

INTERIOR DESIGN

Ernest de la Torre

THE SUN KING

THE IBM EXEC TURNED
DESIGNER SHOWS OFF
HIS FLAIR FOR COLOR AND
HIS LOVE OF HISTORY IN A
FRENCH DECO-INSPIRED
VILLA IN PALM BEACH



De la Torre, this page, has a flair for showstoppers, such as the verre églomisé panels he created, which lead to the master bedroom. ■ In that room, opposite page, one of a pair of studded chests by De la Torre Design—covered in Criolo horsehair, from John Rosselli & Associates—is topped with antique Meissen urns acquired at Sotheby's.

EVEN WARHOL ROYALS SEEM TO BOW TO THE POWER OF A '20



A

ask designer Ernest de la Torre what event in human history he'd give an arm to have witnessed and he'll probably choose the 1925 International Exhibition of Decorative Arts in Paris, when another French revolution—one involving furniture and architecture—added the term Art Deco to the style lexicon. De la Torre is a design historian who relishes the layers of influence legible in his beloved Verner Panton chandeliers or in the zebra-stripe console he created, inspired

by the work of Irish designer Eileen Gray. "Things should be jarring enough to be fresh," de la Torre says of his zest for interiors that juxtapose seemingly disparate but aesthetically and historically kindred elements. It's what artists at the 1925 Paris Expo would have said about their work, too.

That "jarring enough" freshness, rooted in a modernist idiom, is what de la Torre brought to the Palm Beach vacation home of an East Coast family looking to deformalize their surroundings. On visiting the house, both de la Torre and the

CHANDELIER AND THE DE LA TORRE ROUNDABOUT IN THE ENTRY



clients remarked on its *Great Gatsby* vibe: 1920s bones; expansive site near the water. Lucky for de la Torre, who adores color, “the clients react poorly to beige” and had begun to collect modern art in all its pigment-saturated glory. Poring over period illustrations of Art Deco interiors, the designer was pleased to see that the decorators had painted rooms bright greens, blues, and pinks. “We think of Art Deco interiors as being muted only because all the photos and movies are black and white,” he says. Color there would be. ▷

Andy Warhol silk screens of Queen Margrethe II of Denmark, left, and Queen Elizabeth II add a dash of pop art to the dramatic reception space. A de la Torre roundabout sits under a ca. 1925 chandelier from the Waldorf-Astoria ballroom. A Damien Hirst spin-art piece hangs at right. At the rear, opposite page, are twin bergères by French Deco master Paul Follot, bought at Two Zero C Applied Art, London, and covered in Bright White kidskin from Libra Leather, NYC.



De la Torre grew up near Chicago, in a landscape devoid of much color most of the year, but where the genius of buildings by David Adler and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe marked him. He has an unusual CV: while working as an account executive for IBM, he bought, renovated, and sold houses, and discovered that he liked the designing part best. He learned from Peter Marino ("I studied things that usually go straight to museums"), from David Collins ("He's a color master and can make anything look sexy"), and at Polo Ralph Lauren (de la Torre's custom furniture caught their eye). By the time he opened his firm, De la Torre Design Studio, in Manhattan, spurred by the "wake-up call" of 9/11, he had designed interiors for Rothschilds, an Armani shop, and a library for Ian Schrager's Morgans Hotel, among many projects.

De la Torre, who has a down-to-earth ease and a sly sense of humor, envisioned the Palm Beach house as a giant cabana where the clients could entertain elegantly but also relax. For the main room, he created Jean-Michel Frank-like seating pieces, upholstered in a blue-and-white scheme modeled on Billy Baldwin's iconic decor for the Villa Fiorentina in Cap Ferrat. These meld perfectly with the beachy light that fills the house and with art such as an Eric Freeman seascape and one of Yves Klein's signature lapis Plexiglas low tables. A Felix Gonzalez-Torres work in gray softens the bright-blueness, as do lush Christopher Hyland curtains shot through with silver thread. ▷

Serenity and simplicity are the keynotes of the living room, this page, which features de la Torre's Jean-Michel Frank-inspired sofa and chairs, curtains in Christopher Hyland's Constantino Millennium satin in chartreuse, silver, and blue, and palm grass carpeting by Stark. Painting by Eric Freeman. ■ In the dining room, opposite page, a de la Torre cast-glass table with reverse gold leaf stands beneath another Waldorf chandelier. Russian neoclassical chairs are covered in Old World Weavers' Medius horsehair in Rouge-Beige; the curtains are made of Christopher Hyland's Beryll in red, orange, and gold.



Everything's coming up roses in the master bedroom, this page, where Donald Baechler's *His Miraculous Rescue* (2001) hangs above a bed (with a custom headboard made by Anthony Lawrence-Belfair, NYC) dressed in chintz. ■ In the kitchen, opposite page, a bright and feminine Murano glass chandelier, ca. 1950, is played off curtains in Osborne & Little's *Scaramouche*. A KWC faucet from Simon's Hardware, NYC, is attached to Kohler's *Staccato* kitchen sink. See Shopping, last pages.

Inspiration from the 1925 Paris Expo is evident in de la Torre designs for the house: a Ruhlmann-esque reverse painted mirror; a reverse-gold-leafed, molded-glass dining table edged in brass. The table is surrounded by Russian neoclassical chairs with carved medallions that echo the splashy Damien Hirst painting hanging adjacent. Pairing Russian antiques and spin art might be a hard sell, but educating clients is part of the fun, says de la Torre: "It's showing how to play with shape and scale, that things have a relationship that's not simply historical and evolves over time."

In another clever conjoining, Andy Warhol's European royals survey the marble entry hall, and surely would approve the circa 1920 chandeliers from the Waldorf-Astoria ballroom, Paul Follot slipper chairs swathed in white kid, and a regal red damask roundabout seat of de la Torre's design. De la Torre's subtle sense of humor is manifest in other, not so subtle objects. In the master bedroom, he punched up a traditional cabbage rose fabric (an old favorite of the clients') with an in-your-face Donald Baechler painting of a rose and with two red horsehair night tables bejeweled with upholstery tacks. "It was a way to take something traditional and make it modern," he says. Indeed, for all his appreciation of things historical, de la Torre insists familiarity breeds blandness: "I like things to be unique and for clients to have something really their own." The greats of 1925 would be proud. [delatorredesign.com] —MARY TALBOT

