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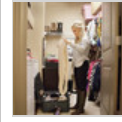
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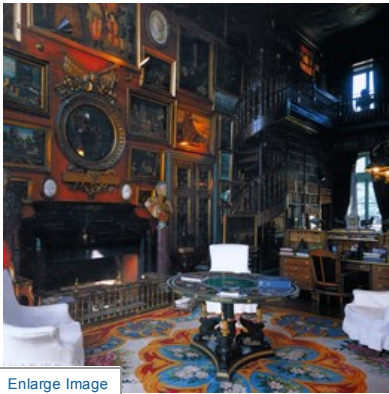
A Well-Bred, Well-Read Party Zone

The double-decker library at Château de Groussay was a spot where sophisticates could let loose. Decorator Robert Couturier remembers his convivial weekends there—and what the place taught him about design

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By JEN RENZI

March 8, 2013 3:42 p.m. ET



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HIGH VOLUME | Comfy sofas and chairs placed around the fireplace brought the lofty library at the Château de Groussay down to earth. "That's a very French way of arranging a room," said Mr. Couturier, "one big seating plan versus bunches of little vignettes. It's more conducive to group conversation." *Estate of Pascal Hinous*

ON PAPER, Robert Couturier is a bit intimidating. Just consider the Paris-born, New York-based decorator's design portfolio, replete with zillion-dollar mansions, manor homes, estates and even multi-building compounds in places like Biarritz, Cap Ferrat and other nerve centers of the upper crust.

He launched his solo career as the go-to designer for financier Sir James Goldsmith; customizing the interior of a [Boeing BA -1.35%](#) 757 was among Mr. Couturier's duties.

In person he is disarmingly warm and friendly—equal parts pedigreed and personable. So, too, is his favorite room, the congenial library of the Château de

Groussay in Montfort-l'Amaury, a town about 45 minutes west of Paris. He first encountered the storied property as the country home of Carlos de Beistegui, the scion of

ONLY \$1 A WEEK FOR 12 WEEKS an aesthete and peerless host. "I gathered, weddings," Mr.

Couturier said. "As a guest, you always felt welcome. It was a very comfortable house, which was unusual because the French don't do cozy. That combination of grand and relaxed happens very seldom." (In 1970, upon Mr. de Beistegui's death, the château's interiors were largely dismantled.)

Bio in Brief: Robert Couturier

His résumé: Educated at the École Camondo school of decorative arts in his native Paris, the designer launched his New York practice 25 years ago. He has since executed projects ranging from airplane interiors to vacation homes, is active on the show house and lecture circuit and is regularly included in Architectural Digest's annual list of the world's top decorators.

Guests always wound up in the library, a palatial space that was "also a real hangout," Mr. Couturier recalled. Conceived by Mr. de Beistegui in collaboration with society decorator Emilio Terry as an addition to the early-19th-century château in the 1950s, the double-height room had floor-to-ceiling mahogany bookcases and salon-style art installations. A Louis XVI desk anchored a seating area furnished with white slipcovered sofas and chairs conducive to lounging. "In country homes, you entertain for much longer periods of time," Mr. Couturier said. "It is a very different way of being in a house—much

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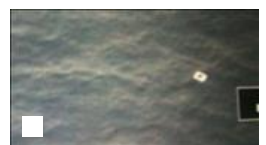
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Robert Couturier *Gianni Franchellucci*

His clients: A-listers, society fixtures and major collectors seek out Mr. Couturier for his connoisseurship, attention to detail, sense of humor—and discretion.

His look: Lavish yet livable. Rooms that look like precious stage sets are anathema to Mr. Couturier, who strives to design interiors that function for people who want to nest, de-stress and occasionally sprawl. While rooted in tradition, his work commingles period antiques, vintage finds and contemporary art; in any given space, Jean-Michel Frank, Picasso and Louis XVI pieces consort like guests at a fantasy cocktail party. robertcouturier.com

less formalized. You have no obligation to do things. It is more about conversation."

Mr. de Beistegui, he explained, was a genius at creating spaces that fostered interaction. "There'd be 400 people in the house, but it never felt full. And yet those big rooms always felt human, never overwhelming, thanks to an attention to scale and proportion."

