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PIERRE YOVANOVITCH

Meet the designer whose home is his castle

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PIERRE
YOVANO—
VITCH:

A CHÂTEAU
FIT FOR
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Pierre Yovanovitch's ultimate design showroom is also his home of more than a decade. *Annick Weber* meets the man with the keys to the castle. Photography by *Romain Laprade*



Although he spent years renovating every corner of the sprawling Château de Fabrègues, Pierre Yovanovitch's favorite thing about his country house is not actually its interior. When at home in the South of France, the designer likes to spend most of his time outdoors. More days than not, he starts his mornings taking his three sheepdogs for a walk around the grounds, past the small, free-standing chapel and through the Louis Benech-designed yew labyrinth. He will pop out again later to feed the chickens or do bits of gardening. "I'm mostly a nervous person, but in my garden I'm calm," he says, speaking over a video call from his home office, which overlooks the estate. "It's where I get to disconnect and be a dreamer."

With his studio working on 40 active projects across Europe and the US, Yovanovitch is a man in need of relaxation. When we speak, the 55-year-old is fresh off the Eurostar train from London, where his firm is currently renovating a townhouse. For someone who regularly commutes between his headquarters in Paris, New York (where he also has offices) and the house in Provence, he's looking surprisingly fresh-faced, wearing chunky glasses that recall

a 1970s Yves Saint Laurent. Since establishing his studio in 2001, Yovanovitch has completed countless private residences, as well as interiors for hotels, restaurants, art galleries, offices and boutiques for the likes of Michelin-starred chef Hélène Darroze, billionaire businessman François-Henri Pinault and footwear designer Christian Louboutin. His resolutely contemporary style—blending a purist sensibility, site-specific art, and bespoke and vintage furniture—has made him a key player in a new French design aesthetic, defined not by ornate adornment, but by understated luxury.

Yovanovitch found his way to design via high-end fashion. After graduating from business school, he started his career in the early 1990s working with Pierre Cardin on menswear. "They were very formative years," he says. "Cardin was a master of volume and proportion. He told stories through his clothing." Though he was given more and more design responsibility during his eight years at the company, Yovanovitch realized that he belonged to a different world. "The creative process made me remember how I was constantly drawing apartment layouts in my imagination as a child," he says, a statement which







Left: Sideboard, table and chairs by Christen Emanuel Kjær Monberg, 1923; *Frau vor goldenhem Hintergrund* artwork by Stephan Balkenhol, 2009; ceiling light by Paavo Tynell, circa 1948; lamp by Atelier Stiffel, circa 1950; ceramics by Robert Picault, circa 1960; candelabrum by Tommi Parzinger, circa 1940.

conjugates the image of Yovanovitch sketching blueprints in the sandbox where others played. “I loved working closely with Cardin, but in the end, my passion was elsewhere. His approach is still alive in my work today though: He greatly influenced the way I think about symmetry and silhouette. You can make someone look taller or shorter depending on the cut, color and shape of a dress. I think you can do the same with a space.” While he found that the similarities between the two disciplines were many, Yovanovitch had to get his head around a few changes. “Fashion gives you more flexibility to create,” he explains. “A dress is worn for one or two years, but a home should last a long time.”

