



**THE RINGER** On a table just like Willie Mosconi's, Philip Taaffe practices the culture of pool.



Photographs by David Corio for The New York Times

**POSSESSED**

## In the Billiard Room, With a Candlestick

By DAVID COLMAN

**Y**OU'RE not supposed to judge a book by its cover. Can you say the same of décor?

Consider the antique pool table in the New York studio of the artist Philip Taaffe. Made in 1920s by the Brunswick-Balke-Collender company in a lavish quasi-Egyptian-Moorish Revival style, the table was then the height of luxury, among the first to have a system to whoosh all the pocketed balls quietly down to a green-felt-lined wooden tray fitted at one end.

One would expect the table to be part of Mr. Taaffe's perfectly articulated bohemian gentleman aesthetic, which has turned his enormous studio on the top floor of a dull garment district building into one of the most spectacular work spaces in the city.

There is a huge main room with 16½-foot ceilings, soaring trefoil-arched windows, a terrace and a half-dozen side rooms, each with dedicated contents: a library for books, an office for papers and personalia, a room for flat files, even a conservatory for his beloved Victorian-style collection of potted palms.

It is practically a Clue game board: you wonder if there is a secret passage to the glamorous Hotel Chelsea apartment where he lives with his wife, Gretchen, and

two young sons. In the billiard room there is even a malevolent candlestick in the shape of a coiled cobra. Mr. Taaffe's seductive abstractions — paintings that mix geometry, non-Western ethnic motifs, organic shapes and a splash of Rorschach — are hung there, too, and they have never looked better.

But surely the decorative pièce de résistance is that pool table, recalling in this aesthete's lair the most genteelly roguish of pastimes.

Well, it is and it isn't. You need only watch Mr. Taaffe take out a pool cue and set to work clearing the table, and fast, to realize that the man is, as they would say in the old pool halls, a ringer. This fact is borne out by the triad of trophies that he won in 1968 and 1969 as a suburban New Jersey teenager for whom pool was a total obsession.

So a few years ago, he fell in love with another table as soon as a vintage-billiards dealer near Wilkes-Barre, Pa., showed it to him. But his moment of true rapture came upon realizing it was the same table that Willie Mosconi, his childhood hero, was using in the photographs in his 1948 how-to book, "Willie Mosconi on Pocket Billiards."

"I remember all these guys," he said. "I even saw some of them play. For instance, there was Machine Gun Lou Butera, who

could run 150 balls in a half an hour."

"I have a lot of lore," he said as he deftly sank another ball. "There are very few people out there who understand the culture of pool. People think of it as very hedonistic, but once you get to a certain level, it's very highly disciplined in its exactitude and infinitude. The level of vision it takes — the way the edges of the spheres meet and collide at a particular point, and the number of points that exist with any given shot — you have to be much more precise than you do as an artist."

And, he added, "I was a very poor geometry student."

Still, watching Mr. Taaffe pocket the balls, you cannot help but think that his way of making both playing pool and creating art look easy are not dissimilar. As decorative as his own abstractions appear at a glance — a new show is up at the Gagolian Gallery on the Upper East Side — they possess a degree of imagination, precision and care only hinted at in each painting's off-hand sense of exotic geometry.

Perhaps it is best not to judge anyone — pool player or artist — by his aesthetic. He may be holding out on you.

