

Design 2002

He's Got the Patio Covered

For two decades at Brown Jordan, Richard Frinier injected outdoor furnishings with sex appeal and excitement

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Richard Frinier sips iced tea in his Long Beach garden, scanning an article about fashion designer Ralph Lauren's 35 years at the top. "Can you believe it? He was the first to cross over into home furnishings, and he's still at it," Frinier marvels. "What an amazing success!"

It takes one to know one.

For the last two decades, Frinier has been the driving force behind Brown Jordan, the El Monte-based outdoor-furniture manufacturer whose innovative, elegant, well-constructed chairs, tables, chaises, benches and umbrellas have made it the best-known name in the luxury market.

From the minimalist profile of his Quantum chair to the more ornate scrollwork of his Florentine chaise, Frinier has proved himself a master of both contemporary and traditional styles. And whether they are fabricated in aluminum, teak or woven resin cord, his designs have timeless appeal, many of them as suitable indoors as out.

Earlier this month, after producing 60 furniture collections for Brown Jordan, the 56-year-old designer retired as chief creative officer. Frinier intends to keep his hand in the home-furnishings business but doesn't yet know what he'll do next. Whatever his second act, he has altered the outdoor field forever.

"Outdoor furniture was pretty dowdy until Richard goosed it and brought in sex appeal and excitement," says Marian McEvoy, editor in chief of *House Beautiful*. "He did it by not copying the same old things ... he came up with original forms and took the latest materials to a level that was really chic."

A little more than a half-century ago, outdoor furniture as we know it didn't exist. Sure, there were cast-iron garden seats, wicker settees and Adirondack chairs, but they rusted, faded, cracked and otherwise fell to pieces in the rain and sun. Only after World War II, when new materials such as aluminum and vinyl became readily available, did things begin to change.

In 1945, Robert Brown and Hubert Jordan teamed up in Pasadena to manufacture wrought-iron breakfast sets. Three years later, at the request of a Honolulu hotel, Brown Jordan started making tubular-aluminum chairs with vinyl-lace seats that could be left exposed to the elements. The Leisure collection was an instant hit--and Brown Jordan and the patio industry never looked back.

Over the years, the company helped pioneer emerging technologies, most notably, powder coating, in which electrostatically charged particles of pigment are sprayed on and then fused to metal. The firm also led the way with the latest in fabrics (solution-dyed acrylics and vinyl-coated polyester instead of rawhide and cotton), finishes (antiqued and textured effects instead of smooth surfaces) and colors (pastels, metallics and tints instead of plain white, blue or dark green).

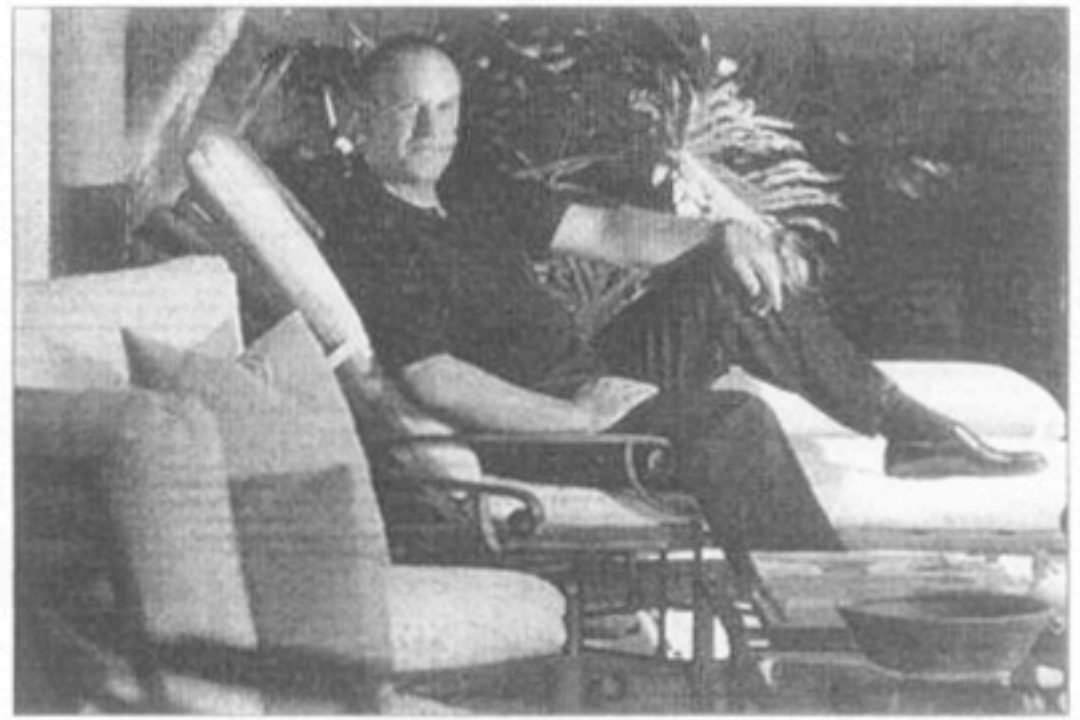
Today, thanks to the popularity of "outdoor rooms" that extend a house's usable space and multiply the opportunities for entertaining, patio-furniture sales account for 10% of the \$23-billion residential-furniture business. And thanks to Frinier, Brown Jordan has captured the imagination of the high-end consumer.

