

# All that Glitters is Not Gold

*Acrylic furniture makes a modern mark on the Valley*





by **Christine Lewis**  
photos by **Lara Woolfson**

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With an enticingly bright and glossy finish, there is a growing trend toward the use of clear acrylic in home furnishings and accessories. Acrylic furniture makes a bold artistic statement without creating visual clutter. And when natural light falls upon the transparent furniture, acrylic products are visually effervescent: the ultimate eye candy.

The current design wave can be traced to the 2002 introduction of the Ghost Chair, a staid Louis XV chair rendered in clear acrylic by avant-garde designer Philippe Starck. Today, Victoria's Secret boasts acrylic display easels. MTV's "Real World" features an acrylic park bench in the telephone room. Yet with all of this Hollywood glitz and glamour, you might be surprised to learn that a longtime maker of acrylic furniture has roots right here in the Merrimack Valley.

Akko, a company once located in Lawrence's Pacific Mills, was the brainchild of former Malden Mills textile chemist Daniel Frishman, who became intrigued after watching an artist work with acrylic. In 1974, Frishman began marketing acrylic tabletop pieces. He had enough demand to warrant

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Above: A model apartment at Washington Mills in Lawrence boasts the perfect backdrop for this acrylic coffee table, which fits right in to the modern aesthetic. Left: Dorean McFarland, a resident of Andover, purchased several pieces of acrylic furniture to bring just the right look to her elegant home. Below: A "bamboo" chair features a fun zebra print cushion, bringing a touch of flirtation to an otherwise standard acrylic piece.



opening a small factory in Andover's Dundee Park. The company moved to Lawrence when the product line expanded and evolved to include larger pieces of furniture.

Fellow Lawrencian Richard Messina joined the company in 1979, taking over from the Frishman family as President and CEO in 1991. He remembers this as the boom days at Akko: "We were one of largest producers of acrylic furniture in the country, with annual sales over \$2 million," he says. "Our product line grew in response to demand – we listened closely to what our customers were asking for, and responded accordingly." It worked. Celebrities and designers alike delighted in the Akko product line. Yoko Ono and John Lennon had matching typing tables; even Zsa Zsa Gabor owned Akko pieces. The venerable Tiffany & Company, aware of how well acrylic complements jewels, was a longtime customer, buying everything from trays to sets of chairs for their stores' displays.

The recession of the early 1990s, high material costs and changing tastes contributed to Akko's closing in 1995. Messina pursued other professional interests, eventually working in management at



An acrylic nightstand gives the illusion of a larger space in a studio apartment, set off by modern yet modest items of décor.

an acrylic fabricator in Dorchester. In 2003, he ventured to reintroduce selected original acrylic furnishings along with some new designs. By selling online directly to clients, his new company, Acrylic Décor, has been able to offer acrylic furniture at competitive prices. Richard's wife, Catherine, handles the sales and is a natural for the furniture business. She is the daughter of Michael Ansaldi, the legendary Lawrence furniture refinisher. Catherine takes whatever time is necessary to make sure the customer knows what they're getting, and educates them on how take care of their pieces. Her primary word of advice? "Never use glass cleaner on acrylic!"

Doreane McFarland, owner of Elite Personal Training in Andover, is a perfect example of how a design-oriented product can be sold directly to consumers over the Internet. McFarland had

admired the transparent furniture featured in home décor magazines, but soon became frustrated in her efforts to find pieces at local retailers. An Internet search under "acrylic furniture" led her to Acrylic Décor's New Hampshire sales office. There, she worked with Catherine Messina to design custom pieces to her exact specifications. "It was very important to me that I work with someone local,"

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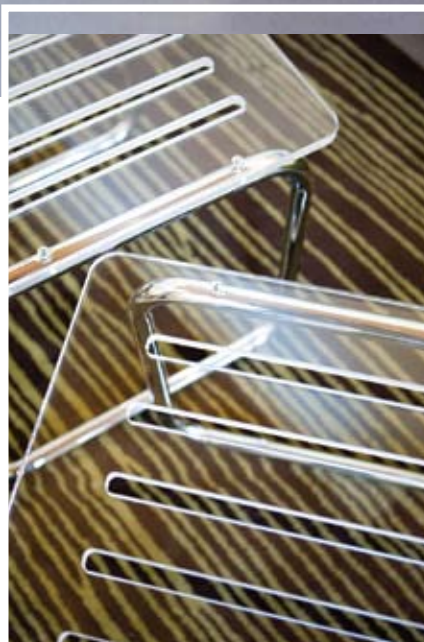
says McFarland. “My daughter was getting married, and we had just moved into a new house, and we needed the right pieces in a hurry.”

Many terms are used to describe the material from which these transparent furnishings are made, making it seem more mysterious than it is. Lucite, Plexiglas, Acrylite, Optix: these are simply different manufacturers’ brand names for the same product. Initially used industrially as a replacement for glass, acrylic started showing up in the home during the 1960s as part of that era’s fascination with a space age aesthetic. Continuing through much of the 1970s, acrylic expanded throughout the design scene, being used as either a minor accent – drawer pulls, handles, trays, frames – or even being fabricated into major pieces of furniture. Sunny, warm climates such as Florida, Texas and California have remained strongholds of acrylic design. Local interior designer Jerry Piccirillo remembers supplying clients with acrylic from Akko when the company was active in Lawrence. “Acrylic is a very hot trend right now,” he says. Although New England has been slow to embrace the look, he expects to see clients adding the brightness of acrylic to their homes in the near future.

Acrylic Décor has continued the tradition that Akko began, supplying transparent, high gloss products to an eclectic group of devoted enthusiasts. As otherworldly as Acrylic Décor’s designs might be, it is comforting to know that they are only a phone call away for all of us.

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Acrylic Décor may be reached at (877) 686-7201. View their designs online at [www.acrylicdecor.com](http://www.acrylicdecor.com).



Top: The Washington Mills model apartment in Lawrence is enhanced by these striking dining room chairs. Above: A pair of transparent end tables showcase the artwork in McFarland’s home. Left: The clarity of a set of acrylic chairs draws the eye down and through the furniture to the textured rug below.