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DESIGN

# George Stacey, the First Designer to Mix High and Low

Combining lofty antiques with simple pieces, the society decorator pioneered the 'haute-humble' look—in the 1930s

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By MAUREEN FOOTER

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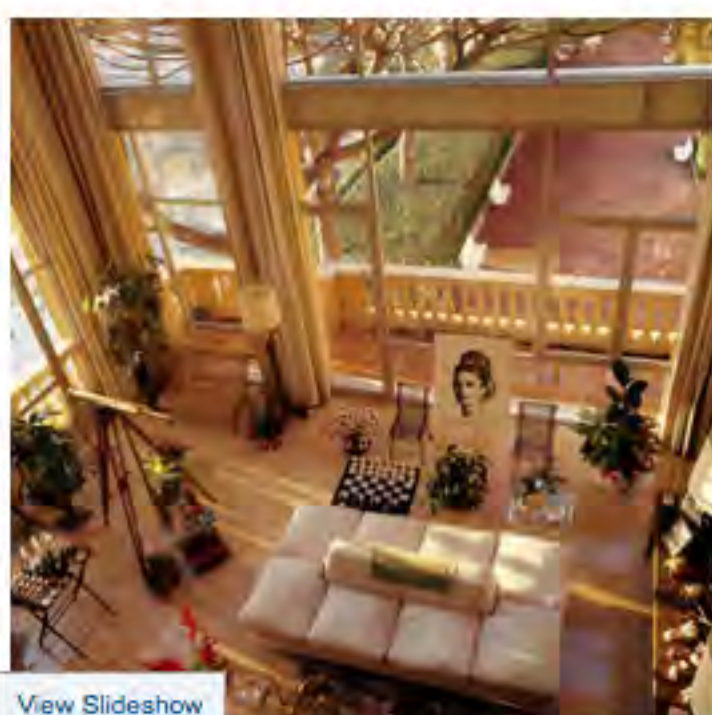
CLASSIC BUT CASUAL | George Stacey, in tie and sporty knickerbockers, on the beach in the 1920s. George Stacey papers

**GLITTERING CRYSTAL** chandeliers in rooms with daringly unadorned walls, a gray lacquered floor with shrimp-pink highlights—the villa on Long Island Sound was thrilling in its novelty. In 1934 no one had seen an interior like this, the first commission of a 33-year-old decorator named George Stacey.

America in the 1930s was entering its prime, newly confident and ready for a style that was independent from strict European models. Mr. Stacey, a young man from Connecticut, had just returned to the U.S. after a decade in Paris studying decorative arts, living *la vie bohème* and selling antiques. Establishing himself as a decorator in New York in 1933, he channeled these influences with a nonchalance worthy of a Cole Porter song, stirring up design cocktails of old and new, Deco and Directoire, Asian and European, and most radical of all, an offhand mix of the haute and the humble.

This unconventional but polished style struck a powerful chord with the "smart set." Soon glamour girls, style setters and power players with names like Harriman, Whitney, Warburg and Paley were seeking out Mr. Stacey's flair. For fashion editor Diana Vreeland, his resourcefulness and disregard for stuffy rules particularly resonated. In Ms. Vreeland's Park Avenue apartment, Mr. Stacey's design pyrotechnics sparkled: One might find a cachepot improvised from a salad bowl or a rattan picnic seat replacing a proper occasional chair.

Photos: The Work of George Stacey



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While old-world elements like damask, Coromandel screens and blackamoor sculptures figure in the Stacey oeuvre, the designer's raffish touch was always present. You can see it in the svelte living room he designed in Locust Valley, N.Y., where contemporary Steuben glass, an Anglo-Indian chandelier and neoclassical urns mingled with unassuming wood tables painted white to highlight their inherently good lines. In a Bermuda project, an enormous salvaged railway clock catapulted a living room from smart to extraordinary. Victorian furniture, relegated to dusty attics, resurfaced in Mr. Stacey's fashionable rooms, jazzed up by a coat of paint, simplified legs or sleek fabric. Though Café Society clients could afford just about anything, what they wanted most was something money couldn't buy: effortless chic.

Nowhere was Mr. Stacey's indifference to convention more apparent than in his own homes. Bohemian at heart, Mr. Stacey weekended for decades in a squash court on the compound of longtime clients (and quasi-family) in Locust Valley (the arrangement was contingent on Mr. Stacey conserving the traditional white walls and red playing lines). The decorator insouciantly moved in a mix of antiques and found objects, added simple pots of geraniums and poured martinis for anyone who came to visit.

Abroad, after a dozen years inhabiting a Louis XIII chateau in France, Mr. Stacey next took up residence in a rustic chicken coop in the Ile-de-France. With 18th- and 19th-century furniture glowing against a backdrop of beams and brick, the house exemplified American chic. Mr. Stacey's unusual choice of dwellings would presage another leitmotif in American design: adaptive reuse. Part of Mr. Stacey's legacy is that today a converted loft, school or church can have as much cachet as a Fifth Avenue duplex, if not more.

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**“ Bohemian at heart, Mr. Stacey weekended for decades in a squash court. ”**

The influence of his high-low mix permeates interiors today. Mr. Stacey paved the way for Sister Parish, decorator of the family quarters of the Kennedy White House, to incorporate country quilts in Fifth Avenue drawing rooms, and for "California look" creator Michael Taylor to include Mexican *equipale* chairs in jewel-like pavilions in the 1960s.

And the movement continues strong. "There is hardly a decorator today who doesn't employ Stacey's mix to some degree or another," noted Jared Goss, design historian and a former curator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. "[Decorator] Tom Scheerer represents the trend particularly well." Mr. Scheerer's Stacey-esque flair is evident in his redo of the Lyford Cay Club in the Bahamas, where wicker chairs and mass-produced Chinese garden stools rest beneath Régence mirrors. When Jesse Carrier and Mara Miller, the team that designs homes for [Anna Wintour](#), juxtapose a tavern table with silk curtains, they, too, prove the enduring potency of Mr. Stacey's stylish innovation.

—Ms. Footer is an interior designer in New York and author of the new book "George Stacey and the Creation of American Chic" (Rizzoli).

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