

Reconciled Beauty

French doyenne of design Andrée Putman illustrates that life is best lived not in black, white, or gray, but rather in rich contrast

By Claire Naa

Upon opening the door to Andrée Putman's office in the 14th arrondissement of Paris, visitors are immediately blinded by the light shining through the space's playfully constructed design of glass openings and windows. Seated behind a black desk is a tall woman dressed in a stark white suit, her ash blond hair billowing slightly in the breeze from a nearby fan. The window behind her allows the light of day to shine gleefully on an elegant necklace—an item, the woman explains, that she has worn every day since she unearthed it at a flea market and replated it with white gold.

This is Andrée Putman, one of the world's most famed and sought-after interior designers. Her unique aesthetic philosophy has earned her the title of “the Coco Chanel of interior design” among Americans, while the French refer to her as “la grande dame du style”. Using her eclectic approach, she has for years bestowed her sophisticated flair on private, everyday living spaces in addition to numerous public buildings, boutiques, hotels, museums and high-end concept stores.



Photo © Andrée Putman.

Relying solely on appearances, one might imagine that this master of French décor is perhaps haughty and inaccessible. Her 5'8" willowy figure is destabilizing for most; her notoriety carries an essence that is slightly intimidating; her stare is piercing.

And yet, beneath her all-business exterior lies a designer with a heart. Of her necklace, she reveals, “I often grow attached to objects that have no commercial value, but that do possess sentimental value for me,” adding that she is drawn to objects as she is drawn to people: by her heart.

Putman is one of those individuals with an innate capability of turning the banal into extraordinary. Whenever she starts something, she means to—and does—succeed. When she decided to learn to play the piano at the age of 23, she was soon after awarded the Prix d'Harmonie from the Paris Conservatory (1948). When she began writing for *Elle* magazine, she immediately became noted for her exemplary contributions to the publication's furniture and décor pages (1968). And when she opened her first concept store, *Créateurs et Industriels*, it was an instant success (1971).

“The place [*Créateurs et Industriels*] was conceived as a meeting point for fashion designers and prominent industry figures, a place where they could edit and revise their most beautiful models,” says the designer, who discovered such now-famous fashion talents as Issey Miyake, Jean-Charles de Castelbajac, Thierry Mugler and Claude Montana.



The living room of a suite in Putman's new Hong Kong hotel, The Putman. Photo © Andrée Putman.



Putman's Crescent Sofa with white oak frame. Courtesy Ralph Pucci International.

Putman is an avant-garde artist—not unlike many of her close friends—and she credits her artistic talents as helping her win over her now-ex-husband, Jacques Putman, an art collector and dealer. “Thanks to him, I was able to meet Niki de Saint Phalle, Tinguely, Arman and César,” she concedes.

In 1978, she divorced. “It was the most painful moment of my life,” she says of the experience. To overcome her heartache, she threw her energy behind a new and audacious project: the opening of the Ecart International design label.

“I produced furnishings originally created by important 20th-century designers like Eileen Gray and Pierre Chareau,” she recalls. “It was a difficult period for me. I was weak, broke and there were



Putman's creations are elegant but also very livable. Pictured here is a bedroom suite in The Putman. Photo © Andrée Putman.



Clean lines accentuate a Putman-designed bathroom at the The Putman, Hong Kong. Photo © Andrée Putman.



Putman's Crescent Club Chair with white oak frame. Courtesy Ralph Pucci International.

plenty of people trying to discourage me from pursuing the costly venture. Perhaps they didn't believe in my ability to bounce back or maybe they wanted to protect me, knowing that I had a diploma and possible career in music."

Putman indicates that there is one thing that cannot be learned and has no price: taste. Having always lived in beautiful locales, it would seem as though she has naturally internalized the beauty she has encountered in her life experiences. "When I would leave my apartment in the 6th arrondissement of Paris, it was to spend the summer at the Cistercian Abbey of Fontenay in Bourgogne, which is now a site on UNESCO's list of World Heritage Sites," she says. "It is evident that places of that nature form one's regard."

Throughout her life, passing from the luxurious to the ordinary has made Putman a sort of chameleon, capable of adapting herself to any situation. "When I create an environment, I juxtapose certain objects, everyday things and items with a refined quality," she says.

It is this feeling of subtle variation that forms Putman's unique style. For her, things should not be black or white or gray—they should naturally contrast with one other: "To create meaning within a space, there has to be a feeling of reconciliation between the poor



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A chic dining table awaits dinner guests. Photo © Andrée Putman.

and the rich, the sleek and the dusky, the expensive and the cheap," she explains. "Beauty is not only that which is luxurious. That is a false perception."

Putman's most recent creation comes in the form of a hotel-apartment-boutique development that opens this spring in central Hong Kong. The tower contains 28 apartments and, for the first time in her life, Putman has given her own name to a structure. Her building, The Putman, brings together two disciplines that she has mastered: interior design and architecture.

Keeping with her signature "sense of calm", she has created in each 1,300-square-foot unit several independent rooms that are strung together by an exterior hallway. "Depending on which door you push, you may find yourself in the kitchen, the living room or the dining room," she details, emphasizing the versatility of her design. Businesspeople, for instance, can welcome visitors into the kitchen for friendly gatherings or into the dining room for more formal occasions. "This place is conducive to the signing of contracts without the normal constraints of a conventional hotel," says Putman with a proud smile. ■



A Putman-designed vanity table with lift-up mirror. Courtesy Ralph Pucci International.

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Tuesday—Thursday

12am-5am Jai Rich
 5am-6am Bob Parlocha
 6am-9am Bubba Jackson
 9am- 1pm Brad Williams
 1pm-5pm Helen Borgers
 5pm-7pm Jazz on the Latin Side with Jose Rizo
 7pm-1 2am Bob Parlocha

Friday

12am-5am Jai Rich
 5am 6am Bob Parlocha
 6am-9am Bubba Jackson
 9am-1 pm Brad Williams
 1pm-5pm Helen Borgers
 5pm-8pm Paul James
 8pm-1 2am Jazz on the Latin Side with Jose Rizo

Saturday

12am-5am Jai Rich
 5am-6am Bob Parlocha
 6am-9am Swinging Years with Chuck Cecil
 9am-12pm Tommy Hawkins
 12pm 2pm LeRoy Downs
 2pm-7pm Nothin' but the Blues with Nick Gerard
 7pm-10pm Paul James
 10pm-12am United Groove with Miles Perlich

Sunday

12am-6am Bob Parlocha
 6am-9am The Swinging Years with Chuck Cecil
 9am-2pm Nick Tyler
 2pm-7pm Nothin' but the Blues with Jack Devaney
 7pm-8pm House of Blues Radio Hour with Elwood Blues
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