

ROOMS

DESIGN AND DECORATION



JOHN STEFANIDIS

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TEXT BY

MARY HENDERSON

DESIGNED BY

PAUL BOWDEN

Weidenfeld & Nicolson
London

Endpapers
Drawings of John Stefanidis furniture

Frontispiece
The print room at Netherton

Page 6
A kitchen on Patmos

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To all the people whose kind forbearance
has allowed me to create the rooms that
make this book.

John Skafarini



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INTRODUCTION

Rooms, like people, have different faces – wear different clothes. Some hide under heavy make-up, others wear none; some choose fashionable colours, others prefer classical simplicity. Some rooms project a fantasy image of their owners, others give a true picture of the owner's character and way of life. Early historical documents and books on design and decoration tell us about the structure of people's houses and rooms, and also give us an insight into their lives. But are these paintings, sketches and plans accurate? Is this what the artist saw or is it his romantic interpretation? We will never know. But such questions are not relevant today for, with modern photography, as in this book (even though a photograph tends to flatten out a room and anchor furniture, losing mobility and the fluctuation of light), a contemporary style is registered. There are no imaginary embellishments, no cheating, the record is clear.

Over the years fashion and social change have dictated the pattern of how rooms have been arranged, altered and rearranged. Each fashionable look, first avidly copied, then overdone, was later checked and reversed. In the seventeenth century, for instance, design was a man's prerogative, the architect was the main creator of rooms, and in keeping with his plans furniture was usually lined up against the panelled walls and set out in rigid fashion. Later, in the eighteenth century, ladies and their upholsterers intervened and the scene changed. Walls were lined with fabric – often to the architect's disgust as it camouflaged his work – fabric was used for bed hangings, draped over doors, made into ample curtains and used for upholstery. And all materials in a room were often in a matching pattern and colour, giving a unified green look, or blue look, or gold and white impression. Gradually this phase changed when architects took the lead again, designing their own furniture and working with a team – usually a decorator and an upholsterer. The French Empire architects Percier and Fontaine were among the first in this field in the nineteenth century. Furniture became mobile, was moved around, placed at right angles to the fireplace, or in the centre of



John Stefanidis in his Chelsea studio

the room; chairs were there to be drawn up, not to line a wall. Symmetry was abandoned – asymmetry was the fashion. Rooms began to be furnished according to their function: for entertaining, for family life or for reading and study. Throughout Europe the trend was quickly followed.

In Britain the Victorian era of clutter and cover – where everything seemed to be covered in heavy, deep red-braided velvet or plush – gave way to the antithesis, to William Morris, to Bloomsbury austerity, to Modernism and Post-Modernism. Although the social changes created by the French Revolution and Britain's Industrial Revolution irrevocably altered the course of design and decoration, it is wrong to fix dates or make

sweeping generalizations on styles and their evolution because styles move in cycles and rarely full circle. They often repeat themselves but turn up in a new guise having – sometimes even unconsciously – assimilated national and contemporary influences. Today it is hard to find a label for the 1980s, as a battle is raging – a free-for-all tussle of styles and criss-cross influences. Perhaps this is due to our jet-age culture where a plethora of ideas, colours and forms from all over the globe is speedily picked up and disseminated on TV, in movies and in the press, bringing taste and style, once the prerogatives of a chosen few, within everyone's reach.

In the past most of the historical data on style and trends came from plans and inventories of important buildings, stately homes and palaces, because these kept more accurate records. Now, although stately homes, palaces and period buildings are being restored, it is the ever growing number of houses, factories, offices and apartments that have to be designed and decorated. A designer like John Stefanidis must therefore have flexibility, for he can be called to renovate a fishing lodge, a small *pied-à-terre*, a derelict mews house or stable, a modern apartment, a castle or a stately home. These could be anywhere in the world – Britain, France, Greece, the USA or the Middle East, all places he has worked in. For this task Stefanidis' art stems from a wide knowledge and

