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MICHAEL SMITH: GLOBAL DESIGNER

BY JAMES REGINATO

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MICHAEL SMITH



When Michael Smith was chosen by Barack and Michelle Obama to decorate the private quarters of the White House, and subsequently the Oval Office, the Los Angeles-based interior designer instantly achieved a new level of international prominence. But Smith has been one of the most sought-after designers for more than a decade, particularly among those who are looking for a decorator whose taste in art is as trusted as his views on passmenterie.

A native of Newport Beach, California, Smith opened his own office in Santa Monica at the tender age of 25 in 1990, after studying at Otis College of Art and Design, in Los Angeles, and the Victoria and Albert Museum, in London. It didn’t take long for Smith, propelled by his fresh take on traditional design, as well as his razor-sharp wit, to become Hollywood’s newest “decorator to the stars.” In addition to actors such as Michelle Pfeiffer and Dustin Hoffman, industry powerbrokers such as Steven Spielberg and Rupert Murdoch also became clients.

In between his first Hollywood success and his high-profile job at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, Smith became the go-to decorator for many CEOs and financiers throughout the United States, and Europe; his interiors now appear regularly on the covers of *Architectural Digest*, *Elle Décor* and other glossy publications, too.

According to one private client, Alexandra Wentworth (Smith decorated a house in East Hampton for the television personality and her husband, Good Morning America host George Stephanopoulos), Smith’s wide range of knowledge and expertise set him apart. “He’s got a brilliant mind for so many things, and he can finesse it all together. I ask Michael for his opinions not just about art and decoration, but everything else: food, clothes, travel, books.”

OPPOSITE In a master bedroom in Malibu, Smith combined elements of art and architecture.

LEFT Michael Smith in his former Bel Air home, in front of the oversized School of Rubens painting the designer bought at auction at Sotheby’s.

On a recent rare day at home in Los Angeles, Smith took time out to reflect on his career so far. “My work has gone from being centered in California to being really global,” he observes. Illustrating his point, in the last week alone he has shuttled between London, Majorca, Antwerp, Copenhagen, New York, Washington, D.C., and Lexington, where he attended the Kentucky Derby with clients.

With his far-flung slate of projects, Smith is a world-class shopper. But unlike many designers, who rely exclusively on a network of dealers, Smith turns to auctions as his primary source for unique property. “We buy something out of almost every sale,” says Smith, who bids regularly at Sotheby’s salerooms in New York, London, Paris and elsewhere. (His 30-person firm, Michael S. Smith Inc., also produces exceptional fabrics, furniture and accessories under the “Jasper” label.)

PHOTOGRAPH BY JOAO CANZIANI





PHOTOGRAPH BY FRANÇOIS HALARD

The living room of a home in Malibu.

"In the same way that I am buying in a global way, I'm thinking in a global way," he says. Smith's broad world view is reflected in the range of his knowledge and interests, and he buys in virtually all categories. "In the last weeks I've bought Latin American sculpture for a house I'm doing in Palm Springs and an Italian portrait from an Old Masters sale for a house in London. Then there has been Islamic pottery, a Philip Taaffe painting and a little David Smith pen and ink."

The obvious question is, how does he keep up with it all?

"The internet has made this possible – you can be in many places at the same time; you can buy things across the globe. But while this proliferation of information that's available on the internet has made my job infinitely easier, it also takes a lot of work to stay ahead of all the sales.

"The advent of the iPad has really helped. I can show clients specific lots, multiple images, enlarged images. It really helps you edit and cull through and be interactive."

Not surprisingly, for a person whose tastes span the centuries, Smith does not rely on the latest technology as his exclusive source of information. "I still love the book-ness of catalogues. I'm Old School in that I find things first in them, and I love being able to reflect in them."