Mr. Couturier often thinks about the room when designing libraries for clients. Among the lessons he internalized during his time there: how to use lighting and snowy upholstered pieces to keep wood-paneled rooms from looking too dark, how to detail bookcases—and why messy shelves are a sign of a brilliant mind. "I prefer getting a bit lost trying to find a book: It fosters a sense of discovery that fuels my creativity."

Below, he shares a few more tips inspired by the château's library.

Go to chateaugroussay.com for more information about the property; the grounds (but not the house) are open to visitors from spring to fall.

Casually Layer on the Art

"I love how the artworks climbed all the way up the walls. (Not all the art was authentic: De Beistegui was known for having paintings blatantly copied for his collection.) In this room, art is an ornament and not the focus, which makes the library look more lived in. When you treat art as the main event, it detracts from the whole of the décor. Personally, I like hanging art against a colorful backdrop, which people tend to avoid. To me, white walls make the presentation feel too museum-like."



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Empire Painted Table

Use tables as auxiliary storage

"I very much like pullout shelves in bookcases, but they're not easy to use and for someone as absent-minded as me they are almost dangerous: I've never closed one without a book or a lamp falling! I prefer a central table for displaying books or piling up ones I haven't read yet. It is also nice to have a horizontal surface for placing coffee or drinks trays after a meal when you're entertaining." *Empire Painted Table, price upon request, H.M. Luther, 212-505-1485*

Go vertical

"Two-story private libraries were uncommon at the time. I'm not sure if this was the first one ever built, but it certainly felt pioneering. I actually designed a high-ceilinged library for my Rhinebeck home. But even if you don't have the room to go up, you can take advantage of the full height of the room with floor-to-ceiling shelves accessed by a library ladder." *Early-19th-century French Directoire Mahogany Library Steps, \$16,500, Gerald Bland, 212-987-8505*

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Early-19th-century French Directoire Mahogany Library Steps



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Collier Webb Scallop Light

Spotlight your books

"There's a misconception that abundant wood finishes make a room seem dark. In fact, darkness is a matter of the lighting scheme, not the room color. I often use clip-on lights or picture lights for library shelves, although it's tricky to hide their wiring. Some people don't like the look of exposed cords, which is a very European way of doing things." Another way to counteract gloom: white seating. "The pale slipcovers look so chic against the rich mahogany backdrop: The contrast creates a reverberation between light and dark." *Collier Webb Scallop Light, \$1,250, Jasper Showroom, 310-315-3028*

Choose furniture that can float



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Milo Baughman Desk/Table from 20cdesign

"That Louis XVI desk is a real beauty. It was finished on all four sides, which allowed it to stand in the middle of the room instead of pushed against a wall. Clients often request a desk in their library so the room can double as an office. In a space this palatial, you'd want something a bit grand—a leather writing surface, a richly detailed base—but there are nice modern options, too. I like this minimalist glass-

topped, rosewood-and-bronze table, a vintage design by Milo Baughman. It has nice lines and a bit of weight to it, and looks good from every angle." *Milo Baughman Desk/Table from 20cdesign, \$5,000, 1stdibs.com*

Back bookcases with color



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Wool felt and carriage cloth for the back panel of a bookcase *F. Martin Ramin for The Wall Street Journal, Styling by Anne Cardenas*

"I sometimes cover the back panel of a bookcase in a different material, like blue fabric or red leather. It breaks up the expanses of wood and adds a bit of life—anything to make things appear less serious. Wallpaper could create a nice effect as well. As for the wood itself, I don't use much mahogany for bookcases. These days, it's hard to find good slabs that aren't too orange-y. I prefer woods like bleached oak. But remember: You want to make sure the detailing of the woodwork is unique to

the library, and not too similar to your kitchen cabinets. Otherwise, the rooms look too

alike." From top: Kensington Wool Felt in Navy, to the trade, Holland & Sherry, 212-355-6241; Claremont Carriage Cloth in Baize, George Spencer Mia in Bronze Blue and Claremont Carriage Cloth in Slate, to the trade, Claremont Inc., 212-486-1252

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