appreciation of past masters coupled with an eye that has culled detail and beauty from his extensive journeys – which include South America, the countries of the Middle East and, most important of them all, India. When working on a project he can choose, enhance, revive or reject traditional patterns, interpret and also sometimes copy designs he has met on his travels. As a true artist he can create out of these influences a style that is his own, that is contemporary, harmonious, elegant and pleasing. It is restrained and original, but it has a firm classical base. It combines the rules of structure with a variety of decoration carefully chosen to suit a building, a room, an era – and a person, the client. In 1898 Tolstoy defined Art as ‘an activity by means of which one man, having experienced a feeling, intentionally transmits it to others’ (Leo Tolstoy, *What is Art*). Stefanidis clearly does this, but Tolstoy goes further and adds that ‘the recipient of a truly artistic impression is so united to the artist that he feels as if the work were his own and not someone else’s’; and this maxim for a successful designer’s relationship with his client has always been John Stefanidis’ aim.

Childhood and early years

Early influences are important – indirectly and subconsciously they leave a mark. John Stefanidis was born in Cairo in 1937. His Greek parents, who stemmed from Corfu, were Alexandrines, their families having lived in that ancient, teeming Middle Eastern city with its rich mixture of colour, race and traditions for three generations.

French, considered at that time the most prestigious European language, was initially planned to be John’s mother tongue so his parents sent him to a French *lycée* kindergarten. But after a brief period his father moved to Eritrea to join the British Military Mission (set up in 1941 after the Abyssinian campaign) and John was sent first to a Greek Orthodox church school and then to a small, hastily assembled English school where his British education began.

John’s recollections of those very early years – from the age of four – include exciting trips in Dakotas and seaplanes back and forth from Cairo and stops at Khartoum where the family stayed in a large hotel conveniently next door to the zoo. Visions of Asmara are still vivid in his mind. The clean mountain air, the rainy seasons followed by brilliant sunshine; the handsome Copts in their cotton or woollen gowns; the women with long plaited tresses, the men in flowing robes clutching their tall staffs. There was fun too (and wit and gaiety are often found in John’s work), as his favourite form of transport was riding in a *calessino* – a buggy for two harnessed to a prancing horse left behind by the retreating Italians – driven by the flamboyant former Italian riding master in a cock-feathered hat. Other recollections are of his parents’ house on the port of Massawa. This was a huge trellis cube which, by filtering the air, always kept the temperatures cool. Later that trellising was to inspire his furniture and screens (pp.49,155) and he has longed for it to replace the draughts and noise of modern air-conditioning devices.

After the war John’s father remained in Eritrea, where he bought salt and potash mines, and in order to continue his son’s education he sent him to Egypt in the care of an uncle and aunt. After three years of preparatory schooling which John wryly remembers as mainly being taught the joys of dancing round the maypole, he moved to the English School in Heliopolis. There the curriculum for the cosmopolitan,

multiracial students dispensed with prayers for Moslems and Jews to the envy of the Christians, but included English and European history, a snatch of Arab history and Bible classes which John found came to life vividly as the Bedouin, riding in from the desert, tethered their camels outside the school windows. But throughout the period from 1952, when the monarchy was overthrown, to 1954 when Colonel Nasser became President, Cairo was in tumult and the school was often closed. Frequently a cordon of soldiers had to protect the school as rumours circulated about some parents who had been imprisoned or placed under house arrest while others had risen to power. Despite the upheavals John remembers his schooldays as being happy, with pleasant holidays when he sped to Alexandria sitting in a red velvet train compartment, or was driven through the desert at break-neck speed where he saw more mirages than there could possibly have been. Thus fantasy and imagination had played their early part; the desert’s infinite space and Alexandria’s mixture of hedonism and art were to leave a lasting imprint.

For recreation his high-minded uncle took him – or ‘dragged’ him as he recalls – to the Cairo Museum instead of the movies. But twenty years later, when he came back to the museum on his way to India, he found he knew every corner – where every statue was to be found. Thinking back John finds it hard to judge how much he was influenced by this passion for Egyptology but he admits that the light – gold in Cairo and pearl in Alexandria – had a great influence on his work and this is evident throughout this book.

