

The really useful column



Alison Cork finds cheap leather, blinds for tricky windows and someone to do your fiddly jobs

Bargain of the week

For those looking for leather skins at a fraction of the normal cost, pay a visit to the market stall of Naeem, who has been selling skins for more than 30 years which are perfect for interiors projects and upholstery. You can get a 9-11sq ft suede pig skin for only £10. Claiming to be the cheapest in the country, Naeem is also knowledgeable about the use of skins, can supply bags of scraps and can recommend a reputable upholsterer. He trades at Spitalfields Market and Portobello Market. Call 07956 069857 for more details.

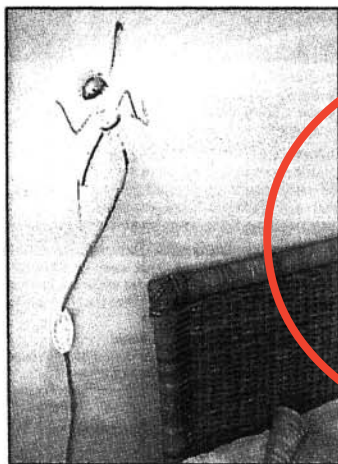
By a thread

I have discovered a textile atelier that specialises in all aspects of fine needlework. Run by Jenny Fitzgerald Bond and her team, it offers hand embroidery, a making-up service, blocking and stretching

of canvas work and can produce wall hangings, rugs, bags, fire screens — in fact, just about any needlework objects. The company also upholsters onto furniture frames. A unique and useful service. Call 020 7708 5011.

Great British design

If you like to support British craftsmen, take a look at www.objects-of-design.com, an internet retailer which offers stylish home accessories and furnishings



Wall light from black+blum, which "climbs" up the wall like Spider Man, £22, from www.objects-of-design.com

from a hand-picked selection of some of the best British craftsmen. From fine Irish linen to a delightful range of crockery, several of the site's suppliers are happy to customise items to cater for individual tastes. And being online, prices are competitive.

Picture this

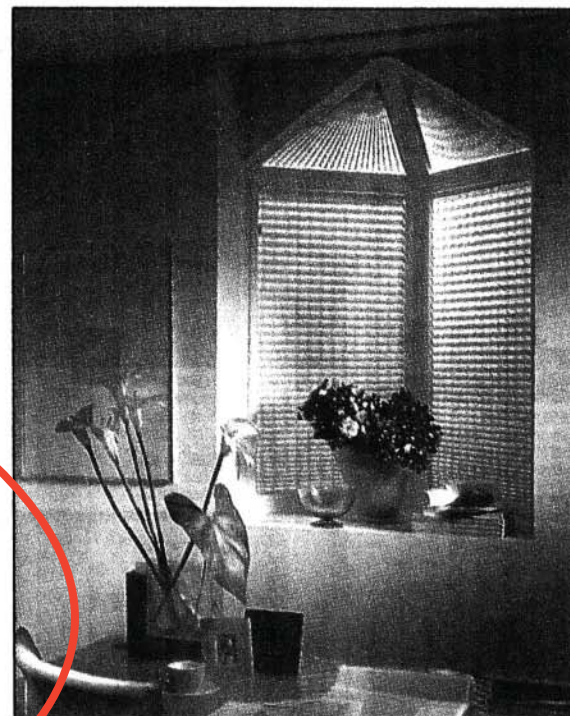
What do you do if you are looking for an elegant classic picture and cannot afford originals? A company based in Somerset is reviving the art of the facsimile, and producing fine-quality limited-edition prints from some of the world's finest art collections. For £215 upwards, you can have a limited-edition print of a Rembrandt, Watteau, Gainsborough (and many other artists) with a watercolour-washed mount and handmade frame. Call Patrick Judge at Atelier on 01458 253545.

Time share

For a cost-effective way of organising your life, take a look at buy:time. Set up by Claire Brynteson, buy:time operates a system whereby you buy assistance as and when you need it; no joining fees or subscriptions. So, whether you want help organising a wedding or having someone come around for an hour to put your CDs into alphabetical order, you pay as you go, at about £30 per hour. Call 020 7498 7934 or see www.buy-time.co.uk.

Crystal clear

I recently came across the factory shop for Royal Brierley Crystal in Dudley, West Midlands, but you can choose merchandise from the website and have it sent to you through the post. Bargains include items from bestselling lines such as Fuchsia, Berkeley and Honeysuckle, at discounts of up to 70 per cent. Some of the items are seconds with minute flaws, but others are perfect. Call 0121 530 5607 or see www.royalbrierley.com.



Get in shape

It can be tricky to solve the problem of curtains for non-standard windows, but Cosiflor has come up with a brilliant alternative in the form of shaped blinds. Suitable for circular, triangular or even trapezoid windows, the new range of blinds comes in 200 fabrics, colours and designs, with the option of automated control. Also a good alternative to curtains for allergy sufferers. For further information, call TF Sampson on 01449 613535.

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Do you know of any people, places or services that should be featured in The Really Useful Column? If so, e-mail me at alison@alisoncork.com with the details and I will investigate

Alison Cork is a consumer journalist and the founder of The London Tradesmen's Directory (0906 780 8888, premium line), a list of recommended and reliable London-based workmen from many trades, including an emergency call-out service. All you pay is the price of the call (about £2). Some mobile and office lines do not permit premium calls.