

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Décor Inspiration from Surrealist Jean Cocteau

An avowed maximalist finds affirmation in a visit to the super-eclectic home of surrealist Jean Cocteau an hour outside Paris

By Emily Evans Eerdmans

Aug. 4, 2016 3:28 p.m. ET



Surrealist writer, artist and filmmaker Jean Cocteau first showed up on my radar in 2009 while I was researching a book about eccentric French decorator and antique dealer Madeleine Castaing. Her radical eclecticism—think leopard-patterned carpeting, aqua walls and neoclassical antiques—captivated the It Crowd in post-WWII Paris, including Nina Ricci, Pablo Picasso, Coco Chanel and Cocteau.

After discovering that Cocteau borrowed pieces from Castaing's shop as set props, I watched his 1946 film, "La Belle et La Bête," in which tears morph into diamonds and disembodied hands lift a candelabra. He collaborated with her, too, on Maison Cocteau, his home in the French

medieval town of Milly-la-Forêt. And since it opened to the public in 2010, I've wondered what someone of relatively little means like Cocteau, a rarity among Castaing's decorating clients, had managed to create with her. So while in Paris this spring, I made the hour train ride to see.



SURREAL ESTATE | A cast of Jean Cocteau's hands in his salon PHOTO: FRANCIS HAMMOND FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

From the front of the 17th-century house, which Cocteau and then-lover Jean Marais bought in 1947, I glimpsed the renaissance turrets of the Château de la Bonde, to which Cocteau's cottage originally belonged. Then I went inside his home to explore the three rooms that remain as they were when Cocteau died, at 74, in 1963. The first, the salon, is outfitted mostly in modest 19th-century mahogany furniture; atop every surface sit shells, books, sculpture fragments and ceramics. A favorite trick of Castaing's lends cohesion to the clutter: All walls are upholstered in a graphic brown print, and a large patterned rug answers in brown and cream. Splashes of red keep the room vibrant as do flashes of brass and gilding—the sunburst ornament over the fireplace, for example, a gift of Coco Chanel.

The salon embraces another Castaing tenet: Every room should include something ugly or unexpected. A carousel horse prances alongside the mahogany table. A gold-metal cast of Cocteau's hands lopped at the wrist subverts a fairly conventional tableau of paperbacks,

colored pencils and a bronze lamp on a butler's tray table. The juxtaposition strikes me as contemporary, albeit eerie.

Upstairs, in Cocteau's small study, I found more pieces with a flea-market air—an apothecary cabinet, a gothic-revival desk chair—and the poetic detritus of a highly creative mind. Here, cheetah-print cotton covers the ceiling as well as the walls. It is electrifying. You just don't see people doing this.

Well, maybe one. New York interior designer Harry Heissman, an admirer of Cocteau and Castaing, enveloped his own tiny living room in leopard-print. "It adds an aura of inspiration and fantasy," he said. "It also masks the lack of a crown molding and enlarges the room."

I dream of creating such a room. I work in a quirkily laid out studio in Greenwich Village. I've used leopard carpeting to unify the office, hall and bathroom of the space. But I'm an art and design adviser, and my office must have neutral walls. However, the bold, green banana-leaf pattern of Martinique paper, created for the Beverly Hills Hotel, covers the walls and ceiling of my office bathroom, and a matching curtain hides my shower.

Many would regard Cocteau's study as kitsch, and some would find it draining to occupy, but I think it's a good example of working amid things that stimulate you. Lots of them.



The bed, angled for a view of the gardens he designed. PHOTO: FRANCIS HAMMOND FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Next door, his bedroom walls feature dentil molding and a chair rail, so no need for the all-surface pattern treatment. A chair made of animal horn sits unexpectedly amid mostly simple furniture. A mural believed to be painted by Marais and featuring himself in the bottom right corner covers one wall. But the big draw here is the view of the Cocteau-designed grounds. He angled the canopy bed so the footboard didn't obscure his sight line to the red-draped window. I recall that Castaing hung crimson curtains in her country house to complement and highlight the green outdoors. In Cocteau's home, too, the purposefully framed views function as an element of the room.

Although mixing styles has been the interior-design ideal for years now, Cocteau's décor is so personal and bizarre it seems to mix states of consciousness, too. Mr. Heissman said he took another lesson away from the admitted opium addict's home. "It helped me listen to a client's collection, to mix an expensive painting with a starfish," he said. "Maison Cocteau has what many interiors today lack—a soul."