for nick-nacks? By **Karyn Miller**. Pictures by **Nicky Johnston**

**P**hilippe Starck, the French designer who created the iconic, three-legged lemon squeezer (pictured right), as well as some of London's hippest hotels, has just set up home in London. But if he thinks that his British peers are going to welcome him with open arms, he could be in for a nasty surprise.

British design behemoth James Dyson, designer of the Cyclone vacuum cleaner, has a bone to pick with him. 'What worries me is Starck's view of design: that you just come along at the end and make something look good,' says Dyson. 'I've stayed in Starck's hotels and I think he's a better interior designer than a designer of things. It's depressing seeing design students copying them.'

When I show Starck the offending article, he says, 'But this man is not a designer, he is the owner of a vacuum cleaner factory. His work is more that of an engineer than a designer. He is clearly jealous. Why? I don't know. I create beautiful things. He has made one vacuum cleaner. If that is enough for him, I am not interested in what he says.'

Starck himself is certainly not complacent. He works with such speed that it has been said he can design a chair in the time it takes a plane to lift off. Even in his private life, he doesn't hang about – when he touched down in London to hunt for his new home, he snapped up a £1.4 million town house in an hour. He chose it because it is less than a minute's walk from one of his favourite London locations: Julie's Champagne Bar.

This timekeeping ethic does not apply to our interview, however. He is still out at lunch when I and a photographer arrive to meet him at his house. And when he does launch himself into the room, nearly an hour later, he is wagging his finger sternly. 'You must not take any

photographs inside,' he barks in heavily accented English. 'Don't take any when I am out of the room, either. *Zero.*'

This is an unexpected mandate from this most influential of interior designers. Some of the world's most fashionable hotels have been fitted out by Starck: the Hudson in New York and St Martin's Lane in Covent Garden, London. His work has been the subject of countless articles in glossy magazines, and is also frequently featured as the modish backdrop for celebrity photoshoots.

My photographer, bowed, trudges out into the back garden and begins arranging Starck-designed chairs against the garden wall. Starck, a short man with twinkling hazel eyes, is resolute. 'This is not my house yet,' he shrugs.

Starck, 54, arrived in London with his elegant American wife, Nori, and their eight-month-old baby daughter, K, in February. Starck-designed items are scattered about the place. There, on a shelf in the kitchen, are his pretty, plastic baby beakers that resemble crystal goblets; in a bedroom is an unusual-looking floor lamp – it actually turns out to be an illuminated electric fan.

Starck and his wife, rendered in oil paints, glare stiffly from a full-sized, gilt-framed double portrait in a downstairs reception room.

He explains, however, that he hasn't yet had time to decorate the house to Starck standards. Starck has 15 houses around the world, including a riverside apartment in Paris, a flat in Venice, and an oyster farm in Bordeaux, and he divides his time between them.

Starck does strive for a little continuity between each of these many residences. His beds always face due south and are all exactly 27 inches high.

I ask him about his views on contemporary design. 'I have nothing to say, because it doesn't interest me,' he ▶



► replies. 'It is ridiculous to admire a chair. We are better. The worst human is better than the best chair – even one that I have designed.'

As we speak, he leans backwards against a bookcase that is lined, wall-to-wall, with copies of his book, an eponymously titled 260-page photographic record of his design achievements. The floor beneath him is littered with sheets of paper, disgorged continuously by the fax machine in the corner. These are communications relating to his current projects. Periodically, Starck ambles around his desk, reads them and drops them again.

Starck is so busy that he travels constantly. 'I spend more time on my jet than I do in my houses,' he says. 'My house is a plane.' His young family often travel with him, although this jet-setting lifestyle cannot be easy for Nori – she is expecting another baby at Christmas.

Starck has also recently turned his hand to transport design: he is behind a £35 million make-over of Eurostar trains. He unveiled his vision – comfortable headrests, elegant colours and modernised departure lounges – in May.

'There is a tendency today for people to travel wearing purple jogging bottoms, green fluorescent sweaters and orange Nike trainers,' he said at the launch. 'Sometimes you can inspire people to upgrade themselves.'

The press in this country accused him of lambasting the British sense of style. Starck is adamant that he was saying nothing of the sort.

'What I said,' he growls, 'is absolutely right. Everyone is dressed messily when they travel these days. But why? I will add a new elegance with my new Eurostar uniforms. I hope the travellers will become elegant, too.'