John returned to Eritrea during the long summer holidays but, at the age of fifteen, he travelled to Greece for the first time. Here he was struck by the clear piercing Attic light that dazzlingly rebounds off marble temples and whitewashed walls, and the softer purple evening veil – so different, he recalls from the tomb-like severity and one-dimensionalism of Egypt.

Oxford followed. After ‘spending ten days in London on the way and going to twelve plays’ he sat his Oxford entrance examination. John had visited Oxford in the past but did not know Brasenose, which was to be his college, and looking around he was deeply depressed by the gloom, the dripping walls and the winter darkness. He prayed he would fail the test but in fact he passed and his Oxford years were crammed with gaiety. His ‘unheated rooms’ looked over the Radcliffe Camera (by James Gibbs) and All Souls (by Nicholas Hawksmoor) – early inspirations for a budding designer.

When he came down from Oxford, he worked for a time for the advertising agency CPV (Coleman, Prentice and Varley). But after a year, when his work permit ran out, he was forced to go abroad and he joined CPV’s newly-opened branch in Milan. There his job was administrative and he learnt about deadlines, discipline, efficiency and how to delegate – experiences that were to serve him well in the future. In Italy at that time there was what was called ‘Il boom’ and Milan was its centre. The town was bursting with talent as artists and writers, Romans, Florentines and Neapolitans, jostled for jobs and fame. There is no doubt that Italy influenced John’s decision to become a designer. Its infinite variety of architecture, colours, paintings, frescoes and bravura are clearly reflected in his work.

A period in Greece followed and, still uncertain of what he wanted to do, he tried his hand at real estate. This was not a success. In Athens he



1. Op art sculpture in a bedroom with painted walls.



2. Stefanidis-designed unit and chrome sculptures in a music room.

delighted in his roof-top apartment overlooking the Parthenon but he found his compatriots in business tricky. He left, having bought a plot of land, and travelled all over Greece, then a country untouched by tourism.

First commissions in London

By 1967 his mind was made up – he had decided that he wanted to work and live in London. Although he had had no formal art training John knew he could design. He had already renovated some houses on Patmos and designed the interior of a yacht which he describes as ‘all chrome, steel and formica, very comfortable, clean lines, pale cream and buff colours and very restful’. Brimful of new ideas and styles he first decorated his own house in London which, when pictures were published in *Queen* magazine, attracted considerable attention (Fig. 1), and he worked on friends’ houses. He was also commissioned to decorate a lakeside house in Geneva where his novel treatment of abstract shapes confusing the perimeters of the hall was immediately picked up by *Connaissance des Arts*.

Among John’s early contracts was a music room for Christopher Blackwell of Island Records in Kensington. The room had to be dark so he painted it chocolate brown. Inspired by Vasarely he added huge floor cushions to give colour. He also designed his first pieces of furniture for this room – large, slick lacquer and chrome cabinets – a design he has repeated to this day, changing the surfaces, using or discarding the chrome (Fig. 2). Another project was ‘Joldwynds’ in Surrey, a 1930s house built by Oliver Hill, the architect and designer whose later work embraced Modernism and Art Deco (Fig. 4). John responded readily to its style, given both his affection and respect for Art Deco – elements of which are often to be found in his rooms today alongside his contemporary or traditional furniture. ‘Art Deco’, he believes, ‘was much more revolutionary than Art Nouveau and immensely innovative’.

Allowing free range to his capacity for fantasy and wit, John also designed two balls. One in 1969 for Viscountess Lambton in her 1930s London house built by Freda Casa Mores, was decorated with swirling colours and a gold and silver floor; the other, in 1970 for Mrs Paul Channon, was even more sensational, and had a two-storey-high tent, Kabuki designs and platforms at different levels. The tent was lined in varying shades of pink and the ceiling hung with clusters of white balloons which reflected the graded shades of pink. There were giant paper flags with camellias *en relief*, and strings of ping-pong balls as curtains with electric lights in them.

