

Van Truex: Designer And Catalyst

By JANE GENIESSE

IMAGINE this. Your telephone rings. Tiffany's Walter Hoving is on the wire. He says: "Come over here to Tiffany. Tell us what is beautiful. We don't want anything in here that you don't approve of. And, by the way, don't give a thought to what it costs or how it sells."

How is that for a stunner?

Even if you were Van Day Truex, the year were 1952, and you had just resigned as president of the Parsons School of Design to take a shot at private life, you would still be stunned by the enormity of such carte blanche. Imagine its happening twice in a lifetime.

This September, no sooner had 74-year-old Van Day Truex sold his beloved house in Provence, France, to return to a life centered in the United States, than the telephone rang. It was Walter Hoving on the line again. George O'Brien, the influential design director whom Mr. Truex had chosen to be his successor 12 years ago, was leaving. Nothing else but Mr. Truex's filling the gap would do.

As a result, any day now Tiffany & Company will announce that Mr. Truex is returning as design director and divisional vice president. "Mr. Hoving is not easy to refuse," said Mr. Truex with a smile, shaking his exquisitely neat, silver-haired head.

During a leisurely chat in his small, sunny, stylish New York apartment, this great figure in design, whose career has spanned 50 years in the field, talked a bit about the past, the future and the state of the art.

The man who led Parsons to a foremost place among schools of design, and in whose honor the school established a teaching chair two years ago, who went on to help make Tiffany the formidable champion of quality it is recognized to be today, was born March 5, 1904, "during a cyclone on the western plains of Kansas," he said.

Like Dorothy, Mr. Truex was swept from the farm to Oz, which in Mr. Truex's case turned out to be Paris during the fabulous years between the world wars. A charming and fluent anecdotist, Mr. Truex described the wondrous transition from the ordinariness of his boyhood ("Father worked for J.C. Penney and once a week

Continued on Page C8

Van Day Truex: A New Role

Continued From Page C1

Mother rode a caboose with the receipts hidden under her petticoats") to the sophistication of Europe.

"Those years in Paris, they formed me completely," he said. "I went in 1922 for my last year at Parsons — the first school of its kind to found a Paris branch. I left 15 years later. I lived and walked for 15 years in beauty."

The rumble of war brought him home, but his love affair with France continued. The French Government has made him a Chevalier of the Legion of Honor and for the past 17 years, until he sold his Provence home, he has spent more time abroad than in this country.

The decision to return was not an easy one. Mostly, he said, it was his age and a recent concern for his health that convinced him that the time had come to touch base once again with his countrymen after 12 years of semiretirement. Despite the fact he had kept a pied-à-terre in the city ready for this moment, the return was fraught with anxiety.

"I have rather dreaded New York," he said, "simply because I believe that if you are in New York you should be in the arena. This is not a city for nonactivists."

But it is a thrilling city, he acknowledged, where challenge is everywhere and ideas burst from every corner. Just the view from his window, a riot of architectural styles, he finds exhilarating. "The Sherry-Netherland is Mont St. Michel. The Hotel Pierre is the Grand Chapelle of Versailles. Look at the Venetian Gothic of the Barbizon over there, or the Romanesque of Delmonico's!"

