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This page: Francisco Costa in his Manhattan apartment. Abstracts by Enrico Castellani hang on the walls. *Opposite:* a large painting of a horse's mane – a gift from a friend – hangs alongside the bed

Costa bravura

As Calvin Klein's creative director, Francisco Costa is known for his sophisticated palette. So it's no surprise to find the same natural elegance at play in the designer's Manhattan pad, says Harriet Quick. Photographed by Martyn Thompson



Far from being an eccentrically contrived jumble, the diverse pieces have an affinity of proportion and texture – not unlike Costa's design aesthetic



MARTYN THOMPSON

A nineteenth-century buffalo-horn throne – ‘so kitsch and so odd’ – dominates the sitting room. The Polynesian-patterned screen in the corner was made by Horst for Coco Chanel

“Pop” goes a floor-to-ceiling cabinet door in an innocuous space that leads from a sitting room to a galley kitchen. The carefully concealed wood-panelled door, painted in a heathery grey and fastened with a bronze sash-window handle, reveals an immaculate cocktail cabinet stocked with martini shakers, bottles, glasses and requisite twizzlers. “Pop” goes an identical door on the opposite wall, revealing a more mundane selection of utility items – an ironing board, brushes, mops and fluorescent-yellow bottles of cleaning fluids. “It is not such a huge apartment, so we needed to make sense of every space,” explains Francisco Costa, leading me into the kitchen, where, tucked under the window ledge, is a metal tractor seat that swings out on a hinge. “John said this was the best view of the Empire State Building, so he wanted a perch to contemplate the vista.” Stunning views in New York are hard to come by – windows are at a premium and most buildings face other brick walls – so Costa’s outlook on the bravura building, which was constructed in 1930 (the Empire State contains 200,000 tons of Indiana limestone) and is still to find a challenge in an architecturally tumescent New York skyline, is prime.

The apartment, located in Midtown in a neighbourhood called Murray Hill (once dubbed Curry Hill, because of the Indian restaurants on Third Avenue), is the sublime city abode for the creative director of Calvin Klein and his partner, John DeStefano, a horse trainer and manager. “It’s the neighbourhood we could afford,” Costa laughs, referring to the city’s spiralling property prices. “I didn’t know Murray Hill before, but I have fallen in love with it – it has so many historical references,” says Costa, pointing to the Morgan Library & Museum on Madison Avenue, which houses a collection that includes pieces by Matisse and Giacometti. “The church just down the hill has windows by Louis Comfort Tiffany. It is a tribute to the craftsmanship of that era.”

The apartment building itself is early Forties, built to solid and gracious standards, as America recovered from the Great Depression. There’s a doorman, a lobby furnished with good-looking Regency-style pieces, and tonal flower-print wallpaper in the communal hallways. Costa discovered the apartment in a state that was categorically not to his taste (Eighties styling, with steel, lacquer and black aplenty), so he remodelled it with the help of Alex Pomarico of PomaSteven Design & Architecture. Window frames were stripped back to functional metal frames, wood panelling was inserted in hallways and rooms, and the entire apartment – which consists of an oblong living and dining room, kitchen, bedroom, library and a generous hallway – was painted in four shades of grey, creating a Tardis-like effect of part sanctuary and part >

"You go around and you collect things. I'm not minimal – that is someone else's story"



Above the linen-covered sofa in the library is a triptych by Eric Brown. The apartment is decorated throughout in a palette of subtle greys

MARTYN THOMPSON

gents' club. It's a subtle, gradating palette that migrates from summer cloud to pumice and a stormier purple-toned shade – a choice that could only come from a designer whose refined choice and experimentation in colour and fabrics leads to descriptions in the collection's show notes of "white hand-loomed silk ribbon coat" and "talc laminated sequin pencil skirt". The decor is austere but warm, with a lulling play of textures, ranging from the fine herringbone of a sisal carpet, to ecru cashmere Roman shades, which mellow the harsh New York light, to burnished-bronze sculptures and the amber-toned wood of the dining table. "I wanted it to feel easy but masculine, with a certain kind of taste to it," says Costa. "The rental we lived in before on Central Park South for 15 years was very 'Colefax & Fowler-y', with faux Chippendale-style furniture – great in itself, but we thought it was time to move on and buy a place."

Costa and DeStefano have great taste, which ranges from the bold, mechanical-striped metal cabinet in the sitting room to a folding screen with a Polynesian motif, which stands next to an elegant Fifties Italian dining table (with a secret pop-out drawer) and two Josef Hoffman chairs. "The screen was a starting point. I found it at a Christie's auction and loved the piece. It was only later that I discovered it was featured in a *Vogue Living* book from the Fifties – Coco Chanel gave the fabric to the photographer Horst and he created one of four screens. It felt strong and it felt good," says Costa. "You go around and you collect things; it takes time."

