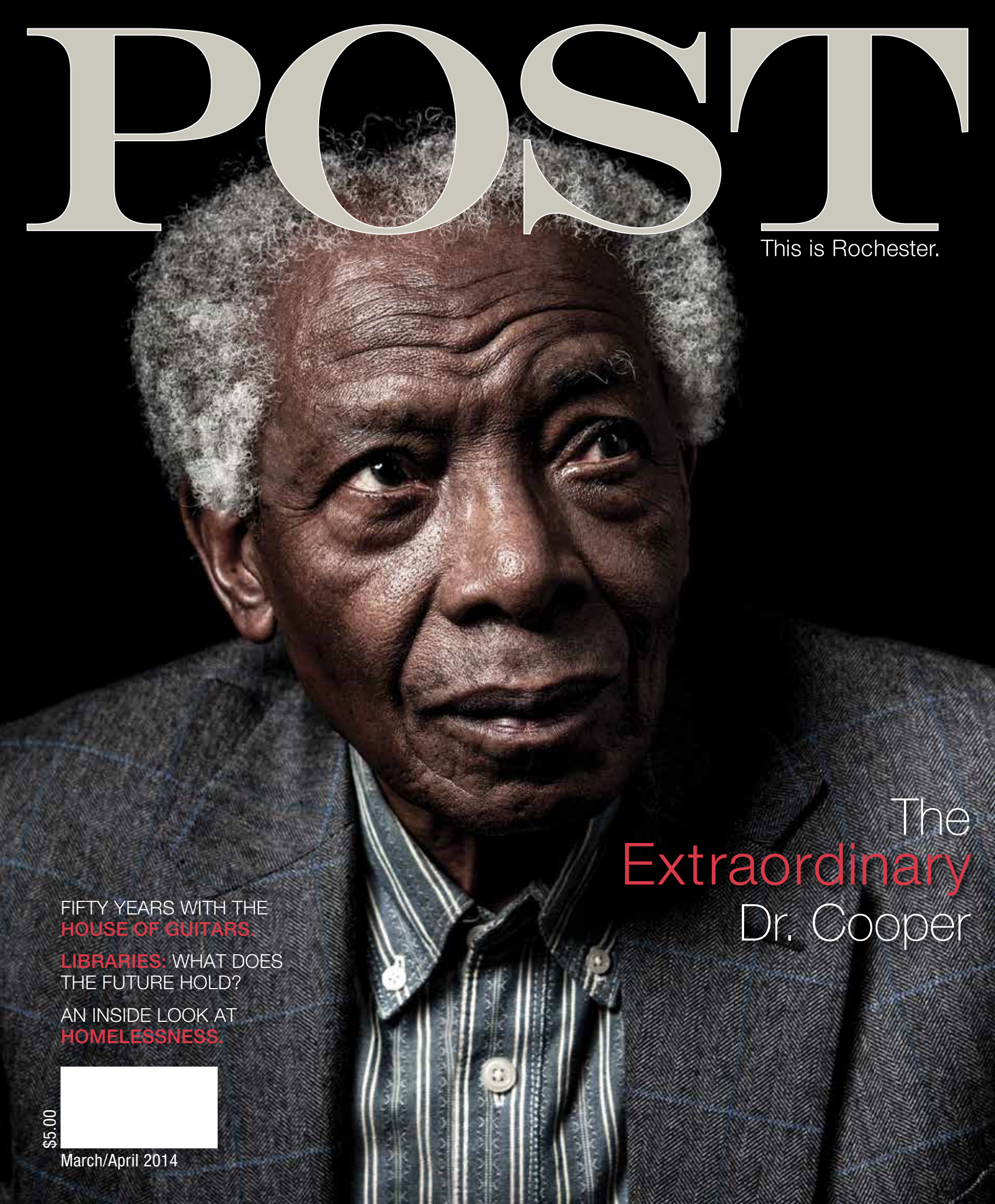


# POST

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March/April 2014

# THE INTERVIEWS

Arthur Vitoch • Betty Strassenburgh • Tony Karakashian

## Arthur Vitoch

Forty years of interior design, and counting

One man's chaos is another man's visual filing system. Fabric. Carpet. Lighting. Table lamps. Candlesticks. Tile. Backsplashes. Moldings. Furniture. Every detail that goes into the design of a home is in Arthur Vitoch's showroom and warehouse on Halsted Street—and also in his head.

Design ideas are Vitoch's constant companion, whether for a particular client's home or for something he'd like to create—a table, a mirror, a carpet. "I walk by racks of fabrics, and I say, 'I can use this one for the Smith job or that one for another job,'" he says. He keeps it all straight with spreadsheets and wheelable, desk-high baskets and bins assigned to each project.

Vitoch started his design business 40 years ago "from nothing" he says. At one point, carpets were housed in a bathroom draped over the side of the bathtub. Now Vitoch Interiors, with its dis-

tinctive "V" logo, has one of the largest design libraries in Upstate New York and services clients across the country.

Even when he was a boy, growing up in Sayville, a small fishing town on Long Island, he loved design. "My mother was creative; she painted," he says. "She let me do whatever I wanted in my room. I painted it chocolate brown. Way back then people didn't paint rooms dark colors. That was fun. I found a huge model airplane with a 6-foot span. I saved money for it and hung it from the ceiling. It had a little engine and propellers. It made a statement."

