

ELLE DÉCOR – January/February 2007

Photographed by Dominique Vorillon

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Under the Influence

Designer Madeline Stuart outfits a 1920s Hacienda for Muppets Mogul (and Hollywood Mom) Lisa Henson, and the result is exotic opulence fit for a modern Maharani.

Intimate and dimly lit are not terms one associates with Beverly Hills. After all, this is a city where house can be Brobdingnagian and chandeliers can be klieg-light bright. Tucked away on a quiet street, however, is a rambling old mansion where regional flamboyance has been banished in favor of something a bit more casual and faraway.

“It doesn’t have the Hollywood front hall with the big staircase going up,” admits entertainment executive Lisa Henson, who bought the house and then rented it for two years to rock star Courtney Love—believe it or not, “She was a great tenant!”—before moving in. The private courtyard was certainly appealing, but the painted and sturdily beamed ceilings sold her on the place, a relic of California’s craze for Spanish Revival architecture in the 1920s.

Silver-screen glamour wasn’t a design priority. Creating coziness, however, was crucial to Henson, a co-CEO, along with her brother Brian, of the Muppets empire founded by their late father, Jim. At the time, she was preoccupied with the delicate process of transplanting two young children (son Julian, daughter Ginger) and their pets (Marco the Dalmatian, Sugar the cockatoo) from their previous residence in Benedict Canyon. She waved sayonara not only to the more cramped quarters but to its subdued Zen-like décor, which had been overseen by the interior designer, Madeline Stuart, a longtime friend.

This time on the home front, “I was feeling a lot more emotional, flamboyant, and into ornamentation,” says Henson, a fan of distant lands such as India, Tibet, and Nepal (she and her sister once spent a couple months backpacking through the Himalayas). “I appreciate things that have greater historical resonance than my little life.”

That so-called little life has had spectacular high points. For several years Henson was president of Columbia Pictures, and she also was the first female president of the *Harvard Lampoon*, during which time

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the folklore and mythology major helped oversee a makeover of the magazine's castlelike headquarters by installing a black toilet and Gothic elements.

"Lisa and I share an affinity for the slightly macabre," says Stuart, whom Henson once enlisted to create a Freudian-dream study to showcase her collection of animal skulls and who was called in to furnish the new house. Most spine-tingling curiosities ended up in discreet corners—no mother wants to give her children nightmares—but a few dark entries made the full-frontal cut. In the living room is a Walton Ford painting of a parrot preening beneath a glass dome, while an eerie Darren Waterston diptych ("Kind of weird, kind of sexy," in Henson's opinion), starring devilish sprites and fluttering birds, dominates the master bedroom.

Oddities aside, "this is really a house about living and kids," says Stuart, as Julian zips past on Rollerblades. Serene, however, its not. Dappled with carnelian flowers and brilliant with golden arabesques, a stenciled wainscot straight out of the Taj Mahal wraps the living room's cream walls. Red and gold saris found in Artesia, a nearby city known for its concentration of Indian shops, became cushions for an Anglo-Indian daybed and tailored banquettes. Reflecting it all are silvery mirrors based on Indian motifs. The room's palette recalls the jewel tones of a Moghul miniature. "Our original color scheme was fuchsia and purple and lime-green," says the designer, adding dryly, "it would've been a little too brave."

The library, however, walks happily on the wild side, with dusky peacock-blue walls, a bold paisley fabric on armchairs with Proustian curved, and a red carpet strewn with stylized flowers. "Pretty wild!" Henson says of the neo-Vuillard blend. "It makes you want to actually take down the books and look at them." As Stuart recalls, "Within ten minutes of us finishing, there were people sitting around, hanging out, and talking. Absolutely magical."

Magical too, is daughter Ginger's pink-paisley bedroom, which is modeled after a passage in *A Little Princess* by Frances Hodgson Burnett, the one where an Indian butler decorates the orphaned heroine's garret room. The adjoining bathroom is lined with vintage 1950s Peter Pan wallpaper—one roll donated by Henson's friend Lucy Dahl (the screenwriter daughter of author Roald Dahl and actress Patricia Neal), the rest found on the Internet in what Stuart describes as an online "archeological dig." The Internet also yielded what Stuart calls "the tackiest, most fabulous" beaded curtains with a palm-tree pattern for \$39.95. They now hang on the terrace, behind a carved-wood Indian swing.

Such unsnobbish pursuit gives Henson's house an intrepid air, at once scholarly and spontaneous. Its exoticism is worn lightly, but its comforts are deep. Best of all, as far as Henson is concerned, it's a world away from Beverly Hills, yet right at its heart.