Style and international projects

Parallel to his work in London, John began restoring more houses on Patmos. Although he has now renovated some ten houses on the island and set a style for others to follow, he feels that restoration is a less valid artistic expression than building anew. ‘The rustic idiom in design’, he argues, ‘is the assimilation of the local vernacular architecture in detail and materials. In restoration contemporary methods of building and materials are used without being evident – so restoration is really a form of artifice.’ He has only built one house from scratch on the island, for the German publisher Axel Springer (p. 112), and hankers for more.

The centre of his international design operation today is the John Stefanidis studio in Chelsea where the doors and window surrounds are painted Mediterranean blue – a foil to London's winter grey. And as his team of twenty specialists, which includes about seven architects and highly trained assistant designers, bend over their drawing boards and his secretaries tap out detailed specifications on their word processors, the atmosphere of precision and concentration is like that of a space shuttle launch. Now that he is one of the foremost British designers, it is interesting to trace the direct influence of his early years on his work. In his style, which could be described as Modern – a counter-current to Colefax & Fowler, with a different use of colour from David Hicks – form, order and discipline have always been his masters. The use of light, for which he is so renowned, surely comes from those sharp shafts of Middle Eastern and Mediterranean sun. Even if it is dark and gloomy outside, his rooms glow with light. His windows – dressed with pull-down blinds behind bouffant balloon shades or floating unlined double curtains or even half-drawn plain straw or muslin blinds – all give the impression that they are there to keep the sun in check, and that it is just outside. His mirrors, often in pairs, his rows of plain silver 'flower pot' vases crammed with flowers (Fig. 5) his polished chrome, steel, brass or lacquer furniture (p. 108) pick up and throw out light.

Concealed lights tucked away in ceiling mouldings, or behind cupboards or shelves, illuminate his rooms too (without a single bulb showing) and enhance his carefully chosen, carefully mixed pale or bold coloured, dragged, stippled or stencilled walls. On the practical side, reading lamps – sometimes in brightly polished brass – are scattered around, and there are lights at different levels. His kitchens and bathrooms are always functional as well as splendidly luxurious.

When approaching a new project, John first takes in the street and the exterior of the building, because he believes that when decorating you 'must look out of the window'. The scene outside is always carefully interpreted and reflected in his work. Then he studies his client's way of life and surveying the rooms with a laser-beam eye, he decides whether to conserve, alter or gut. But the most crucial moment comes when he discusses the work with his client: when he tries to find out what he or she has in mind. What 'finish' is required – should it be a marble bathroom and specially designed fitted furniture or should it be a marbelized or tiled bathroom, practical, with less expensive fittings? Should it be silks or cottons? The question of a client's taste, aspirations and ambitions is vital too. There are those who hate stripes that others love; those who cannot bear certain colours and rule out, say, green or blue, or superstitious clients who think that bird designs or feathers are unlucky and furniture with animals' feet is unsavoury. Some people cling to totally unsuitable but beloved objects, while others do not really know what they want. John's role is to guide, help and interpret – which is sometimes hard. One client, for instance, sent him a tape of *Dynasty* and wanted her home to look like Joan Collins's apartment. But at meetings she felt sick – taking decisions was too much of a strain. Another client wished to meticulously restore a derelict Palladian villa on the outskirts of Athens. Looking back rather sadly on this project, John feels that 'although historians have agreed that restoration is in part invention', the careful copies of antique borders, mouldings and floors and all the architectural details were carried out very successfully according to his brief. Yet when work was completed the client's wife



3. Venini glass and Stefanidis furniture in a Kensington bedroom.



4. The sitting room at 'Joldwynds', a 1930s house by Oliver Hill.

preferred the rose-covered cottage she had moved into during renovation. The task of a successful designer is to generate harmony and to instil confidence so that a client can express his or her own style, which the designer must then bring out in his work, adding his own interpretation, expertise and design. John's aim is to do this and evidence that he often succeeds is best spelt out by a recent client, the owner of a prestigious eighteenth-century stately home. Her words: 'There are many talented interior designers but to my mind John is the only one with the flair of genius, he is in a class of his own. He does not seek to thrust his personality on the client nor the house or room or whatever it may be. He prises out with perfection what is there and transforms it into something of great beauty and originality.'

