

MODERN

MAGAZINE



WINTER 2016 / modernmag.com

design decorative arts architecture

Gideon Mendelson applies the lessons he learned from



Born to Design

By Sandy Keenan
Photography by ERIC PIASECKI



ALL OTHER IMAGES COURTESY OTTO
PORTRAIT: GABRIEL EVERETT PHOTO, MENDELSON GROUP.

his best teacher,
his mother,
as he creates
interiors that
span the
generations

A NEW YORK COUPLE, TWO BUSY LAWYERS with a first-born on the way, asked Gideon Mendelson to conjure the perfect nest for them high above the Hudson River on the Upper West Side. They wanted a comfortable space with verve and grace where they could balance design and parenting, working and entertaining. And somehow make it all look clean and easy and sophisticated—an impossible dream.

In Mendelson, a forty-one-year-old principal designer and

The mid-century Accolay orange and black giraffe from France, dating to the 1950s, is a scene-stealer even amidst a small white oval bowl and a yellow and bronze stoneware vase by Gunnar Nylund for Rörstrand, Sweden, 1950s, and a glazed ceramic lamp marked by the Danish firm Palshus. “It’s a really cool piece,” Mendelson says of the giraffe, “a whimsical moment that creates a conversation. If you can’t have fun, just go home!”



owner of the Mendelson Group, they found an empathetic ear, someone with his own intimate grasp of this work-life predicament. He and his modest-sized team juggle as many as ten large design projects at a time—from the city to Westchester County, where he grew up, and in the Hamptons, where he serves on the architectural and historic review board for his beloved second-home village of Sagaponack, founded in 1653.

The custom cabinet, designed by Mendelson, was inspired by French furniture of the 1940s and crafted by the Attinello Furniture and Cabinet company in Montauk, New York. The top is inset with marble. Above it hangs *Ravening Clouds* by Rachele Krieger, 2009. The green Bitossi ceramic lamp on the end table is one of a pair. Mendelson collaborates with Cynthia Byrnes, a contemporary art consultant, on many projects, including this one.

A comfortable space with verve and grace to balance design and parenting

And in the remaining hours, Mendelson and his husband of five years, a Wall Street bond trader, are hands-on with their own brood—twin two-year-olds and a five-year-old. Their family is centered in Park Slope in a stately prewar co-op overlooking Prospect Park. “When my kids are a little older, and ready not to destroy it,” he says, “only then will I restore it.” To make everything work, he builds in two super-long workdays a week so that he can be home more on alternate days. You see, he understands the importance of comfort and safety, and why a graceful and round mahogany cocktail table (this one by T. H. Robsjohn-Gibbings) was the way to go in the clients’ living room. And he knows the day will come when the sleek daybed in the living room becomes a springboard for toddler tumbling.

So he listened carefully for the gist and nuance of what his clients wanted their new home and life to feel like and then went to work. “This is a scary process,” he says. “They were busy and knew they



feeling of it. It’s as if I’m their storyteller.”

In the Upper West Side project, he aimed for a calm and neutral space with punches of color, layers of texture, and a bit of metallic whimsy sprinkled about, all in the service of the couple’s desire for an international vibe. He knew it would require a delicate balancing act, somewhere “between creating a calm space and having enough energy in the room.” He’s pleased with how dynamic the layout and colors feel.

In the living- and dining-room combination, he says the wide expanses of glass convinced him to have a lower-slung “floating” furniture configuration, making sure nothing was hugging the walls or impeding the spectacular views. But then he contradicted that approach in the master bedroom, obscuring the wall-sized window with a mid-century walnut dresser and by grouping sensual and lovely objects on top, including kissing penguins by the Swedish artist Gunnar Nylund dating to the

With such spectacular views of the Hudson River, Mendelson chose to “float” the furniture away from the walls and windows. The blue sectional provides something sturdy to ground the space, he explains. “It’s not meant to be formal and stiff; that’s why we tufted it.” The mahogany cocktail table is by T. H. Robsjohn-Gibbings.

