

THE WORLD OF INTERIORS

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MUSTIQUE AND ROMANCE

A newly decorated and extended house on the glitzy and glamorous island of Mustique – famous for its outré occupants and outrageous parties – pays tribute to its classic design history

By David Lipton Photography by Kate Martin



Pagodas, pergolas and pavilions pretty much set the scene: on Mustique, all seems sweetness and light. But where did these breezy buildings – part Palladian, part Oriental – come from? How, indeed, did this island itself, with its light-footed citizenry of jet-set glitterati, emerge? Like Venus surfacing sensuously and fully formed out of a scallop shell, it was more of an apparition than an arduous birth. Appropriate, perhaps, given the island's reputation for glamorous glitz and high-flying hedonism; here reside those on whom the goddess of beauty and prosperity has smiled – not so much the world's one percent as its 0.1 per cent. The Zephyr to Mustique's Venus was famously the Hon. Colin Tennant, later third Baron Glenconner. Having bought the island for £45,000 in 1958, he blew away the mosquitos that gave the island its name and instituted a prelapsarian pleasure dome. It really was an alchemical creation, this one man's bewitching work: before he bought it, the island had little drinking water and less electricity. Not for nothing did *Vanity Fair* in 1986 dub him the 'magus of Mustique, the Prospero of [...] paradise'.



The main living room with views through to the dining room: the rattan armchairs are Bonacina; the fabrics on the cushions are from Paolo Moschino.



The façade facing the sea has nine windows, all of which remain open throughout the day to help the house breathe in Mustique's humid climate

If Lord Glenconner played Prospero, the island's Ariel must be the artist and set designer Oliver Messel. Like Mustique's owner, he was a facilitator to minor royaltyand, raising an aesthetically acute antenna to the wind, he gave visual shape to Glenconner's ambitions. When Messel's nephew, Anthony Armstrong-Jones, married Princess Margaret in 1960 and Glenconner gifted them a cool ten acres of the island (which only measures three by one and a half miles in total), it was on Messel that the new Earl and Countess of Snowdon called to design their holiday home. That he was a theatre designer was appropriate, for theatre was what was required. Thus, at their villa Les Jolies Eaux, he devised the architectural type that would become the Mustique classic: enter through a grand courtyard along an airy entrance hall to the heart of the home, a gleaming pool flanked by perfumed pavilions – all made up in the shimmering coral stone local to Saint Vincent and the Grenadines. This was to be a stage perfectly set for outrageous entertaining, and so open and airy as to make the privacy of a secret and secluded island feel truly exceptional.



The dining room highlights the client's love of all things chinoiserie; they are set off by pale blue walls that echo the turquoise ocean. The rattan chairs, a hallmark of Mustique's interiors, are by Paolo Moschino



Moschino and Vergeylen echoed the arched openings of the gallery with parallel mirrors, 'extending' the size of the room



The elaborate plaster mouldings are inspired by features of Oliver Messel's interiors that became synonymous with the island

Given that the grand old Countess of Snowdon, by all accounts the life and soul of the island, last set foot there in 1999, it is surprising that Mustique continues to draw to its shores the great and the good from the pool of 0.1 per centers. But its unparalleled privacy and tranquillity is undeniable and their ranks have now been swelled by a young couple – the husband described as an avant-garde fashion tycoon – and their children. Of course, a panoply of coral-stone pavilions was needed (as essential for entry to the island's citizenship as a passport for lesser mortals); swiftly, a mere ten metres from the sea, one was found. And in lieu of Messel himself, this fashion tycoon called on the next closest thing – the decorators Paolo Moschino and Philip Vergeylen, who had previously helped finish his central London apartment. Yet the 'urban, Oscar Wilde chinoiserie feeling' of their city home was not going to cut it on these sandy beaches; a place into which a 70s celebutante or offbeat aristo could happily wander after an afternoon spent at Basil's Bar would be much more like it.



Bedrooms such as this one exemplify the mix of pattern, furniture and objects that Vergeylen says he hopes give the place personality



Moschino and Vergeylen have long worked with Italian rehab community San Patignano to produce some of their wallpapers

‘We want classic, we want classic,’ the client kept repeating, much to the designers’ surprise. After all, in life he is a forward-looking fashionista. But classic it was to be, and all the elements of the classic Mustique interior are accounted for: rattan, check; squashed arches on doric columns, check; beachy beige, check; splashes of colour, check. You get the idea as soon as you walk up to the entrance, through manicured box hedges lined with conch shells surrounded by a planted profusion of palm trees. Indeed, says Vergeylen, the ambition throughout the house was to create an interior that looked like it had always existed. Thus, a Japanese commode jostles with a 19th-century Italian mirror and one of the beds once belonged to Oscar de la Renta, while the rattan chairs à la Brighton Pavilion are antiques. The greatest coup was employing traditional coral stone throughout the structural elements of the project. It takes on an appealingly weathered patina almost instantly – unlike limestone, ‘which takes two hundred years to look aged’, explains Vergeylen. He and Moschino used it to build the extension pavilions, which transformed the property from a three- into a six-bedroom house, as well as for the pergola, which unites the architectural units.



The children's bedroom, with a playful rattan turtle, a tribute to the wildlife of the island



A bamboo bed that once belonged to the couturier Oscar de la Renta in one of the guest bedrooms

Like the island itself, this owner's idyll was not established without impatience. In the 50s, Mustique was nothing but a glorified island farm; by the 60s, the beau monde were in; by the 70s, the secret was out: the island was ordained the ultimate A-list escape. 'He wanted it tomorrow,' says Vergeylen of his client. With the help of a few pulled strings – including convincing the Italian rattan maestros Bonacina to slash their standard eight-month lead time to just four weeks – the project was fast underway. What usually takes at least four years to complete was finished in two. A local architect was employed to help with the contractors, while the decorators drew on experience working in the Dominican Republic to get furniture and fittings to the island (Mustique still has little more than a couple of shops; even Princess Margaret had to import her favourite booze in her bags). A man after Margaret's own heart, the client has had his cupboards well stocked – 'I've never seen so many brands of gin,' Vergeylen exclaims – so one may anticipate jovial parties. Evidently, the house has proved itself an appropriate apparition on Mustique, raised, like the island itself, fully formed – as if out of one of the shells that line its garden paths.



The pergola defines the outdoor space and connects the separate pavilions with the main house. Surrounding it are the conch-shell-lined box hedges, with views towards the palms that encircle the property.