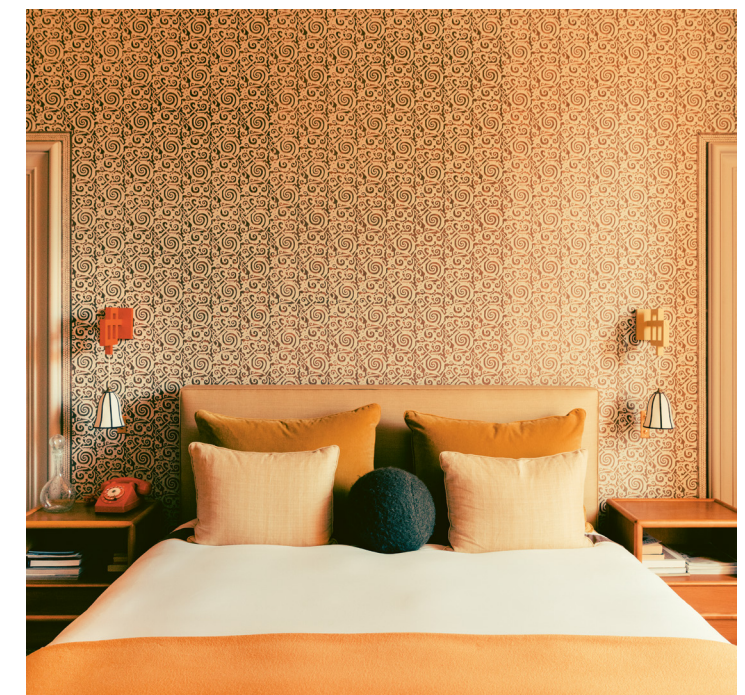
In the 20 years since founding his interior architecture practice, Yovanovitch has never fully let go of his background in couture. He has become celebrated for applying the same tailor-made approach to interiors that a fashion designer brings to dressmaking. Like a couturier drawing on a network of embroiderers, lace makers and pattern-cutters, Yovanovitch relies on the savoir-faire of the dozens of craftspeople his firm regularly collaborates with. “They’ve become something like a family,” he says. “I’ve been working with the same woodworker, ceramicist and glassblower for 15 years. Each one of them is an expert in turning simple materials into long-lasting pieces.” When he was tasked with transforming a ramshackle Douro Valley winery into the chic Quinta da Côrte guesthouse in 2018, Yovanovitch got together a team of local experts to help create a decidedly Portuguese space complete with azulejo tiles, white adobe walls and hand-painted frescoes. “I wanted guests to be able to feel where they are,” he says. It is, of course, a costly and time-consuming way of working; the Yovanovitch method is not designed to scale up.

As much as his work gives center stage to the best of contempo-

rary craftsmanship, there’s a reverence for the past, particularly in the use of vintage 20th-century furniture. Yovanovitch is an avid collector of the Swedish Grace movement, a 1920s art deco offshoot that he came to discover when designing the scenography for an exhibition on one of its lead designers, Axel Einar Hjorth. Almost all of his projects incorporate Scandinavian design pieces, such as Einar Hjorth pine-wood rocking chairs, Paavo Tynell lamps and Gunnar Asplund dining chairs. Even OOPS, Yovanovitch’s debut furniture collection with its teddy bear-eared armchairs, contains subtle nods to the soft, sheepskin-covered loungers designed in the 1930s by Viggo Boesen. “These names are mostly unfamiliar to collectors,” he says of his affinity for lesser-known Scandinavian designers. “As soon as I start a commission, I also start looking for the right furniture at auction houses and antique dealers. Good pieces are hard to come by, so it’s not something that I can leave until the end.” The same goes for the art he chooses for interiors. He favors yet-to-be-discovered

talents such as Claire Tabouret and Wilhelm Sasnal over the Damien Hirsts of contemporary art.

The one project that brings together all of Yovanovitch’s craftspeople, favorite artists and furniture designers is the 8,600-square-foot Château de Fabrégues—his “life project.” When he first came across the Provençal château in a real estate ad in a magazine in 2009, though, buying a country house was the last thing on his mind. Having grown up in nearby Nice, he went to visit it out of professional curiosity. “The structure was completely run down, but I was drawn to the simplicity of its 17th-century architecture,” he explains. “Unlike the grand châteaux of the 18th century, there was very little ornamentation as people were poorer, which allowed me to freely readapt the decor to my liking.” Over the course of the extensive three-year renovations, Yovanovitch and his team of artisans created a sober, at times monastic home. Hints of the past remain throughout, from the original limestone floors to the sculpted ceilings, meticulously restored by Yovanovitch’s go-to



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Yovanovitch's château is home to a collection of art that includes works by both established and upcoming artists, such as Stephen Balkenhol, Georg Baselitz, Claire Tabouret, Jeremy Demester and Valentin Carron.

plasterer, Joël Puisais. "My role is like that of a *chef d'orchestre*, conducting an orchestra of very different, but equally passionate talent," he says.