His high school art teacher suggested he study art in college, and he was accepted at Brooklyn's Pratt Institute. But his parents wanted him to experience life farther from home and Vitoch wanted to study industrial design, so he went to RIT. "They told me they were going to offer industrial design," which turned out not to be true, he says. He stayed anyway and graduated in 1969 with a fine-arts degree then went to work for Sibley's department store as an assistant to the home fashions director.

While designing windows for Sibley's in Rochester and Syracuse, Vitoch was discovered by the late Ron Nichols, then a well-known interior designer, who hired him as an assistant. "He was very fancy, very elegant, and had me making tea for clients," Vitoch says.

It didn't take long until he decided to open his own shop, and in 1972, after he'd gotten a \$5,000 inheritance from friends of his parents and a big dose of encouragement from former client and close friend Margi Weggeland, he did.

He honed his sales skills by convincing furniture reps that a little shop next to a motorcycle bar (the Fireside Lounge) was going to be able to move their lines. But he really had little business knowledge: One Christmas he didn't have much money for stock so he bought "interesting Christmas ornaments" and trimmed a large fir tree for his store window. Helen Ryder, a wealthy Rochester doyenne, came in and bought the entire tree. "Everything I had was on that tree," he says. "I had to borrow money to buy more ornaments." But he gained recognition from what he calls his "kooky" store windows, such as the one that featured an old armoire covered in chicken feathers. "Cars stopped in the street; it got into the paper." Another showstopper had a ceiling fan—not easy to come by in the

early 1970s—festooned with satin jewel box ribbons that arced across the store, creating a giant tent effect, and lit up at night.

Soon friends and friends of friends were asking him to decorate their homes and he eventually realized the fun, the ideas, and the money were in designing and not retail. “But a lot of people miss the store,” he says. “It was like a mini department store with unique things that you couldn’t find in Rochester. “A ritzier Pier One. It put me on the map,” he says.

Other designers wanted to work with him and now seven women work in the 6,000-square-foot Halstead Street office. Several of them have been with him for more than 30 years. Leslie Cordaro, a relative newbie as a 23-year veteran, loves the atmosphere. “Arthur is very easy to work with, very supportive,” she says. “I like his clean sense of style. It’s not fussy.”

It’s classical. It’s comfortable. It’s elegant. “I don’t like ‘faddy’ things. I want to keep things timeless and lasting,” he says. His favorite color is white. “You can do anything

with it.” He uses it as a base, but he says he’s famous for doing one “cozy, rich-looking room” in his projects. “Something dramatically colored.” Chinese red. Chocolate brown. Classic colors. “When one of my clients called me after coming home after a long vacation and said, ‘Arthur, can you believe you did this [design] 25 years ago,’ it was music to my ears. That’s what you want all clients to say.”

His own house in Irondequoit has winter and summer looks with different slipcovers, books, lamps, rugs and pillows to mark the changing of the seasons. And it’s all comfortable and durable enough for his beloved Labradoodle and Wheaten Terrier to hop on the furniture. “I’m a bad parent. I don’t know how to say no. [They] look so cute up there,” he says. The eclectic home has contemporary and period pieces. How does he tie it all together? “Talent. Some people can do it. That’s where we come in.”

And that’s about as much horn-tooting as you’ll hear from him. He’s essentially a quiet man, self-effacing and with a good sense of humor. For the past 20 years he has lived with

Weggeland, whom he calls his soul mate. “You need somebody that has your back and tells you the truth; you can get a little bit high on yourself when you get too many compliments. She puts me in my place. She puts things into perspective.”

Vitoch is much more than a decorator. He calls himself a “frustrated architect,” and when he envisions a design he considers how a client uses their space and how a home can work for them—which might include the need to move walls and add architectural details. Even in a suburban tract home he insists on interesting moldings, coffered ceilings, door frame details. “The things you add and change make a house special and custom,” he says. “I love David Adler [an architect who died in the 1940s]. I like to look at the details that he did in the beautiful homes he did. I find that inspiring. Round foyers, casings around doorways. I don’t like cookie-cutter things.”

Travel also inspires him, especially to Manhattan, Buenos Aires, and Paris, where he likes to sit in a park and sketch. “But none of it is very good. Tourists will look over my

shoulder and then walk away. I usually hide in the park to draw,” he laughs.

Each time he travels he brings back a small Limoges box as a memento. He encourages clients to collect something—coffee table books, wooden salad bowls, model cars, candlesticks—and use them in small groups as a design element. “Collections show your interests and make a home personal,” he says.

He’s not sure where his next journey will take him. After 40 years in the business, he says he’s not ready to retire but wants to spend



time with only a few clients and work on his other design ideas: more hands-on work creating mirrors framed by upholstery or by hundreds of clear marbles; coffee tables and other furniture; garden armillaries (a celestial globe like the one he designed for the front of his building); and drapery finials. “I need to get into other creative venues to keep me motivated. You can’t keep doing the same things.”

—Stacey Freed



L to R: Meg Schucker, Tom Horn, Norma Goldman, Lori Blaakman, Arthur Vitoch, Sue Seipel, AnneMarie Weissend, Leslie Cornell-Cordaro, Patty Seeborg. Missing from photo: Mary Crowe, Karli Stahl

