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Silver-Screen Décor

Designer Jonathan Adler culls decorating tips from the swanky sets of 'Auntie Mame'

By JEN RENZI



Auntie Mame/Warner Bros. Pictures

One of designer Jonathan Adler's most beloved rooms is not a room at all but a film set, that of the 1958 classic "Auntie Mame."

Jonathan Adler's interiors reflect the principles of classical decorating: He's a slave to symmetry, scale and proportion, and a devotee of David Hicks and Dorothy Draper. But chat with the ceramicist-turned-interior-designer about inspiration and the conversation inevitably turns to pop culture. A porcelain vase in his pottery line is modeled on Morgan Fairchild circa the "Falcon Crest" days. His ideal shade of red—whether for a lacquered side table or an accent wall—is that of burlesque bombshell Dita von Teese's lipstick. And he's quick to name-check favorite (and often campy) titles of the big and small screen, the latter of which he starred on as a member of Bravo's erstwhile "Top Design."

It stands to follow, then, that one of Mr. Adler's most beloved rooms is not a room at all but a film set, that of the 1958 classic "Auntie Mame." More specifically, the living area of the protagonist's Beekman Place duplex, which she revamps six times in themes ranging from postmodern neoclassical to haute Bollywood. "Watching Auntie Mame is a right of passage for every aspiring decorator," says Mr. Adler.

"When I first watched it, in college, what hit me was the gestalt of it: the life of fun and glamour that can be yours if you manage to claw your way to New York City," he says. "But the awe-inspiring sets are what continue to inspire me today."

Said sets support the narrative by reflecting Mame's evolving lifestyle. When her 10-year-old orphan nephew, Patrick, comes to live with her, he's welcomed into a Japanesque lair. By the time Patrick has graduated and Mame has swapped her bachelorette lifestyle for that of a memoir-writing widow, she has transformed her home into a traditional tableau.

Mr. Adler's favorite look is the Scandinavian-modern scheme complete with Cubist artworks, a koi pond, a faux Alexander Calder mobile, Swedish stove and minimalist seating—by fictional Danish designer Yul Ullu—whose height is adjusted via crystal pulls. (The movie's actual set decorator was four-time Oscar winner George James Hopkins, who did "My Fair Lady," "Casablanca" and 70 other films.) Mame has redecorated in anticipation of hosting Patrick's in-laws-to-be, the uppity Upsons, and her provocatively au courant style is meant to challenge their bourgeois mindset.

"There's a tongue-in-cheek quality to the design, in that Mame appreciates avant-gardism from a connoisseurial standpoint while also recognizing its ridiculousness, in the form of the kinetic seating," says Mr. Adler.

And while he loves Mame's signature styles, the grand dame's attitude has proved equally inspiring—and translates well off-camera. "When designing for clients, I like to channel their inner Auntie Mame, to make them appear just a little more glamorous and eccentric than they are."

Sound advice for all—in decorating and in life.

HAVE MULTIPLE SEATING ZONES

"I thought about these sets often when designing my own house on Shelter Island [N.Y.]—particularly how Mame's living room is broken up into vignettes with little cocktail tables. Even though my husband and I mostly entertain ourselves, our living room is designed as if we throw lots of parties, with numerous furniture groupings. Instead of having just one seating area in a room, carve out a few intimate zones within a larger space. I'm a bit peripatetic, so I like to have a million places to sit."

NEVER SACRIFICE COMFORT FOR STYLE



Pedro Friedeberg

Display a Pedro Friedeberg chair like a piece of art.

"The scene in which the Upsons almost fall off Yul Ullu's sofas is so over-the-top and fun. It reflects Auntie Mame's obsession with the new—and her sense of humor. The décor is an homage to modernism yet gives a knowing wink to how antithetical to real life it can be. Purely sculptural furnishings are okay, but I'll usually relegate it to just one piece—like a Pedro Friedeberg chair—displayed like an artwork.

For a similar discourse about how modernist design makes a mockery of comfort and practicality, rent Jacques Tati's 'Mon Oncle'—also from 1958."

EMBRACE FOLLY



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"It was so eclectic of Mame to mix Gustaviana with those International Style pieces, to juxtapose expressionist curves with clean lines. That insane Swedish ceramic stove, anchored by a mosaic wall, is such a folly. Every room needs an element of folly: something silly and unexpected to lighten the mood. It doesn't need to be such a big gesture as a Swedish stove; it can be achieved with accessories.

For instance, try the Victorian trick of displaying a bouquet of peacock feathers in a vase."

SEPARATE WITH SCREENS



"The screens separating the entry from the living room are so beautiful—that curvy, organic shape plays off the rectilinear architecture and diagonal flooring. I love both the design and the function of those screens: they



add a layer of decoration and depth without blocking sight lines—a great device for a film set. But what works for the camera works in the home, too. Screens delineate a space and add instant architecture. It's just the right element for when you need *quelque chose d'autre*.

When divvying a room, stick with an open pattern. A solid screen is ideal in a corner, as a sort of backdrop to anchor the decor."

Jonathan Adler

Desmond Screen, jonathanadler.com

LONG AND LOW IS ALWAYS CHIC

"In its static iteration, Yul Ullu's crazy kinetic seating is quite fab because the proportions are perfect: so long and low and wide—like a furniture expression of International Style architecture. The lesson here is that long and low is always chic, and to avoid at all costs what I call 'furniture on steroids': American designs are generally so supersized and big and puffy. Go for delicately scaled pieces—never above a 17-inch seat height."



Vladimir Kagan

Mr. Adler recommends Vladimir Kagan's Floating Curve Sofa, vladimirkagan.com

BIO IN BRIEF: JONATHAN ADLER



Jonathan Adler

His résumé: Mr. Adler, who started making pottery in his teens, kicked off his design career by opening a SoHo storefront in 1998 to sell his ceramics. He soon added housewares—from pillows to furnishings—to his collection, and has since morphed into a veritable lifestyle brand with 14 boutiques.

His clients: In addition to wholesaling his product designs to stores across the country, including Nieman Marcus and Nordstrom, Mr. Adler has kitted out upscale residences for art collectors and hospitality moguls as well as the Parker Palm Springs Hotel in California, boutiques for Trina Turk and the Barbie Dream House in Malibu. Currently he is the guest designer for Lacoste.

His goods: The vast Jonathan Adler product line encompasses granny-chic needlepoint pillows, sly scented candles (hashish, watercress), boldly graphic wallpaper, myriad tabletop items and midcentury-inspired furnishings including lighting, seating and storage. [For more info, visit jonathanadler.com.](http://jonathanadler.com)

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