



CENTURION
Magazine

SPRING 2023

On the Life of Objects



A design legend and noted art collector, Jacques Garcia shares his sharp wit and wisdom with Lanie Goodman following a monolithic hotel project

Jacques Garcia in Villa Elena, his magnificently restored former monastery in Sicily; opposite: Maison Proust's literature-themed Proust suite

According to Jacques Garcia, a renowned French architect and interior designer, there's really nothing new under the sun, and he would certainly know. A passionate antique collector with a sweeping encyclopaedic knowledge of France's royal history and a laser eye for priceless

PHOTO BRUNO EHRS

objects, the seventy-five-year-old designer is adamant about all that is avant-garde. “Modernity can only come from the Old World,” he muses. “It can’t come from the new because there’s no modernity in the modern.” Which makes perfect sense, since Garcia’s trademark is the art of reinvention through a gorgeously provocative mix of genres, historical periods and bold, rich fabrics from centuries gone by. His lavish interiors, spread across the globe (Hotel Costes, Paris; La Mamounia, Marrakech; Le Métropole, Monaco; Wynn, Las Vegas; Banyan Tree, Doha) are only part of his creative repertoire, which includes numerous collaborations with prestigious museums, from the Louvre to Versailles.

“In the 1980s, everything was pale grey – with a little touch of taupe,” Garcia says with an amused smile. “I tried to change that in the 1990s by adding colour.”

We’re sitting on a blue velvet banquette in the sumptuous Belle Époque-style bar of Maison Proust, a newly opened 23-room boutique hotel in the Marais, one of Garcia’s latest design projects. Every detail – gilded mirrors, Deco crystal chandeliers and plush upholstered furnishings – conjures a refined fin-de-siècle salon. You’d half expect to spot writer Marcel Proust stroking his moustache, in deep conversation with a marquise at one of the neighbouring tables – which is exactly what Jacques Garcia and owners Yoni Aidan and Sylviane Sanz (Maison Souquet, Maison

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Athénée) had in mind when they dreamed up their third hotel. The idea, Garcia explains, was to pay tribute to one of the greatest authors of the twentieth century by naming each suite of the six-storey townhouse after Proust’s true-life friends – writers, poets, painters, actresses and high-society beauties who inspired his fiction.

“The funny thing about Proust’s social circles in the 1900s is the resemblance with today’s elite world –





Maison Proust's Monet suite; *opposite*: a look inside Château du Champ de Bataille, Garcia's extraordinary estate in Normandy

they're exactly the same, the nice and the nasty," Garcia chuckles. His eyes twinkle with mischief behind his horn-rimmed glasses. He knows the score, since many of his clients are the wealthiest and most powerful people on the planet.

For Maison Proust, the designer spent the past three and a half years choosing the wallpaper, the colour scheme and fabrics that correspond to the distinctive personality of each of its namesakes. Talk about an illustrious gang: Baudelaire, Manet, Monet and aristocrats like the sharp-witted patron of the arts, Princess Mathilde. And as if that weren't enough, Garcia came up with his own objet d'art: a parchment-like lampshade that resembles an open leatherbound book, each with handwritten excerpts of *Swann's Way*. "I chose different quotes for each room," Garcia beams.

For the Renoir suite, the shimmering orange Pierre Frey fabric was used "on the wrong side" to evoke Impressionism. Up on the sixth floor, Proust's executive suites are a warm brown, "the colour of polished wood of the 1900s," Garcia says.

A complex challenge, yes, but the designer says he also feels a personal connection with Proust's circle of glitterati.

For example, the junior suite, named after "la grande dame" of the century, French writer Colette, is

particularly dear to him. "I met Colette with my father when I was six years old and she was 81, a year before her death. She looked at me and said: "That little boy is going to do something, he's not like the others."

Opulent palm-tree fabric was de rigueur when it came to Countess Greffulhe, who inspired Proust's fictional Duchess of Guermantes. "She was the most beautiful, elegant woman of her time, an atomic bomb! In my mother's bedroom, there was a portrait of the countess in a yellow dress, so I 'lived' with the her throughout my childhood."

Garcia's father, Jacques ("a real bibliophile"), also introduced him to Jean Cocteau; his suite even showcases an original drawing by the poet/artist. And then there's his childhood infatuation with the notorious 1900s dandy Robert de Montesquiou, thanks to his father's clay statue of Montesquiou dressed in a tuxedo. "The guy was so beautiful – a male Claudia Schiffer!" As for the much-revered actress Sarah Bernhardt, Garcia owns pieces of her Egyptian-style furniture, spotted by chance at an antique dealer.

Which brings us to the subject of Jacques Garcia's upcoming auction at Sotheby's in Paris on 16 May, where the designer will be celebrating his 75th birthday by parting with 75 treasures from his monumental royal collection. Why? "Thirty years

ago, I decided to sacrifice my life for the image of France,” Garcia states dramatically (he is sporting his Légion d’Honneur medal, pinned to his jacket, as if to prove it). He describes what has become an all-consuming project – the massive restoration of his 17th-century Château du Champ de Bataille in Normandy, acquired in 1992, which includes the largest and best-tended private 40ha park in France, filled with greenhouses, an *orangerie* and a jaw-dropping red-stone Indian mini-palace, among other architectural follies.

Having no direct heir, Garcia explains that the goal of the auction is to raise enough funds to create a foundation that will preserve the upkeep and durability of the castle and its grounds. One of the most outstanding pieces for sale is a violet Sèvres porcelain vase from 1797, estimated somewhere between 800,000 and 1.2 million euros. There’s also a long list of ornate masterpiece furniture that belonged to kings, barons and dukes.

“I also chose smaller things – like six beautiful chairs that Louis XV had in his room, where he’d pass countless hours with his mistress, Madame du Barry. And a mahogany tray that belonged to Marie Antoinette, [which] she kept under the bed to collect her love letters. Some American or Taiwanese woman will be very happy to have it.”

“That’s the life of objects,” Garcia shrugs. “No regrets.” And you’re inclined to believe him.



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