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FEATURES

The French Affair in Greenwich
Weekend Home for All Seasons

EDITOR'S CHOICE

Into the Garden with Antiques and Tree Peonies



the french affair

Decorator Michael Whaley brings 18th-century Parisian luxury to Greenwich

By Katherine Lagomarsino | Photographs by Jeff McNamara



YOU MIGHT THINK INTERIOR DESIGNER

Michael Whaley, or his client, had just read Choderlos de Laclos's *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*—or perhaps just watched the 1988 movie starring Glenn Close and her heaving bust—when he began this project in Greenwich. Was that the rustling of a damask skirt in the solarium? Did a pair of dainty Louis-style heels just tap through the foyer? Perhaps, because it would be no far stretch of the imagination to envision white-wigged French aristocrats getting into all manner of romantic scandals within the walls of this rather unassuming federal-style home.

If you caught last summer's "Dangerous Liaisons: Fashion and Furniture in the 18th Century" at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, you'd know that a home's décor at that time was not only about pleasing the eye but also about arousing and seducing a potential lover. In this case, the home has become the ultimate seductress bedecked in powder blue, pale pink and soft green trappings.

And who better to fulfill a feminine French fantasy of floral and gilt than Whaley, who cut his teeth at the famous Parish-Hadley firm during the 1980's, a time when luxury reigned. Like this homeowner, he adores layers, antique furniture and those relentless glee-inspiring tidbits that make a home engaging. If love is in the details, then this house was doted on like a new paramour.

"We've been collecting pretty things for

Dressed for Dinner | An 18th-century English mahogany table (PREVIOUS SPREAD) is set with an antique tablecloth from Virginia DiSiasacio, NYC, antique plates, glassware and silver and an elaborate flower arrangement by Greenwich Orchards. An 18th-century Baltic chandelier from David Duncan, NYC, hangs above. Curtain fabric is Lee Jofa trimmed in tassels from Cowtan & Tout.

Pink Sophisticate | The palette in the living room (RIGHT) was built around the Cowtan & Tout cbintz on the sofa. Touches of pink are tempered by glazed pale blue walls. The curtain fabric and fringe are by Clarence House. See Resources.







years," Whaley says. Like the floor-to-ceiling collection of gold-framed 19th-century prints from a book called *Les Fleurs Animees*, which contains page after page of dainty, dancing flower people. His client also has a collection of papier-mâché furniture with mother-of-pearl inlay. "I found every single piece for her," Whaley adds. And if something could not be bought, he had it custom made, like the chiffonier in the master bedroom.

"It is an exact replica of a cabinet made for Marie Antoinette at the Petit Trianon—her most intimate palace," he explains. For the bed, Whaley flew to London to work with a master carver to create a caned Louis XV bed with a curved headboard. The hand-chased gilded hardware in the master bedroom and the solarium was made in Paris, designed from patterns found in 18th-century catalogs. To Whaley, "This hardware is really like jewelry for the house."

If the hardware is the jewelry, the draperies and custom fabrics are the ball gowns. You might even say the house was not so much designed and decorated as it was dressed for court. Whaley hired Naeem Khan, a Manhattan couturier, to find a source in India who would hand embroider burnished silver and gold threads into the skirt of a bedside table. The wall upholstery in the dressing room was made by Sabina Fay Braxton, a Parisian textile designer who supplies fabric to Yves Saint Laurent, Christian Lacroix and Oscar de la Renta. The master bedroom's window treatments were made of ice blue taffeta with sheer, scalloped bridal-lace under-curtains.

Could all of these feminine wiles drive someone with more masculine sensibilities wild? One might think so. Whaley's client hesitated about covering two living room chairs in her favorite color, pink, for fear of turning off male guests. "But it's so funny because every man who comes into this room goes straight to the pink chair," she says. The house possesses the pleasing duality—like a true coquette—of being pulse-poundingly beautiful and inviting all at once.

Les Fleurs | Off the solarium is the flower room (ABOVE LEFT), fitted with hand-painted and glazed cabinetry. Framed prints from a 19th-century French book depicting varieties of flowers as ladies in costume fill two walls from floor to ceiling. **The Midas Touch** | This gilded hardware (ABOVE MIDDLE) is a replica of an original Robert Adam design and was cast in Paris from molds that are over 100 years old. **Work of Art** | Centered on one wall of the solarium is a custom-made copper-and-lead fountain (ABOVE RIGHT) raised on a 15-inch-thick solid statuary marble base designed specifically for the room by Michael Whaley. The soothing sound of water trailing down the copper leaves enhances the tranquility of the room. **Found Space** | The solarium (RIGHT) was built into a space between the main core of the house and the service wing. The marble floor was imported by Paris Ceramics from an 18th-century church in France. See Resources.





Print Inspiration | Inspired by a 19th-century print, the window treatment (LEFT) of blue silk taffeta from Clarence House hangs from an arched painted wooden pelmet and is tied back with lavish tassels. White re-embroidered and scalloped bridal lace is used as a second layer of trimming. **Haute Details** | Naeem Khan, well known for his beaded evening gowns, commissioned the hand-embroidered skirt of a bedside table (RIGHT) with burnished gold and silver threads. **Royal Slumber** | The focus of the room is a custom-designed Louis XV-style bed (BELOW) with a curved caned headboard embellished with carved and painted floral swags. The bed linens were embroidered in France and purchased through Leron, NYC. The walls are upholstered in a 19th-century chintz from Cowtan & Tout to give a look of slightly faded elegance and the sense of luxurious relaxation. See Resources.





Well Received | A Napoleon papier-mâché bed (LEFT) with mother-of-pearl inlay and hand-painted floral decoration is the centerpiece of the guest room. The seating area is composed of a charming papier-mâché slipper chair and a tightly tufted and buttoned French bedroom chair covered in a Sanderson fabric with heavy passementerie. **Luxe Life** | Schumacher's Taglione Rose covers the wall in the guest bedroom (BELOW) giving it the feel of a late-19th-century boudoir. A crystal lamp with pink-crystal drop fringe and a Scalamandré tablecloth complete the look. **Fountain's Fable** | Above the bathtub and set within a paneled and mirrored niche hangs a custom-painted mural-on-canvas (RIGHT) that depicts one of La Fontaine's fables. Whaley designed the marble mosaic tile floor, which was fabricated by Waterworks. A slipper chair is in an unusual French document cabinet from Brunschwig & Fils. A mirrored and polished nickel French gueridon table sits beside the tub. See Resources.

"I'm finding that people are afraid of formal," Whaley says. "They think it means, 'I have to entertain,' or 'I have to be fancy.' I don't think people realize that a home can be as formal as this and also be comfortable. It doesn't have to feel like a museum."

Case in point: Two dogs and two cats wonder freely throughout the house. Tassels on a Parish slipper chair in the living room became too tantalizing for one feline resident who shredded them to tatters. They had to be snipped off and thrown away. Whaley's client has learned to embrace the inevitable traces of wear and tear in her home. European aristocrats often clung to the worn furnishings outfitting their chateaus for the sake of history.

"It looks like a home that has been lived in by generations of one family over the centuries," Whaley says. Though heavily influenced by 18th- and 19th-century France, the house has plenty of English style intermixed. In fact, the homeowner had intended more of an English look when she began the project. She loves flowers and covered her living room sofas in floral chintz, and an 18th-century English mahogany sideboard with inlaid satinwood and rosewood sits in her dining room.

So why did she find herself choosing a blue, white and gold color scheme for her master suite—the same as Marie Antoinette did for her bathroom at Versailles? Perhaps the desire slowly crept into her consciousness—and then her house—like a very clever suitor. ☀