Relationships with Sotheby's experts, built over many years, are invaluable to Smith, who has always bought at auction to furnish his own home. "In Contemporary, for example, I can depend on Anthony Grant. Mary Jo Otsea, who is head of the Carpets department, has known my taste for 20 years, so she will call me and alert me to things that are coming up that I'd be interested in. And when you know the personality and spirit of a department, you see how a sale evolves, and a distinctive point of view comes through."

Smith's own point of view has always featured a lively mix of fine antiques and contemporary art, which no doubt attracted the Obamas' interest. The designer is discreet in discussing his relationship with all his clients, including the Presidential couple, but according to *The New York Times*, Smith has been instrumental in advancing the White House art-historically. "I share with the President and First Lady their vision of bringing new artisans and artists to the White House, and that's been thrilling to be involved in," he says. Smith's role at the White House was enhanced last year when the President appointed him to the prestigious Committee for the Preservation of the White House, which advises on the character of the public rooms and on additions to the permanent collection of fine arts and decorative arts objects; the committee also includes esteemed art historians John Wilmerding and Paul Schimmel and collectors Lew Manilow and Richard H. Jenrette.

Smith has brought Abstract Expressionism and contemporary pieces to the White House through loans he helped select from three Washington museums: the National Gallery of Art, the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden and the Smithsonian American Art Museum. In consultation with curators from those institutions, as well as with the White House curator and the First Lady, Smith assembled an adventurous selection of paintings and sculptures. In addition to a lead relief by Jasper Johns, there are works by Mark Rothko, Susan Rothenberg, Josef Albers and Ed Ruscha. The loans also include several paintings by contemporary African-American artists, including Glenn Ligon and William H. Johnson.

"I have always been interested in the crossover point between history and art," he says. "It's fascinating that you can trace any period of history not just through its art but its decorative arts. And I love seeing hybrids between different cultures – the Danes in Rome in the 18th century, the Portuguese in Japan."

Smith's roster of current projects reflects his wide-ranging interests. In London, he is giving a modernized Bloomsbury look to an 1880s Dutch-style townhouse, while in the Bahamas he is building a Georgian-style house out of coral stone. On the East Coast, he is creating one of Manhattan's most spectacular penthouses, and, on the ocean in East Hampton, a mansion whose style he refers to as "modern-meets-pilgrim." In Palm Springs, he recently completed the interiors of a visitors centre for Sunnylands, the fabled home of the late Walter Annenberg, now a conference centre.

BELOW LEFT In the sunroom of Smith's home, an arrangement of beautiful objects sets the tone.

BELOW The living room of an apartment on Wilshire Boulevard in Los Angeles.



Smith's magpie instincts inflect his work. "It's easy to knock out a room, but I like unexpected combinations. The challenge is to combine art and furniture to give a room a personal voice," he says. "People don't want to live in an art gallery, or, the other extreme, an antiques shop."

"I try to have the art be on its own channel, as it were, to be its own thing. Yet it crosses over so many times. Art can be a great punctuation. In a traditional setting, modern art can give another dimension. And in traditional environments, contemporary pictures or photography can reset the frame a bit. Great rooms reveal themselves over time, as opposed to rooms that are static and stiff. A great room is like a great person – there's diversity and complexity, it holds your interest and it's not one-note."

While Smith has often used contemporary art, the architectural backgrounds of most of his projects have tended to be traditional. So it was notable when Smith recently sold his Georgian-style red-brick house in Bel Air and bought a starkly modern house in Holmby Hills. A museum-like concrete and glass structure, it was built in 1993 by a collector to house her serious contemporary art collection. Vast and cool, it has been dubbed the "Temple of Dendur" by some of Smith's friends. "I loved my old house so much but this is an opportunity to do something different, on a different canvas. I think it's important to always move forward. I try to practice what I preach."

JAMES REGINATO IS CONTRIBUTING EDITOR-AT-LARGE OF *ARCHITECTURAL DIGEST*. HIS WORK ALSO APPEARS IN *VANITY FAIR*.



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