Retail prices for Brown Jordan furniture range from \$400 for an armchair to about \$3,000 for chaises and sofas. Costs vary, depending on materials and labor, with machine-extruded aluminum being the least expensive, stainless steel being the most expensive and hand-woven resin-cord and teak falling in between.

"We're all stuck with the same materials and technologies, but those who can come up with something fresh have the edge," says Richard Schultz, the former Knoll designer who created the now-iconic 1966 collection, a streamlined study in white mesh stretched across white aluminum. "I'm very encouraged when I look around and see something I'd be envious of. Richard's stuff falls into that category."

Ironically, Frinier, a mild-mannered native Angeleno, didn't set out to design furniture at all. "I grew up surfing and loved the water," says the onetime lifeguard who was born in South-Central L.A. and raised in Downey. In college, he studied fine arts at Cal State Long Beach, earning a master's degree in crafts in 1976. "My thesis was about lighting," he recalls. "I was fascinated by light as a material and, gradually, I started translating sculptural forms into functional lamps."

Then Frinier landed a part-time job teaching wood-furniture design at Cerritos College, and, later, a friend who happened to own a local furniture factory invited him to design bedroom pieces. Along the way, he bought a tiny 1922 flat-roofed stucco house in Long Beach that he has since remodeled and furnished with Gustav Stickley reproductions and his own Mesa collection. He continues to live there with his wife, Catherine, a writer in public/media relations.



ANACLETO RAPPING / Los Angeles Times

Frinier, who has produced 60 collections, recently announced his retirement.

In 1981, Frinier went to work for Brown Jordan. Designer emeritus Hall Bradley, known for his skill with rattan and metal, returned to mentor the new hire and pass the Brown Jordan baton. Says Frinier: "He taught me to stay true to the brand but to challenge the status quo, to carry the torch but show leadership."

As a link between the company's past and its future, Frinier introduced his first line, Quantum, in 1982. Influenced by Schultz's 1966 collection for Knoll, Frinier designed the armchair (\$415) as one sleek frame of flat extruded-aluminum tubing but with three seat options--straps, mesh or cushions. Quantum went on to become a contemporary classic and, like several of his older designs, the 13-piece collection remains in the company catalog.

"Hopefully," Frinier says, "it will find its way into a museum someday."

Early on, Frinier's interest in photography prompted him to take charge of Brown Jordan's advertising and marketing campaigns. Working with graphic designers like Jane Kobayashi of 5D Studio in Malibu, he not only designed the furniture but shaped the way it was promoted to the public. The result was beautiful locations and slick brochures.

"Richard allowed us to reinvent the Brown Jordan look every year with each new line instead of sticking with the brand identity," Kobayashi says. "He was very good at pushing people further." Frinier had a keen sense of timing as well. In 1986, when everyone else was churning out contemporary pieces, he broke from the pack with the wrought-iron Florentine and Venetian collections. They marked a return to the use of a material Brown Jordan had abandoned in the 1950s.

Rampant construction of Mediterranean-style housing across the Southland sent Frinier searching for inspiration in the details of historic European buildings. "I knew people were going to need to furnish all those places," he says, "and it would be good for me to design something to complement that architecture." Frinier, who furnished his own patio with Venetian, later phased out the wrought iron and offered both designs in aluminum with textured and antiqued finishes to simulate Old World ironwork.

In other cases, Frinier adapted his designs to available production facilities, as he did with the Mission line in 1989. To capitalize on an Indonesian factory already making ready-to-assemble indoor furniture for Europe, he conceived a line of outdoor furniture that could be built of local teak and shipped back to America for assembly here.

By the early 1990s, Frinier was experimenting with a new weather-resistant extruded-resin cord that could be handled like wicker. He first saw the material, now known as Hularo, at a trade show in Europe, but it was woven on a less-durable rattan frame. Frinier improved on the concept by making an aluminum frame, then wrapped it in the cord in three different ways to produce three distinct lines of woven furniture. One of them, Eastlake, is still sold today.

Last year, Frinier ventured out in yet another new direction--stainless steel. An homage to the mid-20th century aesthetic of architects like Mies van der Rohe and Eileen Gray, the Vu and Nxt collections gave him a chance to work with a luxe material that hadn't been applied to outdoor furniture. Bold as they are, however, these lines--particularly the Nxt armchair (\$1,670)--remain consistent with the Brown Jordan look.

"Richard's designs were always leading-edge and trendsetting. Without a doubt, he won more Design Excellence Awards than any other single designer," says Joseph P. Logan, executive director of the Summer & Casual Furniture Manufacturers Assn., which hands out the equivalent of the Oscars for the outdoor-furniture trade.

Even today, Frinier insists there are still frontiers to be explored. Textured fabrics such as sateens and chenilles are one area. Special-effect paints that, like pearlescent automotive paints, change color depending on the light are another.

But he'll have to be content with Brown Jordan's next lineup. Due out in spring 2003, it's his last and most prolific--six collections in all. Right now, Frinier, a workaholic once noted for working weekends and holidays, has slowed down to consider life after Brown Jordan.

"Who knows?" he says. "Thirty years later, maybe I'll design that line of lighting after all."