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Thomas Hamel: living well by design

By **LISA ALLEN**, ASSOCIATE EDITOR & EDITOR, MANSION AUSTRALIA

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International interior designer, Virginia-born Thomas Hamel, shares homes in Sydney, Melbourne and Los Angeles with his partner, Californian-born George Massar.

But Hamel's favourite, by far, is a beach house in Otford on the NSW south coast that was once co-owned by former NSW premier Nick Greiner and his ex-wife Kathryn.

"I go down there every weekend for sure," says Hamel, who is unfazed by the 67km commute from the Sydney CBD, saying he adores the beach house's isolation from more popular beachy destinations such as the Palm Beach peninsula, north of the city — long the holiday hideaway of Sydney's rich and famous.

"That beach house at Otford on the coast is magical."

Since he arrived in Australia in 1990 after meeting his former partner, the late Sydney antiques dealer Martyn Cook, in Paris, Hamel has introduced his cross-pollination interior decoration style of world cultures to Australians. He has decorated some of Sydney's grandest mansions for the Turnbulls, the Mordants, Lowys, and Gandels, employing an elegant international style with objects sourced from as far afield as Chicago, Milan, Palm Springs and, closer to home, PNG, Bhutan and Indonesia.

These days Hamel — who trained in New York under American interior decorator and socialite Sister Parish, who decorated the White House for Jacqueline Kennedy — has commissions countrywide, including Perth's Dalkeith, where he has been spending considerable time of late.

But he says about 40 per cent of his Australian work is centred in Melbourne, where he has a small apartment in South Yarra.

Offshore, Hamel has about 10 projects on the go for Aussie expats living as far afield as Austria, New York, London, Florida and Chicago, employing 30 staff from his Redfern headquarters

including architects, creative directors and senior designers.

He's heavily into client connections and friendships and is now decorating for the next generation of cashed-up Australian homeowners.

"It's all about relationships and building friendships," he says.

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"We try to give a global vision while offering great service. Everyone travels now, so they are exposed to wonderful art."

Indeed, Hamel encourages his clients to buy art and sculptures from overseas, saying that if they like it he will find the correct place in their apartment or house for it.

"I say to all my clients you should feature the souvenirs of your life. Everything has a place, your home should have it and I can make it work," he says.

Personally, he has sent much of his ethnic art down to Otford, which he describes as looking like a St Barts beach house, but in the city he and Massar have decorated their College Street city apartment in The Residence building with the likes of Venetian chairs with antique silvery green velvet still in tact, a 1700s Portuguese console imported from London, as well as an English gilt wood desk in the Chippendale style with an agate top. There's also stately Moroccan lamps and a couple of antique Japanese temple dogs of carved wood decorating the gallery.

Mixing different types of artworks and sculptures is Hamel's forte and he has a Thai stone buddha and the obligatory white orchids decorating a chic desk.

Hamel loves the apartment's "gallery", a wide corridor leading from the entrance to the million-dollar Opera House and St Marys Cathedral views, which he has decorated with a mix of paintings such as a board of bone-coloured woven plaster strips from Amsterdam, saying he loves the texture.

There's another wall piece called *First Mirrors 2014*, with silver panels on paper by Sydney artist Coen Young, as well as a portrait of Andy Warhol and two matching Chinese red lacquer cabinets

bedecked with old Chinese terracotta roof tiles sourced from Melbourne. Adorning another wall of the gallery is contemporary art by Rex Dupain.

He made the move to College Street four years ago after selling his luxuriously appointed apartment in Broughton House in Clarence and King Street to mergers and acquisitions specialist Simon Mordant and wife Catriona within five days of it hitting the market. It was a top-floor amalgamation of apartments — and Mordant bought much of Hamel's furniture as well.

At sale time, Hamel had reduced it from a five-bedroom apartment to a mere one-bedder.

“The Mordants had been great clients in the past. Catriona wanted to keep as much of my furniture as possible. It has now got two bedrooms,” Hamel says.

The Mordants have since added their incredible sense of art, but to this day Catriona says it has Hamel's DNA, which she wanted to preserve.

Back in College Street, Hamel and Massar were attracted to the views and the outside spaces of their apartment. On the western side, they overlook the War Memorial in Hyde Park through a winter garden-type room that is bedecked with established fiddleleaf figs in ceramic pots.

The style is New York, but Hamel says the apartment has a San Francisco edge.

The luxe kitchen would be a cook's dream, but Hamel and Massar admit cooking is not their forte. “We are accumulators of food and we have enough china to do a state dinner at Buckingham Palace,” Hamel quips.

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