

# THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

## The Decorator's Decorator

Wildly beloved and relatively unknown, legendary designer Madeleine Castaing finally gets her due

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Updated Oct. 9, 2010 12:01 a.m. ET



Ms. Castaing in one of her trademark hats.  
COURTESY FREDERIC CASTAING ROLAND  
BEAUFRE (ALL OTHERS); F. MARTIN RAMIN  
FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL (BOOK)

Every now and then in the continuing blizzard of books on design and decor, somebody truly first rank gets left out. There is no good reason for this, but it does make it very exciting when the book finally comes along that does justice to the omission.

The long-awaited "World of Madeleine Castaing," about the French interior designer who died in 1992 at age 98, is such a book. It manages to be both love letter and catalogue raisonné devoted to this most charismatic and mysterious of great lady decorators. In the history of style, she is as important as it gets: Ms. Castaing's use of color is one of the few perceptible influences on the otherwise sui generis work of English decorator David Hicks. Her love of late-19th-century furniture was groundbreaking. For 50 years, her Paris shop was a stage for her ideas and an unforgettable source of inspiration for those not too intimidated to go inside. Her fabric line is still sold today. As for her character... Well, you could love her just for her wig with the elastic chin strap and false eyelashes.

Jacques Grange—in my opinion the greatest decorator of our time—wrote the book's foreword. He was a friend and admirer of Ms. Castaing in the twilight of her career and the beginning of his. "Her vision of interior design was both whimsical and poetic," he writes in the book. "It was influenced by neoclassicism but reinterpreted with her colors and shapes in a unique and never outdated way. A constant source of inspiration for every interior designer, she remains for me one of the most extraordinary personalities I ever met."

The genius of Madeleine Castaing's rooms is very hard to decode. Like all truly successful decoration, the magic comes from the flower of the combination, rather than the individual parts. But let's have a try. There are several elements contained in this picture, the games-sitting room of her legendary apartment on the rue Bonaparte, that give us a glimpse into her process and the things this most Grande Dame of decorating so deeply cared about.



The legend in her later years. ARS NEW YORK/ADAGP, PARIS

### **A Room by Madeleine Castaing**

#### **Color**

One of the most important aspects of Madeleine Castaing's decoration was her love of color—rich colors in exotic combinations—and its potential to evoke history and atmosphere.

Notice the vividness of the inky blue fabric, which was of course designed by Ms. Castaing (as was the carpet). Add to that the strangeness of blue and black together. Think about it: When was the last time you saw a room entirely in blue and black? It's a very gutsy move. With a

fabric most people would look at a sample of and think "pillow," Ms. Castaing, understanding that the more you see of it the prettier it is, saw a uniform. One of my favorite quotes of hers: "Don't be intimidated by audacity. Be audacious—but with taste." This fearlessness toward color is a constant in her work and still so powerful to look at today. Fearless will always be hip.

### **A Blurred Identity**

Not defining the function of a room is a very aristocratic and ancienne regime thing to do. In 18th-century France, they didn't really have dining rooms; a table would be set up in whatever salon struck the right mood. This kept rooms from being boring, bourgeois and without mystery, which I suspect might have been the most damning thing Ms. Castaing could say about a room. Here, the billiard light suggests "games room"...but I suspect its real role in the mind of Ms. Castaing was to be an object of interest and guts, like a sculpture. She was known as a lover of charismatic objects, and I have yet to read of anyone remembering her as a mean pool player.

### **Whimsy**

It is the decorator's gift to make unlikely marriages, like the tiny urn on a porcelain stove (right side of room)—or, for that matter, a porcelain stove in front of the fireplace. Twentieth-century blue-blood decorator Sister Parish, America's version of Ms. Castaing, was asked once why she had put a worthless giltwood curtain finial atop a lovely antique clock in her entrance hall. "I put it there," she said, "because I had it." Any more questions?

### **French, and Yet Not**

We are in an indisputably French room, an archetype of Parisian style. And yet very few of the objects are actually French: an English Regency table between the windows, a Gustavian porcelain stove, Swedish chairs (or are they Russian?). Ms. Castaing's method is to build a "story" that yields a vivid impression. It reminds me of Thelonious Monk describing himself as looking for the music hidden "between" the notes that were written. It is poetic, in fact literary—and it is why her style is inimitable.



**A Room by Madeleine Castaing ROLAND BEAUFRE**

Netto, David. *The Decorator's Decorator*. *Wall Street Journal*, October 9, 2010.

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A LITTLE MORE CASTAING

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Another room by Ms. Castaing ROLAND BEAUFRE

No one did more to promote the black coolie shade than Ms. Castaing. But look at the surprising contrast of that large lamp and the desk—playing with scale gives rooms like this a sense of personality and improvisation, as well as the illusion of having grown over time.



Another room by Ms. Castaing ROLAND BEAUFRE

Castaing rugs and fabrics, including the floral-garland-striped "Rayure Broderie" on her walls, are sold through Stark.