Starck is at pains to emphasise that he adores British style. 'The UK is my real model of elegance,' he insists, his hazel eyes opening wide. 'Italians are elegant, but when an Englishman is well-dressed, it is impressive.'

'London is a village,' he says. 'All around, there are only friends.'

If this seems an unusual assessment of this noisy urban sprawl and its famously ill-mannered inhabitants, then do bear in mind that Starck's house is in idyllic Holland Park – the posh end of Notting Hill. Local residents include Marco Pierre White and Elton John.

The house will provide plenty of room for Starck's expanding family. The next baby will be Nori's second child, after the couple married in 2000, and Starck's fourth.

Starck chooses his children's names with the aid of a computer programme he designed 25 years ago, which throws up brief, random combinations of letters. 'I cannot accept you create a new life, and you give it the name of somebody who was eaten by lions, died on a cross or was burned by Roman legions.'

And so he has a 24-year-old daughter called Ara and a seven-year-old son called Oa (also the name of a table lamp he designed in 1996). His baby daughter is called, simply, K. The housekeeper prefers to call her Philippa.

Ara, a graduate of the Slade School of Fine Art, is Starck's daughter by his first



French connection: Philippe Starck with wife Nori and daughter, K

wife, Brigitte, who died of cancer in 1992. Oa is the fruit of a later, failed relationship with Patricia, an ex-director of his design agency.

'The fourth child will be called Lago,' he beams. 'It is a little more classical than the others, no?'

Starck says he hated his own youth. 'Some people are adaptable. But I felt like I had arrived from Pluto. I understood nothing. It was absolutely horrible.' He hid himself away until he was 25, finally venturing out of his seclusion in 1968 to establish his first venture: designing and building inflatable furniture.

Design is in his blood. 'My father designed aeroplanes. To create one you must be very creative. If you don't want the plane to crash you must be rigorous. Likewise, my life is creative and rigorous. My mother was foolish. She was an artist – a waste of time. But she had a lot of panache. I also have this panache.'

In 1982, he was commissioned by President Mitterand to refurbish his private apartments in the Elysée Palace in Paris. A few years later he designed the Juicy Salif lemon squeezer.

Yuppies loved it, and it became an instant design icon. It still sells today, priced at £40. But these days, you will more often hear it dismissed for its impracticality than admired for its unusual appearance – it's just not very effective at squeezing lemons.

Starck's latest 'beautiful thing' is the Time and Weather Collection for Oregon Scientific: sleek, square, radio-controlled clocks with temperature displays, pressure readings, moon positions and humidity percentages. According to the designer, these are 'windows on the poetry of the world'.

'The Moon can move 18 metres of water in some places in the world,' he says. 'Imagine the power. Can you imagine the physical impact this has on you? It

is better to understand what moves around you, to understand what you are.'

But overall, Starck decries the consumer instinct. 'There are other ways to live, apart from buying,' he says. This, remember, is a man who owns 15 homes, designs two items a week and has made his millions (he won't say how many) by seducing people into buying objects they don't need – of which the lemon squeezer is only one example.

Unabashed, he continues. 'If you come to me and say, "I am cold, design me a heater," another designer would design one, perhaps in yellow for more fun. But my answer will be to give you a hug.'

Pretentious? Yes. Insufferable? No. There is a winning sense of humour that lurks behind many of his designs: the toilet brush, for example, which he named Excalibur. And it is impossible not to admire a creative imagination that is plugged so firmly into the modern lifestyle. He has thought of everything.

He even designed his own sketch pad. He tears a sheet from the pad and hands it to me. 'Try to tear it,' he orders. The paper will not tear. 'Try to screw it up.' When I let go my hand, the paper unfurls to become flat again. 'You can put it in water, too,' he beams.

And finally, the negotiating skills of our photographer pay off. Starck is eventually persuaded to be photographed inside the house – standing against a plain white wall, and in front of the unusual room fan.

When he stands in front of the illuminated fan, its light appears as a golden halo around his head. Starck cannot stop giggling: 'Look!' he says. 'I am Jesus!' ■ *The Oregon Scientific Time and Weather Collection, designed by Philippe Starck, is released this summer, priced between £40 and £130, depending on model. Call 08707 280 038 to order, or visit [www.oregonscientific.co.uk](http://www.oregonscientific.co.uk) for more details.*