The contemporary designer's role

Fashion can be said to be a form of mimicry. A style is created by a designer – then quickly copied and commercialized. The danger is that in this rapid process beauty often suffers. Things are not necessarily 'desired because they are beautiful but found beautiful because they are desired' – an idea put forward in Paris as early as 1801 (C. Percier and P. F. L. Fontaine, *Recueil de décorations intérieures*). Since we live in an era of Designer and Interior Decoration explosion – fired by the influences and products of giants such as Terence Conran and Laura Ashley – do we need interior designers? Now that so many windows display festoon blinds – easily obtained from leading stores and by mail order – and most housewives have tried their hand at papering, painting, stippling or stencilling? Now that almost all magazines and decorating shops offer to bring swatches, wallpaper and trimmings to your doorstep, what is the need? 'Do-it-yourself' decorators can produce a fashionable, quick and effective cover but this often lacks the understanding of architecture and of scale, the attention to detail, quality, craftsmanship and finish. John Stefanidis' trained eye strips a room or house to the bare bones. Building work and the creation of harmonious space precedes all decoration. Ceilings are raised or lowered, partition walls removed or added. All this creates new volumes and restores shapes to mutilated rooms. Finally, when a project has been completed, John and his team proudly claim it will be trouble-free for many years.

Contract procedure

In his design studio, this is how John works. Stage one is a meeting with a potential client on site or at the John Stefanidis studio where they run through, and establish, procedure, time schedules and fees. Further meetings with the client are then arranged, perhaps three or four, again in Stefanidis' studio and on site in order to gauge the concept, the requirements, the practicalities, budget comparisons and the evaluation of personalities – really to find out what the client likes: what finishes; what to incorporate in the way of pictures, furniture, etc; what kind of kitchen is required; what bathrooms and fittings; what areas and special requirements are needed for children, staff, etc.; and any such points as hi-fi cupboards, paint finishes, the use of wood, marble, mirrors, etc. These meetings are attended by the senior architect, the design expert in charge of fabrics, and an administrator and co-ordinator.

A survey follows and accurate measurements are taken; surveys and



5. John Stefanidis' house in Cheyne Walk.



6. Neo-classical interior in a London mews house.

reports that are made for the purchase of a house are, in John's opinion, rarely accurate enough. After these are completed, he holds an internal meeting with the senior architect, assistant architect or draughtsman and other experts depending on what architectural changes and innovations are necessary, and the general character that is to be given to the project. As most of the work is the conversion of existing houses there are often problems which would not arise if the buildings were new and designed by him. Internal meetings are held to discuss the 'brief', plans drawn up, changed and approved and made final for the architectural presentation to be submitted to the client.

In the meantime, meetings are held in the studio to discuss furnishings. These lead to the 'Furnishing presentation' – the presentation of sketches of rooms, colour boards of paint samples and fabric swatches, samples of wood, marble, mirrors, trimmings and whatever else is needed for the job. Also furniture drawings and suggestions. When the presentation is accepted a budget is drawn up, unless a budget has been previously set to which all the plans adhere.

Working parallel to this procedure, the architects draw up their working drawings and specifications, which take some two to three months. Once the building contract starts, supervision lasts between three months and three years depending on its size. Orders are placed for all the joinery items not included in the building contract and the fabrics, carpets, etc., so that they will be on hand in time for final completion of the contract. Once the contractor is out of the building, specialist painters – if required – and carpets and soft furnishings are moved in.

This is but a sketch of the operation – a disciplined procedure where John, who is a perfectionist, takes all final decisions but allows his teams working on projects maximum independence. At meetings he sits and listens to their interpretation of his client's needs; he approves or disapproves of their suggestions, he points out the flaws or enthusiastically adopts their ideas. This teamwork is an enmeshed contribution of ideas, but always firmly marked by John's ordered style. He is good at delegating, encouraging the talent of others, increasing their confidence, and by being a catalyst he stimulates new ideas and solutions. As a result a number of members of his teams have now established their own practice after working with him.

