

DESIGN & DECORATING

MY FAVORITE ROOM

A Man Cave Writ Romantic

Interior designer Frank de Biasi finds inspiration in the cobbled-together refuge of exiled French author Victor Hugo

BY TIM GAVAN

MOST OF US have to give up tree houses, pillow forts and “keep out” signs once we exit puberty. Our homes get outfitted for entertaining, cooking, paying bills—the tasks that come with adulthood. “Keep out” evolves into the self-directed command to “keep up,” infinitely more complicated. Few of us get the opportunity to go back.

A notable exception: Victor Hugo. In 1851, the poet and author of “The Hunchback of Notre-Dame” was forced to flee France for opposing the burgeoning authoritarianism of

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Napoleon III. Finding asylum on the small English Channel island of Guernsey in 1855, Hugo transformed an abandoned seaside villa known as Hauteville House—boxy, white, and unremarkable from the outside—into a brooding, baroque, haphazardly lavish refuge for himself. Colored glass bottles in the entry evoked the stained glass of Notre-Dame de Paris, and a converted attic served as a window-walled observatory for writing. He remained here for 15 years—completing his massive, intricate novel, “Les Misérables”—even after politi-



DRAMATIC LICENSE On the English Channel Island of Guernsey, French author Victor Hugo shrouded his study in crimson damask.

cal circumstances made returning to France possible.

“There’s a sense of freedom here,” observed New York interior designer Frank de Biasi of the largely intact home, now a museum.

“He’s decorating for himself.”

The so-called red room, in particular, has the magpie spirit of a childhood sanctuary, though Hugo elevated the chamber to a sophisticated study. He arranged the space

like a stage to make meaningful trinkets and secondhand furniture appear curated rather than hoarded; upholstered every wall (and the ceiling) in textured damask to achieve a hushed privacy; and

simplified matters with a limited palette of ruby, sapphire and gold. Here, Mr. de Biasi shows how to create an expressive but adult sanctuary of your own—more epic hideaway than comic-book lair.



Animate Negative Space

A gaping, black fireplace can pull focus, especially when it’s adjacent to gaze-grabbing characters like Hugo’s humanoid torchieres. The lovely but unobtrusive scenery of his Louis XIV screen covered the distracting darkness during the day and softened firelight at night. Pay homage with this Chippendale Period Mahogany and Wool Fireplace Screen, circa 1770, \$2,500, windsorhouseantiques.co.uk

Play Up Voluptuous Forms

Hugo’s decision to upholster the Louis XV duchesse brisée in the same fabric as the walls lets the eye focus on its sumptuous frame, said Mr. de Biasi. “You can imagine a woman in a gorgeous silk dress lounging on this, reading,” he said of the piece, one that seems rarefied today but would have been relatively inexpensive at the local antique store in Hugo’s time. Invest more heavily in your own: Louis XVI Duchesse Brisée, \$11,500, embreeandlake.com



Set the Stage

Pairs of Venetian figurative torchieres flank the fireplace (only one set is visible in the photo above). They’re “like players on a stage, with a proscenium of a valence behind them,” Mr. de Biasi said. Their symmetry gives the room’s complex contents order. Get a similar effect in your own space with these Bronze Maidens on Pedestals, 91 inches, \$6,795 for both, bronzewestimports.com



Top It Off

“I’m sure when Hugo lived here, [the table] was a proper center table with books and statues and other things like that [on it],” Mr. de Biasi said. While the Italian piece with a carved base and inlaid-bone top is beautiful enough to shine when bare, its position in the room’s center with a clear path around the perimeter made it ideal for showcasing special items. A worthy stand-in: English Library Desk, circa 1890, \$3,545, geauxvintage.com

Weave a Story

Hugo, whom friends suspected exaggerated his possessions’ provenance, claimed the room’s beaded tapestries hailed from the apartment of Queen Christina of Sweden at the Chateau de Fontainebleau. Mr. de Biasi believes they’re Italian. In any case, they add shimmer to this grown-up’s hideout, as would this Beaded Altar Frontal from Melissa Levinson Antiques. \$16,000. 1stdibs.com



Deck the Walls

“Covering the walls in fabric, like the silk damask in Hugo’s study, provides texture and sound attenuation,” explained Mr. de Biasi, who upholsters walls in nearly all of his projects and likens the result to being inside a cocoon. The damask’s richness also ennobles Hugo’s less-precious finds, elevating the room from junk shop to gallery. An approximation: Pierre Frey Mona Lisa Brocatelle, price upon request, D&D Building, 212-421-0534



Hit the Highs and Lows

“I always tell my clients to furnish rooms with a mix of short, medium, and tall,” Mr. de Biasi said. Carved crimson pedestals of various heights (probably repurposed from discarded furniture Hugo found around the island and brought home, as was his habit) help fill the room vertically rather than horizontally, making it appear more grand, less cluttered. This weathered lacquer cabinet (left) has a similarly timeworn look with plenty of potential for displaying objects. Qing Dynasty Petite Lacquer Cabinet, circa 1850, \$1,880, pagodared.com



Look Up

“This chandelier is really over-the-top, in a good way, with little chains underneath like vines and colorful glass flowers around the candle arms,” said Mr. de Biasi. The lush, almost overgrown light fixture represents one of the room’s more elaborate elements, but because it’s high and out of the way, it doesn’t add to the potential chaos below. Make the most of your own headroom with a Murano-style Glass and Gold Chandelier, from \$1,181, sognidicristallo.it

Lay It On Thick

“For me, whether it’s parquet or carpet, the floor is just the floor and then your personality goes on top,” said Mr. de Biasi of the evocative arabesques on Hugo’s Mamluk rug, which the writer layered over wall-to-wall cherry carpeting. A colorful print also has the benefit of adding a whole lot of character without taking up physical space, the way furniture and objects would. For visual interest without crowding, try this Mamluk Rug, 6 feet by about 9 feet, \$3,995, nomadrugs.com

Humble Brag

“I’m not entirely sure what this is,” admitted Mr. de Biasi of the bell-like object near Hugo’s fireplace. “It’s in the shape of a Buddhist stupa, but it’s pierced like a brûleur à encens for emanating incense.” It might be one of many references to Hugo’s life and work throughout Hauteville House, perhaps a nod to his famous hunchbacked bell-ringer. Though we searched strenuously for a comparable piece, this is the closest we came: Bronze Burmese Guardian Lion Bell, circa 1800, from FEA Home, \$4,500, 1stdibs.com



BIO IN BRIEF // FRANK DE BIASI



His Résumé Six years at Christie’s in the estates and appraisals department honed Mr. de Biasi’s knowledge of art and design history. A member of the Sir John Soane Museum Foundation and the Institute for Classical Architecture and Art, he acted as director of interiors for architect and designer Peter Marino for 12 years before starting his own design firm in 2006.

His Clients Mr. de Biasi prefers his clients brave. He recently completed a modern waterfront house in Miami filled with a boggling collection of contemporary art along with bejeweled bed frames, golden-alligator-backed chairs and a staircase that includes 37 gradations of marble. He is currently building a house in Tangier for himself and his partner, fashion designer

Gene Meyer, that he said will be “fun and fearless and full of color.”

His Style A frequent, often-long-distance traveler, Mr. de Biasi is familiar with the global design market. His style ranges from the traditional to the contemporary—with an experimental edge—and his projects tend to be layered and rich, opulent but not off-puttingly so.