

Etiquette

FINE AND FORMAL TEXTILES

MANNERS

Hanbok, table linen, bow ties

MORES

South of France, hats, gloves
and stockings, silk in Lyon

MODEL

Kaffe Fassett, Little Shilpa,
Tamasyn Gambell





Joy to behold

THE DECORATIVE STYLE OF KAFFE FASSETT

Abundance is a lovely word and one that lends itself to descriptions of Kaffe Fassett's London home. Exuberance follows close on its heels, as this is a space where colours, textures and techniques join forces to create a virtuoso display of creativity.

In this interior the enthusiasm for pattern and colour is tangible – in the form of hundreds of paintings, pots and textiles – and contagious. Artfully arranged collections draw you in: a shelf of vegetable-shaped ceramics raises a smile and lets you know that this is a place where beauty is enjoyed and interacted with on a daily basis. Nothing is behind glass or in cabinets.

Without pausing to reflect you might begin to use phrases such as 'a riot of colour' – but wait. Yes, this is a house like no other, objects are gathered on a larger scale than usual – why have three needlepoint cushions when you can have thirty-five? (The answer might be that abundant means 'full to overflowing'.) Nevertheless there is a peaceful centre to the profusion and it is Kaffe

himself. A man who expresses himself in measured tones and has a patient, thoughtful air. It doesn't quite make sense. A glance through his new autobiography shows that this is a man who, in design terms, hit the ground running and has never stopped. Really he should be charging around, issuing orders and trying to balance the five or six projects he has on the go. Instead, the day we visit he is at his easel taking five minutes to finalise a new design. In twenty minutes a car will arrive to take him and

his partner, Brandon Mably, to a photoshoot with Bruce Webber. For now it's a chance to do what he loves best, work with colour. "Colour is my most passionate obsession," he admits, and no one who has stepped past his mosaicked front porch could doubt him.

Kaffe was born in San Francisco in 1937. He spent much of his youth in Big Sur, California, where his parents bought a log cabin from Orson Welles and transformed it into the famous Nepenthe restaurant, a gathering place for artists. At the age of 19 he won a scholarship to the Museum of Fine Arts School in Boston, but left after 3 months to paint in London. He settled in England in 1964.

A kaleidoscope of ventures have taken place in the 48 years since that arrival. One of the first was a trip to a Scottish wool mill with fashion designer Bill Gibb, see issue 26. There he bought Shetland wool and some knitting needles, and on the train back to London a fellow passenger taught him how to knit. Knitting is one

of the crafts Kaffe is most famous for, but other media attract him too. Samples of his needlepoint (Kaffe designs needlepoint kits for Ehrman Tapestries) are scattered throughout the house including a huge pile of cushions in the living room. Everything he designs is made up and the collection spans decades and a spectrum of styles. Keeping record of the prodigious output is something of a problem and the top floor of the house has become an informal archive. In the future it is hoped the







house will become a study centre where researchers can take inspiration from their surroundings.

In 1988 Kaffe was the first living textile artist to have a one-man show at the Victoria & Albert Museum; though the designation 'textile artist' is a moot point, Kaffe's paintings are an underappreciated part of his oeuvre. His detailed canvases and murals appear throughout the house, sometimes sitting behind the objects they depict, creating a pleasing effect of added depth and decoration.

Kaffe seems happy to turn his hand to anything that meets his criteria of colour and pattern. And as soon as he learns a new skill he seems determined to pass it on to as many people as possible through books, workshops and lectures. There is a generosity and sociability to the process that feels good-natured. Naturally the same atmosphere pervades his home. It is a social hub and stunning backdrop for events large or small. The dining room in particular is a delight – a study in foliage or an interior "ode to the cabbage", a recurring motif in Kaffe's work. Horticulture is yet another interest – Kaffe designed a gold medal winning garden for the 1998 Chelsea Flower Show and returned last year when invited to create one of five 'Artisan Retreats'. His was called a 'Needlepoint Haven'.

In the coming months there will be several chances to discover Kaffe's work. His new autobiography tells his story in his own words, and early next year Marsha Hunt and Sue Timney will design his retrospective at The Fashion And Textile Museum in London. That will be followed by a show at The Welsh Quilt Centre, Lampeter in March 2013. Of course that's not all that is in his diary: it's a wonder he ever finds a moment to enjoy his colourful home. ●●●

Dreaming in Colour, An Autobiography, Stewart, Abrams & Chronicle Books, ISBN-10: 158479996X, £25, Kaffe Fassett at RHS Shades of Autumn Show, 23–24 October 2012, Lawrence Hall, Greycoat Street, Westminster SW1P 2PE, www.rhs.org.uk