The final look of John Stefanidis' rooms may be conventional or unconventional, yet they will all have a contemporary cloak – perhaps barely visible. There will always be harmony, comfort, restraint and a respect for the architectural character of the building, and in particular for the requirements of those who are to use the rooms he designs. For his clients John can open a Pandora's box of colour and design: colours such as those he picked up from the piles of powder outside Indian temples which inspired his first fabrics; designs influenced by painters such as Bronzino, Carpaccio or Veronese; shapes and designs based on intensive research or furniture he has seen on his travels. Not unlike the British aristocrats of the eighteenth century who returned from their Grand Tours laden with items for their collections, Stefanidis returns from his journeys with a myriad of techniques, objects and ideas for his rooms and houses.

'Getting it right' is his forte and his aim. This means getting the 'right' backcloth and making the 'right arrangement and choice of furniture for

his client's rooms. In Fig. 1 the painted wall which confuses the eye as it masks the contours of an ordinary room is the right backcloth for the movement of the Soto sculpture and the Oldenburg-style soft sculpture encompassing the tv. Fig. 2 is an exercise in arrangement with an excellent grenadine backcloth and also shows Stefanidis' first furniture design. It is a simple piece carried out in lacquer and chrome. Fig. 3 shows more furniture designs by Stefanidis in good plain, bright colours – shades of pink and yellow. The Corbusier chair is wittily covered in velvet. Often small and inexpensive details give the right atmosphere, as in Fig. 5 where the rococo exuberance of the white porcelain chandelier is well matched by the lavish group of Stefanidis flowers. This is then played down by his utilitarian flower table – inspired by an illustration of a humble room taken from Mario Praz's *History of Interior Decoration*. The design for the cupboard in the background was adapted by Stefanidis from a design by Borromini.

Enlivening what Stefanidis calls 'conventional and inevitably predictable spaces' can be seen in his work in the 1960s and 1970s, for example, the Eaton Square bedroom (p. 141), and more dramatically in Pimlico where Stefanidis used variations of brown throughout until suddenly on the top floor there is a brilliant mural on a white background (Fig. 1). The insides of concealed cupboards were painted bright green or red, the bathroom a vibrant yellow.

Originally renowned for his modern design, Stefanidis can now be said to edit any style he chooses and improve upon existing architecture. There is a beautiful example of a 1980s neo-classical adaptation in a mews house which he has reconstructed (Fig. 6). It is restful – the pale colours engender this; there is comfort with traditional Edwardian easy chairs and a Stefanidis sofa with low arms to give a feeling of more space. There are lacquer tables, a large stone-topped sofa table, neo-classical heads and prints which are repeated throughout the house. The carpet, a combination of traditional and contemporary design, was made for Stefanidis, as were the unostentatious fireplace and the neo-classical mirror above it. Throughout the room Stefanidis has displayed clean lines, symmetry and simplicity – almost as if the room had been chiselled out of marble.

It is the extensive variety of his work – from marble swimming pools to palaces, cottages and yachts – that partly accounts for his importance, coupled with his ability to maintain a strong thread of noble design, of form and structure – punctuated here and there with a witty flourish of bravura, as in his stencilled walls, his 'window' stars in the ceiling of an indoor pool, and his columns, mirrors and console tables with their giant Ionian volutes.

This book covers two decades of Stefanidis' design and decoration. The first part illustrates whole projects, where rooms in a building are linked harmoniously although they are treated individually. The second part illustrates rooms which serve the same purpose – such as bedrooms, sitting rooms, bathrooms and kitchens – but each one designed in a different manner to suit their use, the client's taste, the period of the building and the climate. Talleyrand has written that 'the embroidery of life is elegance' – and this is what John provides masterfully. His rooms are elegant, they have no gimmicks, no nostalgia. He is even able to create elegance in a cowshed (p. 145) and this he has done in his country home in Dorset.