The "collection" includes a freakish-looking upholstered leather throne, the back and legs of which are crafted from buffalo horns. Sit down and one imagines a Bourbon-swilling, shotgun-shooting character from a classic Western. Miraculously, the form caresses your spine. This macho chair once belonged to a nineteenth-century Texan ranch holder, a figure rather distant from the slight, beady-eyed, Brazilian-born Costa, who is wearing his trademark canvas jeans and cashmere sweater today. "I saw one like this before in London – so kitsch and so odd – but I realised this was a good one. Look, it even has crystal castors," he says, upturning the chair to reveal its rotating foot parts. Another weird find is a streamlined upholstered chair that looks like a commode, which was designed by a woman who created interiors for cruise ships in the Thirties and which Costa uncovered in Antwerp. "I'm not minimal,"

he says. "That is someone else's story."

Far from being an eccentrically contrived jumble, the diverse pieces have an affinity of proportion and texture – not unlike Costa's design aesthetic, which marries refined architectural lines with unexpected detail and fabrication. His spring/summer '09 collection is based on a series of white-to-silver tones – light jackets with pop-out origami shoulders, sleeveless silk shifts with contouring created from faux crease marks, as if the dress has just been pulled out of a dry-cleaner's cellophane package, and self-sculpting metallic wire and yarn-knit shirts. Luxurious, yes, but pushed to a degree of sublime, just like everything at Calvin Klein.



A framed wire sculpture of a shirt, by Vik Muniz, hangs alongside Costa's CFDA awards

(No less than 5,500 Ecuadorian roses were planted on New York's new ex-railroad park, the High Line, for a New York Fashion Week party to celebrate the company's fortieth anniversary. And artist James Turrell was commissioned to create a "blue void" light piece – costing a cool \$700,000 – which greeted guests on arrival. Tasteful, always.)

As the creative director of womenswear (and about to launch a furniture line) for one of the world's super-brands, which is now owned by Phillips-Van Heusen, Costa is an amiable, modest fellow. (Calvin Klein, the Bronx-born boy wonder who introduced purist sportswear fashion to the Parisian copycat-obsessed New York rag trade in the

Seventies, has now retreated to his former playground of the Hamptons.) Looking around Costa's flat, you do wonder where the divide of professional and personal begins in the shades of grey – is this a show home or a home home? It definitely veers to the latter. Suspended from the bathroom door are two large glass frames filled with snaps of family, friends and cheesy moments. There's Costa with André Leon Talley, as Costa receives his Council of Fashion Designers of America 2008 Womenswear Designer of the Year award; there's another jesting shot with Tom Ford, his former boss at Gucci, where Costa was part of a golden triad of design assistants alongside Claire Waight Keller (now at Pringle) and Christopher Bailey (now at Burberry); and there's a black-and-white portrait of his mother in Brazil with her gaucho-moustached cousin. And there's one of DeStefano on one of his prize thoroughbreds. "I just started riding again in Santa Fe," says Costa. "I had not been on a horse in 15 years."

Horse memorabilia – bronzes, oils, sketches and books – crops up in a fantastically well-stocked library, and suspended from mid-shelf is a lovely oil of a horse race, pre-start, bustling with jockeys, grand-looking owners and plutocrats' bonneted wives.

There are exquisitely small pictures juxtaposed with large abstracts in unexpected "dead" spaces around the flat. Behind the front door is a series of sketches for Jeff Koons's balloon-puppy works. In the kitchen hangs a set of line drawings of Andy Warhol in drag as Marilyn Monroe, each with an irascibly hard-to-follow change of expression and posture. Opposite the hard-to-summon-yourself-from, velvet-covered sofa is a big inky work by Argentinian artist Guillaume Cuello of an abstracted theatre. More unnerving are the portraits of women clad in skins (one woman is in draped chicken skin that looks like a couture flesh suit; a black Brazilian woman is covered in fish skin) by the artist Pinar Yocalan, propped up near the Horst screen.

"When I moved here as an immigrant in 1986, I was living in a small corner apartment with three others," remembers Costa. "We were just living our lives. I moved to Queens, to the East Village, to Uptown – you know, you live for the night, and it was a great feeling. I happened to grow up in the upper middle class in Brazil – it's not like I came from the ghetto," he smiles. "You go through stages to reach somewhere. And this place I find so calming."