Despite the pared-back feel of the overall design, the château is studded with eclectic touches. In the living room, pieces from different countries and centuries are put into dialogue with one another: Custom-made linen sofas rub shoulders with a Swedish Grace oak banquette, and a period stucco fireplace complements one of Francesco Clemente's jigsaw-like watercolors. It's an unexpected mix, but it makes the place feel lived-in and real. With every nook and cranny curated down to the smallest detail, was Yovanovitch worried his house would end up looking like a showroom? "*Non, non*, not at all," he says. "It's a happy house with all my favorite things in it, a place that lives and gets messy from time to time. We like to cook and eat, sometimes we dance. It reflects my personality more than anything else."

Château de Fabrègues wouldn't be the home it is without Yovanovitch's contemporary art collection. Inside are pieces by American sculptor Richard Nonas and Franco-Chinese painter Yan Pei-Ming, while the garden is host to an Alicja Kwade installation inspired by the planetary system. The work he's perhaps fondest of is a Claire Tabouret fresco, which covers the entire château chapel and took a month to complete. "When you walk inside the chapel, you have this mural with 85 children looking directly at you, it's very powerful," he says.

What makes Château de Fabrègues different from Yovanovitch's other projects is that it will

never be fully completed. Whereas client commissions are typically wrapped up the moment keys are handed over, designing his own home is an ongoing process. With no timelines or cut-off dates, he says it's impossible to draw a line under the vast project—particularly when you're a perfectionist. "I want to change things all the time, repaint a room or move furniture around," he explains. "I have sleepless nights where I think about the space, the light and where a particular chair should sit. I already had that as a teenager: I wouldn't be able to sleep unless the furniture around me in my bedroom was arranged right. I've always been obsessed with beauty surrounding me." As an autodidact with a keen interest in the arts but no formal design education, he follows his intuition rather than movements or trends. "I think I'm freer to do what I want than most qualified designers," he says. He believes that he owes much of his style to this greater sense of freedom. Steering away from flashy pretensions, Yovanovitch's specialty lies in crafting harmonious volumes smoothed by soft lines and natural materials.

If there's one thing that has changed in his practice over the years, it's the use of color. He has moved on from the white minimalism of his early days. At Château de Fabrègues, the largely neutral palette is punctuated with playful accents of yellow, petrol blue and brown to underline the architectural scale. True to his made-to-measure approach, he creates custom tints for each project, never buying ready-mixed paint. "I'm a child of the South after all," he says with a smile. "We like light, color and fun. I've come



to realize that adding pops of color helps to make the architecture more interesting, rather than distracting from it." In his 2019 redesign of the Villa Noailles gift shop, it seems as though he has reconnected with his Southern French roots more than ever before. Located on the Côte d'Azur in a Robert Mallet-Stevens-designed building, the art center's boutique now features peachy orange ceilings and a mix of sunshine yellow, turquoise and terra-cotta red walls, purposefully clashing with splashes of electric blue in stark contrast to the white cubist exterior.

Be it in the form of bold color accents or eclectic furniture pairings, moments of drama have become more frequent in Yovanovitch's recent work. His tendency to at times dramatize interiors is a nod to his passion for opera and set design, which he cites as major inspirations. "Opera sets are at their most powerful when they reflect the soul of the work, its music and characters," he explains. "I want to do the same in my oeuvre. With each space, I want to tell a new story—a story that fits my client and the locale."

Fittingly, Yovanovitch has recently landed a commission to design the set for a production of Verdi's 1851 opera *Rigoletto* in Basel: "It's a dream come true," he says. "I've always been a firm believer that if you really want something, then one day you'll get it." As one would expect, Yovanovitch is planning on a design that respects the soul of the oeuvre, while making it relevant for 21st-century audiences. In this way, it's not unlike what he did at Château de Fabrègues: combining the ancient and the modern to craft a work of timeless beauty.