A his-and-hers office alcove off the living room features a custom white oak desk, millwork, and pocket doors for privacy, all designed by Mendelson. “We used funky fabrics to give some zing; and the wall covering, a Phillip Jeffries paper, has a metallic vibe to it,” he says. The chairs are upholstered in Water Stripe Emb by Kelly Wearstler for Lee Jofa. The wall sconce is a contemporary piece by Westwood Lighting; the two table lamps are vintage. The Sodium Chloride Molecular Model on the desk is French from the 1940s.



couldn’t do it on their own. So they trusted us to flex our muscles.”

Architecturally, he considers himself more of a classicist, and earned an undergraduate degree in that discipline from Columbia University. But when it comes to creating interiors, his primary focus, he leans toward the modern, often but not always with a mid-century bent. “My wheelhouse is the ’30s through the ’60s,” he says. “I could get lost there. I love French and Italian design, some American, too. I’m a student who still has a lot to learn.”

Once, for a Hamptons showhouse stairway landing area, he hauled in a gorgeous mahogany propeller from a World War II-era plane as the room’s organizing principle, making it a true landing pad. These days, he’s excited about hitting the refresh button for a Mediterranean revival style mansion in the suburbs, circa 1920. And he hates to pigeonhole himself or the people who hire him: “No matter the style, I’m always trying to guide them to a more eclectic look,” he says. “It’s less about the stuff and more about the

The stained oak dining table with black metal legs is Italian, dating to the 1950s; the set of dining chairs with an ebony finish are also Italian, from the 1960s.





1950s. “I have some fear of heights so I liked doing it,” he says of decorating the view, adding for a laugh, “it’s only New Jersey.”

What’s most charming and even disarming about Mendelson is his tendency to quote his mother, Mimi, when talking about his work and why he decided—after early forays into becoming a talent agent—to follow her example and jump into the design world. He didn’t realize how much knowledge she had calmly introduced him to during his childhood in Scarsdale and on their travels. At restaurants, he was encouraged to draw detailed body parts like hands and fingernails. And then as a teenager in the 1980s, he remembers watching “Moonlighting” and “Thirtysomething” with his mother while thumbing through *House Beautiful* and *Architectural Digest*. Quite casually they discussed what they liked and didn’t like.

He often visited her design office and was particularly intrigued by the technical drawings. But it wasn’t until he was in his twenties and working for the literary agent Joni Evans, at the William Morris Agency, that he had a career epiphany.

Evans was always framing interesting art and photographs but she never hung them; they were piled up around her office. Once, when she went away for a few days, he took it upon himself to organize her space in “a salon like style.” She loved it, and he realized he was in the wrong profession.

Eventually, he got another degree at the New York School of Interior Design and then apprenticed with Steven Gambrel before convincing his dear Mimi to come out of nearly two decades of retirement and teach him the business in a more formal way. She is now retired again and stars as an adoring grandmother to his children.

And what does he hear from his client, new parents to a baby daughter?

“They’re happy,” he says, “with the life we’ve created for them.” **M**

Mendelson aimed for a calm and neutral space with punches of color



Mendelson opened up the galley kitchen onto the living room and kept it quiet. “We weren’t trying to make a major statement; it’s just a modern moment,” he says, “clean and simple.” The art deco bar stools with woven leather seats are French from the 1940s.

Animals are everywhere, another Mendelson touch. In the baby’s room, the bird lamp is new but the horse is an antique. And the Savoy glider chair is from DwellStudio. The bone-inlaid dresser contributes “an international vibe,” he says.

Mendelson wanted the master bedroom to be soft and serene, but also colorful. He opted for sea-foam greens and blues and lavenders: “A feminine palette in a not-so feminine surrounding.” A lot of the furniture was the couple’s, but not the “wonderful old dresser by Henredon,” which Mendelson found through 1stdibs. The penguin figures and the blue speckled vases are by Nylund for Rörstrand.