

THE AUSTRALIAN

Thomas Hamel's gracious touch

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FROM Thomas Hamel's gracious welcome to his inner-Sydney residence, it's clear that you can take the gentleman out of Virginia but you can't take the southern hospitality out of the gentleman.

Fetching me a glass of sparkling mineral water from his tiny hall kitchen, the Virginia-born interior designer can't resist setting out a perfect trio of almond madeleines on a little tray. It is not showy but absolutely right — nothing held back.

“My role model movie growing up was, of course, *Gone with the Wind*,” says Hamel in his softly genteel voice. “I was from Irish and French parents as well so I had a little bit of a relationship with Scarlett O'Hara, and the houses — that's what gave me the vision of the grand sweeping staircases — and just the civil way that people treated each other. It's certainly in my blood to this day.”

As the principal of one of the largest interior design practices in Australia, with 21 staff at offices in Redfern, Hamel has spent nearly half his life here and now considers himself Australian. Since setting up Thomas Hamel & Associates in Sydney in 1993, he has worked with a who's who of Australian society, designing interiors for clients in Sydney, Palm Beach, Melbourne, Portsea and, increasingly, their holiday houses in glamorous locales such as the south of France, London, Florida, Hawaii and Colorado. Some of his first clients were Malcolm and Lucy Turnbull and Jill and Neville Wran, whom he now considers friends.

Turning 50 later this year, Hamel now shares his elegant home in Broughton House, a 19th-century converted wool store with wonderful street views, with George Massar, also an American designer. He broke up with his long-term partner, antiques dealer Martyn Cook, about 18 months ago.

Hamel first moved into Broughton House in 1997 and 10 years later was able to double his space by snapping up the apartment next door. Since then he has set about creating a temple to his creed of sympathetic contrast yin and yang - the classic and conservative balanced by the ethnic

and simple. Classic panelling, antique tables and lamps are set off by exotic objets d'art from Asia and Africa, all against a soothing background of neutral creams and fawns with dashes of brown, black, bronze and Chinese blue.

“One of my trademarks is baskets and woven things,” he explains, then gestures to the coir matting beneath our feet. “This is as simple a product as you could ever come across and yet it works with gilded antiques and things.

And, again, that comes from that southern heritage where in the heat of the summer everyone would put loose covers over the furniture. You'd have this Georgian furniture but then cover it up with a simple cloth, and I've always kept that in the back of my mind.”

A slight, neat figure wearing a collared shirt under a zip-front casual top with tailored trousers, Hamel perches alertly on the front of his seat as he explains that Australians seem afraid to go 100 per cent with interior design for fear of intimidating their friends. “I'm trying to bring clients here for lunch or dinner parties as an education because I'm trying to teach that it's beyond just interior design and building a great house. I want them to understand how to live and the details that go into that - it's the napkins and the plants and the care that goes into creating a home.”

This passion for providing a complete service, right down to the towels, soap and toothbrush, can be traced back to his training and early career in New York, where clients typically demanded turnkey solutions. It's not something Sydney was accustomed to at the time, but it's an art Hamel had been perfecting since childhood. He created his first residence at the age of 10-turning a tiny bookcase into a doll's house filled with his collection of miniature furniture. His father, a marine who expected his son to be strong and athletic, surprised him by being proud of his efforts. “In the end, I felt very honoured because he used to brag about me to his friends, which was quite unusual for a marine whose son wasn't out playing football with all his mates.”

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Preferring a city milieu to the comfortable south, Hamel moved to New York to study, spending two years at the Fashion Institute of Technology, where one of his teachers was renowned designer Stanley Barrows. He then moved to London, where he gained a BA in fine arts.

“With my tutors there, everything was a bit more art for art's sake, so it let you open up your eyes in a way that I didn't get to experience as much in the States. It was wonderful. One of my

projects was under the tutelage of Richard Rogers and his office when they were working on [refurbishing] Billingsgate fish market. And they'd say 'go to Berlin this weekend and look at that' or 'go to Barcelona this weekend and look at that', so it was invaluable and I think it gave me that wanderlust that is so innate in me."

Hamel repeatedly describes himself as "fascinated", "intrigued", "fortunate" and "honoured". The word "fun" crops up a lot too. He certainly had a privileged start with his first job, with Bebe Winkler in New York. At the age of just 23, he was a partner in a small design firm with his own secretary. "I was part of every part of it, so I learned the business side of it very quickly and how important it is." After moving to the more patrician and prestigious Parish-Hadley in the "crazy 80s", he was amazed at how much money came in and went out just as quickly.

