

Tony Duquette

CHAMPION OF MAGIC
AND THEATER IN RESIDENTIAL DESIGN

By Penelope Rowlands

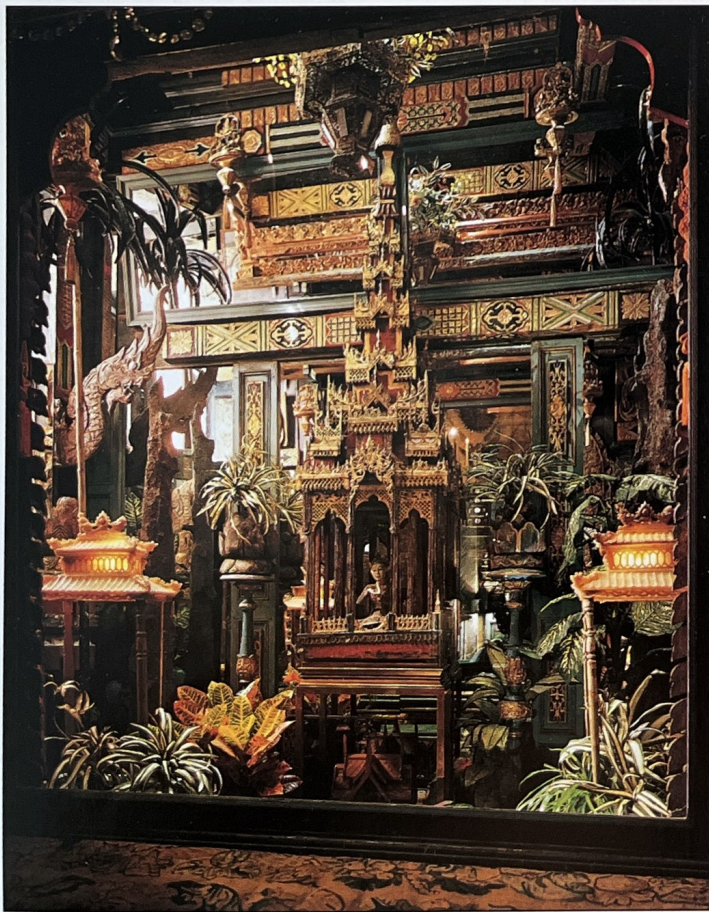


KEITH MORRISON

Like so much in life, it began with a dinner party. The setting was Los Angeles, the year was 1941, and the star of the evening was a witty plaster-and-glass centerpiece, playfully encrusted with faux jewels. This preposterous creation—around which sat a clutch of fine decorators, including the septuagenarian Elsie de Wolfe and the host, Hollywood designer James Pendleton—represented the decorating debut of a twenty-seven-year-old named Tony Duquette. And it was a triumph.

“Everyone who sat at that table ended up hiring Tony,” remembers Hutton Wilkinson, his business partner for thirty years. Most distinguished of these was de Wolfe herself, who had returned to the United States to escape the war and would become one of the gifted youth’s most fervent champions. “She’d just bought a house in Beverly Hills, and she and Tony transformed it,” Wilkinson reports.

Duquette was raised in southern California in a musically inclined family; there was even a touch of design



PHOTOGRAPHY: PETER VITALE



TOP LEFT: “We have sought inspiration for this house from the four corners of the earth,” Tony Duquette (1914–1999) said of the San Francisco house that he and his wife, Elizabeth, decorated over the course of decades. LEFT: A “magical grotto” off the entrance hall.

ABOVE: “I designed the enclosed terrace around the Tiffany stained-glass window,” he noted. Typical of his witty touches was a Balinese “toad orchestra” on the table. OPPOSITE: An amethyst-crystal chandelier created by Duquette illuminated the living room.



“This house is a fantasy based on an imaginary family we pretend occupies it,” said Duquette. “The man of the house is a captain who has traveled the seven seas collecting treasures.” ABOVE: Atop the entrance to the chapel room was an 18th-century Venetian painting.

history in his background—a great-uncle had been a partner of William Morris’s in London. While some parents might have been non-plussed by their son’s early eccentric style, his were not. In fact, it was his father who drove his son, a recent art school graduate who was then working as a store designer, to his first meeting with the Hollywood decorator William Haines.

What Duquette brought to the table—not just on that storied California night but for the rest of his long designing life—was “his own naive, wonderful style,” says Wilkinson. “He’d transform

things right before your eyes,” says James Coburn, for whom, in the 1960s, the designer turned a Beverly Hills house into a brilliantly hued, Eastern-inspired extravaganza. “He came up with things that blew your mind.” At Coburn’s house, these included an enormous Chinese lantern that “Tony dolled up and made extraordinary,” a polychromatic stuffed bird of paradise and shell-encrusted ceiling beams. “You felt there was magic all around you,” the actor adds, using a word that comes up often when people talk about Duquette. “He was the Merlin of the design world,” decorator Ron Mann observes.

To call Duquette multitalented is an understatement: He created sets for movies (*Kismet*, *Ziegfeld Follies*), costumes (notably for the original Broadway production of *Camelot*), and boldly scaled

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BELOW: A pagoda lantern hung in a sitting area. “Scavenging,” he said of the objects he found and transformed, “is my passion, instead of drinking or gambling.”



OPPOSITE: In 1986 Duquette created a pavilion dedicated to Saint Francis of Assisi, also in San Francisco; it was destroyed by a 1989 fire. He wrote, “I have cloaked Saint Francis in mystery and splendor and filled the air with strange sweet music and strange sweet motion.”





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jewelry for the duchess of Windsor, Sharon Stone and, most recently, the fashion houses of Gucci and Balmain. And he tossed off as a matter of course endless strange and wonderful inventions, such as finials made of lemon juicers and a sculpture made of red-painted branches and rakes.

Some of Duquette's best environments weren't done for his clients, who included Elizabeth Arden and Doris Duke. He was a voracious shopper—an activity he referred to as “scavenging”—and many of his finds ended up in his own lavish, overblown residences, which he shared with his artist wife, Elizabeth. Although based in southern California, the couple spent part of their time in a San Francisco Victorian; like all of their places, this one was a universe unto itself. It teemed with fantastic things, from the myriad Asian elements in its grottolike entrance hall to

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the Tiffany stained-glass window on the enclosed terrace. The designer's shimmering, green-hued sculpture pavilion—also in San Francisco—was quintessentially Duquette-like, a place of rare power. It was destroyed by fire in 1989, an event that inspired Duquette to create a series of sculptures called *The Phoenix Rising from His Flames*.

Duquette found inspiration everywhere. “Venice, the natural Baroque, old movies, Renaissance architecture, Arthurian legends,” says Wilkinson, reeling off a list of the things that moved his friend and partner. “He felt insects had great style.”

When Duquette died, in a Los Angeles hospital room last September, at the age of eighty-five, it was “without pain, struggle or fear,” says Wilkinson. This description could apply to his life. Tony Duquette went his own way—fancifully, with a certain lightness—and, in so doing, he left the rest of the world behind. □