



Life & Leisure

Life And Luxury Design

At home with Thomas Hamel, interior designer to the A-list

The US-born, Australian-based designer began his career in New York, but is now one of Australia's most sought-after interior decorators.



Interior designer Thomas Hamel at home in Sydney. Behind him is an oil painting by Los Angeles artist Gabriel Rivera. **Peter Braig**

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For my first post-isolation interview, I decided to visit interior designer [Thomas Hamel](#) at his apartment opposite Hyde Park in the centre of Sydney. So, last week I polished up the brogues, selected a pair of pressed trousers (dry-cleaned, it seems, an aeon ago) and headed down from the Blue Mountains to the unusually pristine “big smoke”.

Hamel, who was born in Virginia, studied in New York and moved to Australia in 1990, lives in a grand apartment on the 17th floor of a recently completed sandstone, steel and glass building with views across Sydney Grammar and the Australian Museum, over the spires of St Mary’s cathedral and onto the glimmering white sails of the [Opera House](#).

“All *en enfilade*,” he laughs as he ushers me inside.



The living room of Thomas Hamel's Sydney apartment has breathtaking views out to the Opera House and harbour. **Matt Lowden**

The ceilings are high (3.2 metres) for a new building, the north-west corner orientation picture perfect. But it's what Hamel has done with the interior that creates its unique ambience.

He calls it, simply, his "new-old approach". What that means in practice is the complexity of a lush contemporary oil painting hung above an 18th century Chippendale Gothic console with a veinous marble top and intricate timber fretwork.

Or a curvaceous mahogany Portuguese bureau from the mid-1700s sitting alongside a 19th century wingback Bergère chair upholstered in French linen, a hardwood stool from Papua New Guinea, and a pert desk chair embellished with a delicate garland and leaf motif, by California artisan furniture company, Gregorius Pineo (which happens to belong to Hamel's partner George Massar).



In the study, a 17th century Portuguese bureau flanked by a French Bergère chair and a stool from Papua New Guinea. **Anson Smart**

Admittedly, that's all very posh. But Hamel's signature trick is mixing up the precious and the quotidian to create a new kind of frisson.

"That cane basket on the floor in the living room cost \$59," he points out, rather proudly.

Hamel's father, who was in the US Marines, came from Boston, and Hamel retains traces of a patrician New England drawl. His mother was born and raised in Brooklyn, and gave him the gift of a cosmopolitan outlook.

"I remember as a little boy, my mother showing the other Virginian military wives pictures of her Manhattan wedding and them being shocked to see black altar boys," he says.

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— Thomas Hamel

He recalls the grand Colonial homes of Williamsburg and Jamestown; the Palladian splendour of Thomas Jefferson's plantation mansion at Monticello.

"But there's nothing to explain the decorator gene, it's just something in my DNA," he shrugs, pointing out that he has one brown eye and one green (while both parents were green-eyed). "My family used to joke that maybe there was someone else involved."

At 16, he visited New York for the first time, staying with relatives in the modernist Stuyvesant Town estate on the East Side. (Developed by the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company as affordable housing post-World War II, the 11,250 apartments are now some of the most sought-after by Manhattan's style-savvy.)



Hamel is an avid art collector. This 'Cycle II' in bronze and alabaster is by Joseph Cals; the console behind him is a rare Chippendale Gothic piece. **Peter Braig**

“I was young, in the most exciting city imaginable and I had just discovered Fiorucci,” he says, referencing the Italian fashion brand that became famous in the 1980s. “I immediately knew I wanted to study at the Fashion Institute of Technology.”

Despite its title, FIT was at the time one of world’s best schools for interior design, as well as fashion. Hamel signed up, and spent his formative years studying the history of the decorative arts, which in New York resonates with names like Elsie de Wolfe (who launched her career in 1905 and is widely considered the world’s first professional decorator); Dorothy Draper (who designed the wonderfully camp cafeteria of the Metropolitan Museum, dubbed the Dorotheum); Albert Hadley (“the Dean of American decorating”); and Sister Parish, renowned for decorating the Kennedy White House.

While the New York Style is immensely respectful of European tradition, these 20th century decorator divas added an at times quite sly irreverence, mixing periods in a way the old school would never do. Operating in the world’s most iconic modern city, they were adept at kitting out skyscrapers in a heady mix of Renaissance and rococo, offset by a very Big Apple glamour, from the 1940s to disco.

Fresh out of school, Hamel got a job with a flamboyant decorator by the name of Bebe Winkler, quickly becoming her 24/7 right-hand man. “I was 23 and so busy I had my own secretary,” he recalls.

When said secretary defected to the design agency formed by an alliance between Parish and Hadley, she called Hamel to alert him of an opening.

“She said, 'You're going to run, not walk over here. We've got a big job in Bermuda and you'd be great for it.'”

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— Thomas Hamel

He paints a picture of an hysterical Madame Winkler chasing him down Lexington Avenue, red talons flying. But he joined Parish Hadley, and never looked back.

“I owe my sense of the decorative to Sister Parish, and my understanding of interior architecture to Albert Hadley,” he admits. “But I owe my understanding of how a business works to Bebe.”

He owes his arrival in Australia in 1990 to the legendary antique dealer Martyn Cook. They'd met in Paris at the Biennale des Antiquaires, then Hamel visited Sydney for two weeks where he was widely feted as a Parish acolyte.

“I returned to New York, went into her office and said, 'You know Mrs Parish, you have quite the following in Australia.' She raised her head, intoned, 'How interesting,' then lowered her head and kept on working.”

But Hamel was smitten, and moved to Sydney not long after. He set up Thomas Hamel & Associates in July 1991. Among his first clients were Malcolm and Lucy Turnbull: the A-list followed suit.

This month, Hamel moved his studio of about 30 staff to a new HQ on Foveaux Street, Surry Hills. A charming 19th century sandstone terrace with a crenellated parapet, its wrought iron Regency balcony overhangs a London-style shopfront installed by Hamel. (Specifically, it is inspired by the facades of the antique dealers of the Pimlico Road, turf Hamel knows all too well.)

Inside, the expansive reference library faces north, and it's here that a steady stream of interns from local design schools are often to be found, poring over the history of their chosen métier.

"We encourage them to spend a maximum of time, immersing themselves in mouldings, ironwork, textiles – the important history of the decorative arts," says Hamel. "It's by understanding history that a designer can forge a way forward."

Need to know

For more of Hamel's work and interior design insight, see *Residence*, by Thomas Hamel, published by Hardie Grant.