"It had a much more conservative, blue-blood feeling about it, but they didn't understand a lot about the business side of things, so it was like the windows were open and the money was flying out."

The main creative lesson Hamel took away from Parish-Hadley was the importance of looking at the architecture of a room first. "You know, it's not about picking out paint colours; it's about the structure and getting the architecture of a room correct - the door heights, window heights - much earlier on than worrying about what kind of chair you're going to have."

A lasting influence on his design aesthetic was the regular conflict between Sister Parish and Albert Hadley. "She was the old-world conservative and he was a bit more of a modernist, so it was yin and yang; they would fight and they'd always have dialogues about what was the correct way to go. But it was a wonderful way of seeing that there was no correct answer, and that you do need that combination of the old and the new, the historic with the more visionary, and so I feel so honoured that I was able to have that."

The next big eye-opener was moving to Australia after meeting Martyn Cook in Paris. "We just sort of hit it off," Hamel murmurs. "Then Martyn came through to New York afterwards. That was September and he said 'come out at Christmas and visit'. So I came out for two weeks and had to write 45 thank you notes! I felt like I knew everyone." Returning to New York's hideous January weather, he decided to give Australia a go. "I thought 'why not? I think I do have the vision that I could start my own company and do my own thing' ... So that's how I first got here and it's been an amazing evolution to watch Sydney and Australia grow in that time."

At first, all of his clients were Sydney based but, after making a big success of his first project in Melbourne, he started being "passed around to friends and relatives", with the result that 30 per

cent of his work is now in Melbourne. Because a lot of his clients know each other, his biggest creative challenge has been to reinvent the wheel with each project. "That's how they all have the confidence to suggest me to their friends and family because they know that they're not going to see a version of their home when they visit on weekends."

Living in Australia has helped him simplify his style over the years, he notes. "I still look at most American magazines and think they need to have someone come in and take away half. Everything is just too overbaked.

There's a wonderful southern phrase 'that person didn't have quittin' sense'. And you can see that."

Hamel is proud that Australian designers are now starting to teach Americans about indoor-outdoor living.

"I'm doing some work in Los Angeles at the moment and they don't have all these Australian products that we take for granted, like the Vergola ceilings that go back and forth and then these metal louvres on the outside of buildings.

I keep showing pictures from here and none of the architects know them ... They typically think that they're the centre of the universe and everything comes from their world, and it's been really fun to be able to show them there are some exciting things happening elsewhere."

Awareness of Hamel's work has soared in the US since he self-published a book, *Residence*, documenting his first 20 years in Australia. He started work on it during the GFC, when he suddenly found himself with time on his hands.

"My thought was to take this and show the world what Australia has been up to, because I consider myself Australian now, and I wanted to show with pride what we're up to."

After holding launch parties in London, New York and Los Angeles, Hamel was able to correct the impression that Australia was all about beach houses and barefoot living. "I wanted them to see that we live very civilised lives here and that we work on a global scale ... it's been a great success and we're on to the third printing now."

He is excited by the opportunities opened up from the book. As well as his new furniture line (see breakout above), he also would like to further develop a set of customisable fabric designs. "These fabrics have that ethnic background but they can still be next to a brocade or a velvet, and

it's that yin and yang of being glamorous and rich but bringing it back down, and it suits our Australian life."

Domestic sculpture

HAMEL has teamed up with his creative director, Dylan Farrell, to launch the Hamel Farrell Collection through Los Angeles-based furniture design company Jean de Merry. Two years in the planning, the collection initially encompasses 10 pieces, mostly sideboards and tables. The pieces will be made to order in the US by highly skilled Guatemalan artisans.

"They're more sculptural pieces because Jean de Merry is basing itself more on an art gallery, so you're buying a thing that's an art form; it's not just a filler piece of furniture," Hamel says.

All are based on bespoke pieces that Hamel has made for clients over the years "because it's very difficult to source intriguing and exciting pieces here". Hamel and Farrell join Jean de Merry's global creative team, which also includes hot Paris designer Jean Louis Deniot.

"So they thought of Australia as well and our designs do speak of inspirations of Australia and the sophistication of the world because everything is handcrafted and detailed and quite organic in appearance ... it's an enormous honour and the next step for me."