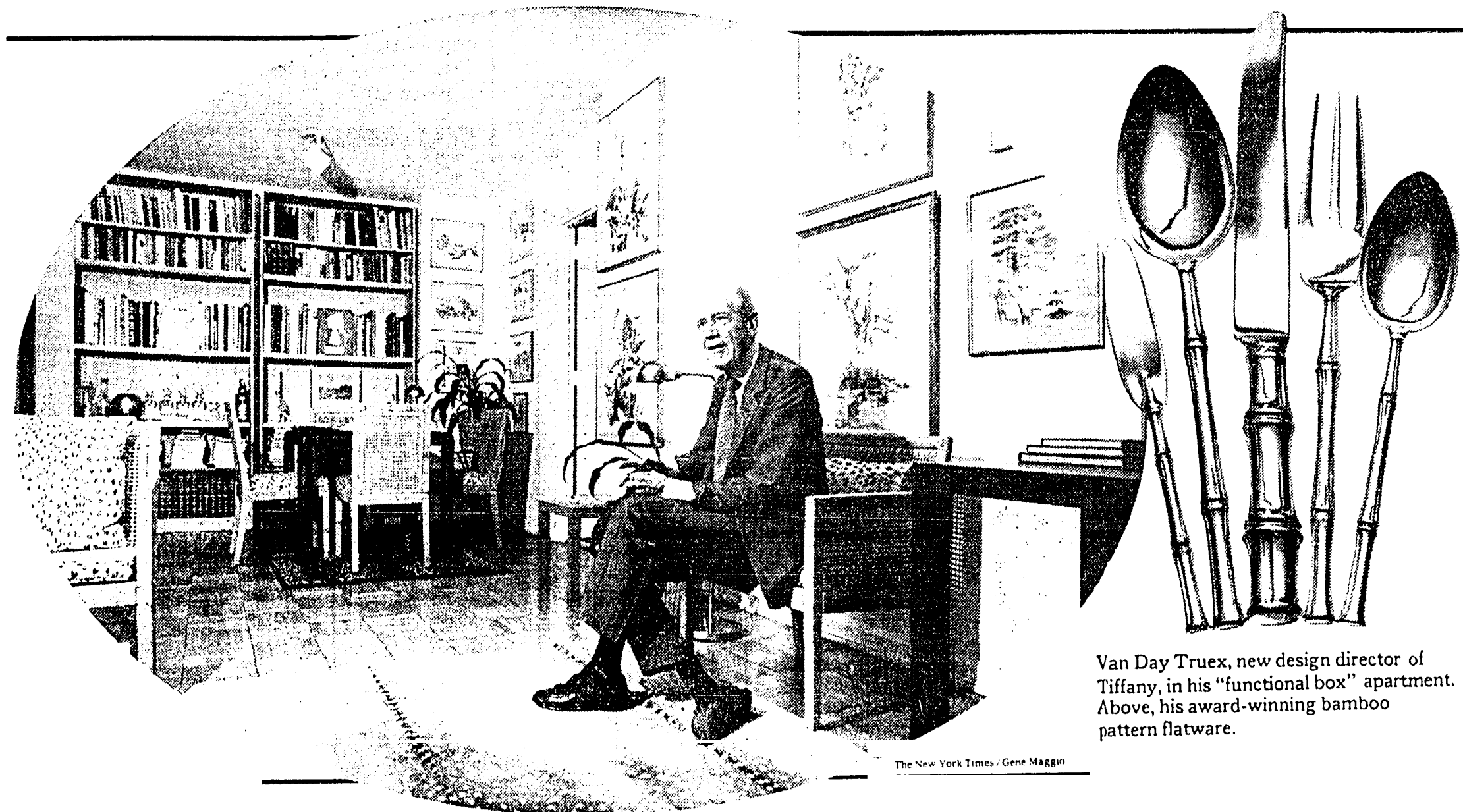
For someone so profoundly influenced by his surroundings, it is no surprise that Mr. Truex's apartment is a studied exercise in classicism. He has managed to make elegant a one-bedroom apartment in a low-ceilinged modern building, which he calls his "functional box." Appropriately, he has chosen several examples of his school's famous effort, the Parsons table, to stand against two sides of the living room. Colors are neutral and the furniture, whether an off-white couch or a group of woven cane chairs, is low, spare and consistent in scale. Mr. Truex tends to laugh at his own fanaticism for order and proper scale, an understandable hazard of the profession.

"I believe in fashion, but it is a power that can get out of hand," said Mr. Truex. "One needs to remain aloof, to recognize changes and influences, but to keep at the same time a certain objectivity. This is a view we insisted on at Parsons. In this apartment, as long as I was reducing myself to a functional box, I wanted to be as contemporary as possible, yet to have things that won't go out of fashion."

The same care he gives to his environment he brings to his personal appearance. Tall, lanky and self-deprecating ("I'm so badly put together. On the beach I frighten children because I'm nothing but a skinny Kansas coat hanger"), he nevertheless looks very much the part of the suave internation-

alist. It isn't just his highly polished black tassel shoes, or the gray mohair suit. It is the detail. You have to look carefully before you notice that his cuffs have been deeply finished on the underside so he can flip them back, or that the red ribbon on his lapel, marking him as a chevalier, is almost indiscernible, so discreetly is it reduced in size.

Asked what he considered his greatest achievements, he tossed aside the thought that they might include the famous Tiffany table settings done by a panorama of celebrities and society matrons. Nor would he take particular credit for his Bamboo silver flatware pattern that Tiffany has been selling now for 15 years. He even shrugged his shoulders over the decanter he designed, which the Museum of Modern Art includes in its permanent collection. His real achievement, he said modestly, has been his work as "a catalyst, of provoking people to do things I couldn't possibly have done myself." And that is a point. Who else would have succeeded, just as an example, in persuading artists like Noguchi and Léger to make doorknobs?



Van Day Truex, new design director of Tiffany, in his "functional box" apartment. Above, his award-winning bamboo pattern flatware.

The New York Times / Gene Maggio