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THE WORLD OF INTERIORS



Vision Accomplished

Veere Grenney describes his late Victorian apartment on the Thames as the culmination of his life and career so far. For this space – built for the countess of Wemyss and allegedly once home to the Nazi dandy Von Ribbentrop – is now witness to the New Zealand-born decorator's fully honed style, in which muted colours and elegant textiles form a background to his expanding collection of British abstract art. No wonder many potential buyers have it in their sights, says Min Hogg. Photography: Fritz von der Schulenburg

Right: Veere Grenney designed the dining table, which stands below a 1930s Jansen chandelier on a sisal-and-jute carpet from Linney Cooper. The gilded, satin-covered chairs come from a set of 50 made for a Viennese palace in c1790. Grenney's 'Temple' linen – a homage to David Hicks – covers the walls





The drawing room is dominated by an ottoman covered in a velvet from Kravet. Beyond, 1950s painted chairs by British architect and designer Robsjohn-Gibbings flank a Regency table whose three legs are decorated with Egyptian masks



It took another eight months to get permission to take away all the non-Shaw features, but Georgian fireplaces, pine doors, wall panelling and blocked windows were eventually ejected, and he could impose the Grenney look, which he loosely describes as 'between the wars': light, cool, calm and uncluttered. The transformation took a good 18 months – far longer than his clients would tolerate, though even for a commission his strategy is much the same: he and his team meet for lengthy discussions as to the eventual effect they are seeking until a fully fledged opus emerges and they get cracking.

Needing two new fireplaces, Veere took as his inspiration the heroic 1930s example of unfilled travertine marble in the bedroom. The story goes that this apartment was once lived in by Joachim von Ribbentrop, the Nazi ambassador to Britain from 1936 and something of a dandy. Certainly author Ann Gore, who lived as a child on the floor above, remembers being told so when she was shown round in the 1940s; she was also most impressed by the bedroom entirely lined in wide slim drawers, each of which held a single gentleman's outfit. Whatever the truth may be, the fireplace in that room, with its strict stepped profile and monumental mirrored overmantel, chimed with Veere's aims and he repeated its look in the other two rooms using the same stone.

With the Thames sailing by outside, his wall-to-wall and floor-to-ceiling windows can at certain times let in too much light, so behind the curtains white roller blinds have been installed to tune its intensity. Most satisfyingly, these are remote-controlled from a wall panel sensitive enough to arrest the rise or fall precisely where needed, eliminating the frustration of yanking at a cord.

From the spaces not facing the Thames, Veere created two guest rooms, a white sliver of a kitchen and the bachelor heaven of a huge sybaritic bathroom – all marble, glass and mirror – with a custom-built dressing room in dark wood beyond.

The wall coverings throughout are in neutral shades of grey and sandy stone. In the dining room he has used one of his own designs from a recently launched fabric collection, a geometric pattern called 'Temple' after his country house and as a homage to one of its previous owners, the aforementioned and much admired David Hicks. There is a hint of apology in Veere's explanation for producing his own fabrics when there is such an enormous choice already on the market, but, as he points out, there are times, for one as fastidious as he is, when nothing available quite fits the bill. All of his five (so far) patterns have been the result of this decorating dilemma.

Not surprisingly, Veere has already been offered dizzying sums for his apartment, but instead of accepting and having to start all over again he has combined his annual peregrination back to New Zealand with a stopover in Rio de Janeiro, where he is negotiating for a flat. We await developments ■
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Above: Perrin & Rowe's 'Vela' tap and units from Siematic combine in the brilliant-white kitchen. Top: the bathroom's Italian marble contrasts with its rough gesso walls. Opposite: a half wall separates the rest of the bathroom from this shower area, where a Josef Hoffmann chair resides





Scrim, for the uninitiated, is that thin canvassy cloth intended mostly for cleaning windows. As a very young man in his native New Zealand, Veere Grenney, the owner of the rooms on these pages, used the fabric for a wall covering of burnt orange, block-printed in a geometric design and teamed with a lot of yellow-and-black blow-up furniture. It was his first foray into decorating, and his mother did her nut. But as these photographs reveal, she really need not have worried, for a more softly refined palette it would be hard to find. He still loves to use scrim on walls, though, but these days it is more likely to be in its natural sandy colour, perhaps combined with something completely contrary, such as silk taffeta.

Back in the 1960s there was no such thing as a decoration school or course anywhere in New Zealand, so, determined to make it his career, Veere wrote offering his services to one of the very few London decorators whose work he had seen and admired in magazines, David Hicks. It was Hicks, you will remember, who liberated us from the drably safe taste of the time with his shocking-pink-and-orange combinations. Sadly, reply came there none, so Veere launched himself instead on a hippie world tour, culminating a year or so later in London with his own stall in Portobello junk market.

Dealing is a sure way of getting to know not only other dealers but the decorators too, and it was not long before Mary Fox Linton invited him to run her shop, to window dress and eventually to become the colourist for her fabrics and Indian durrie collections. In six years he learned a lot, as have many others, at Mary's elbow and inevitably felt ready to branch out on his own when clients began to approach him directly.

A spell as a director at Colefax & Fowler followed, where he added a cooler, more modern element to its traditional repertoire of colourful country-house comfort. Finally, 11 years ago Veere set up his own offices, where ten people toil on his behalf, working on mainly private commissions.

This apartment, says Veere, is the culmination of his life so far, the expression of his vision, his colours, love of textiles and importantly as a background for his growing painting collection, in particular his oils and drawings by late British artist Roger Hilton.

The building overlooks the Thames and was constructed originally in the 1880s as a town house for the countess of Wemyss by architect Richard Norman Shaw. It occupies a double plot, and having been converted into flats in the 1920s, its river frontage is as wide as any lateral conversion. Veere has an enfilade of three spacious first-floor rooms bathed in the sparkle and glitter of light reflected off the water. His luck in getting such a des res is linked to its listed status. Property developers were deterred by the council's refusal to let them chop up the spaces – a thing Veere would sooner die than do. There were other bidders, and then a hike in the asking price, but eventually he signed the deal.

Top: the sofa under the Alan Davie painting is covered with a Claremont silk in Grenney's choice of pink. The table lamp is 1930s, by Jules Leleu. Above: an enfilade runs through to the master bedroom. Opposite: Jansen originally made this desk for American decorator Billy Baldwin in the 1950s



Grenney's own linen fabric dresses the four-poster bed, while a pale-grey linen from Claremont covers the walls. Across from the bed sits a comfy chair upholstered in a Robert Kime chintz. The accompanying stool is a Bugatti design. Antique images of the Middle East decorate the wall behind

