

Play Time

Witty dialogue, interesting characters, high drama—it's all in a day's work for interior designer Robert Couturier.

| *By Sophie Donelson* | *Photography by Ben Pier* |

There's an unmistakable waft of wealth and taste the moment the elevator doors open to the Mercer Street loft of interior designer Robert Couturier. In reality it's just a Frédéric Malle candle in the fragrance *Coffee Society*—formulated to evoke a French parlor—but it defines the mood here, a spot where conversations drift in and out of French, houses are either estates or pied-à-terres and Starbucks is served in china and atop linen napkins. It's hard not to sit up a little a straighter here. CONTINUED...





LOUNGE ACT A project Couturier did for an Austrian client in Vero Beach, Florida

... CONTINUED Twenty-five years ago, billionaire James Goldsmith picked Couturier to design his 60,000-square-foot Mexico house—a gig that launched the French-born designer into rarefied strata. Today Couturier's clients fall into two camps: enigmatic—a former Miss Turkey, a Russian senator, a Southern poultry heiress, a family of aristocratic Argentines—or bold-faced names, such as Anne Hearst and Jay McInerney, style scribe Amy Fine Collins and Frédéric Fekkai and his wife, Shirin von Wulffen. Royalty-tested, tycoon-approved, Couturier seldom accepts a job with a budget less than \$5 million and never engages with a disagreeable person (*auf wiedersehen*, evil prince) or project (*au revoir*, Versailles at the Plaza).

It isn't just Couturier's staggering knowledge of fine furnishings and art and his facility for putting them together freshly that attracts clients but also his exuberance and wicked sense of humor. Impish squeals of delight at, say, a fine tapestry and regular critiques of people who take themselves too seriously—himself included—are part of Couturier's charm, which is on constant display vis-à-vis the elegant spectacle that is his daily routine.

On a recent Friday, as most mornings, he's with the trainer by 6:15AM. Two hours later he's back home preparing a healthful breakfast in his spotless kitchen, whose fridge contains only fruit, coconut water and Champagne for guests. The first of his two baths necessitates a mix of Santa Maria Novella products and a copy of *The New York Times*, which he reads in its entirety before emerging. Dressing means thumbing through hundreds of Savile Row suits, each with a purpose: "This is a day stripe for midseason," he begins. "This is a summer stripe when you feel less bright... this is for when I feel really jazzy... this is super elegant, for late evening. This one is a little sad—for accounting day." Shirts are from Charvet, the shoes by John Lobb.

His workday begins by 10AM in his study, not in the 15-person office one floor below. ("I never go down there.") Longtime colleagues Brian O'Connor, an architect, and Aamir Khandwala, head of decorating, visit to discuss ongoing projects in Berlin, England and Florida. One of their clients has homes in New York, Paris and Germany and perhaps eventually London, but multiple dwellings, says Couturier, is de rigueur. "Today everyone wants a house everywhere they go." The designer is more interested in a catalog of Old Masters that Aamir delivers, and then pops online to read comments about the Gustav Mahler and Marie Laforêt YouTube clips he posted on Facebook. By noon, he's begun a day of errands.

His driver first delivers him to the Paul Kasmin Gallery, where Couturier checks on the Lalanne sheep sculptures one of his clients is considering purchasing and stops to admire an enormous triptych by Walton Ford. "If

I had the money, I would buy this," he laments. And then he laughs, saying he has no walls large enough to hang it anyway.

Couturier next heads to one of his regular haunts, Downtown Cipriani, with his publicist, Katharina Plath. The vivacious 6-foot-1 Hamburg-born redhead peppers him with questions, but he'd rather tell stories, such as how he once asked Christian Louboutin why his namesake stilettos were so uncomfortable and Louboutin replied that his shoes aren't intended for walking, but for wearing in bed. And then the two swap tales about the famed Halston apartment, where hard-partying creatives played during Studio 54 off nights.

Back at the office, Couturier grabs a yellow pad to write an introduction for a talk later in the day led by wallpaper expert and friend Carolle Thibaut-Pomerantz at Alliance Française. He admits he favors tapestry over wallpaper, but concedes, "Carolle has given a letter of nobility to the art of wall coverings."

You'd gather Couturier had a monarchal streak by his soigné city parlor. Sofas decorated with gold-trimmed persimmon and turquoise velvet pillows are inches from a 1970s lounge chair. A Lalanne sculpture and a rustic wood table are book-ended by magnificent wall-size flower portraits by Ron Agam. But everything is meant to be used, even the 19th-century silk-upholstered armchair whose original horsehair filling you can feel crunch ever so slightly when you recline, or the Jacques Adnet zebra-print sofa with a small tear. "It's only furniture," he explains.

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By midafternoon Couturier is at a residential tower near the Russian Tea Room, where his new client, a Polish woman with whom he has been shopping all week, resides. An unforgiving modernist, she declines three different paintings that were delivered from Paul Kasmin. Dealer Barry Friedman arrives with two pieces from his gallery, a photo from Michael Eastman's *Cuba* series and a glass sculpture. Couturier presents the pieces and the client keeps both.

To close out the workday, Couturier delivers his introduction at the Alliance Française and then hops back in his car and directs his driver north. Home to Couturier is Kent, Conn., where his three Shih Tzus and partner, Jeffrey Morgan, live. The 16-acre estate includes formal gardens, a 1746 house, a private lake and a pet cemetery. "I never do much up there except read, watch TV and take the shortest possible walk with the dogs," he says. "I am not a real country person. I hate insects, mud, dust, but I am most happy there in spite of all that green stuff." **M**

POPPING IN

At the Paul Kasmin Gallery, assistant to the director Juliette Premmeur shows repeat customer Couturier their latest available works.

