

Tony Duquette's Jungle

JUST BEHIND the Beverly Hills Hotel, among the manicured lawns and modernist homes, there is a sprawling villa of another era, another sensibility. Designer Tony Duquette lives here with his artist wife, Elizabeth, in a house reminiscent of Hollywood grandeur at its most bizarre.

The walls are crowded with 18th-century Venetian paintings and Chinese embroideries. *Faux* leopard skins are draped over lacquered tables standing on old Oriental rugs that cover parquet floors. Like a giant Fabergé egg, every surface is patterned, and every motif is refracted in abundant mirrors on ceilings and walls.

Duquette, who claims he's in his mid-60s, is a master of illusion, and no aspect of his home better reflects his appetite for fantasy than his garden, two acres of simulated Thai village tumbling down the hillside behind his house. This collection of pagodas, gazebos and bridges, cacti, succulents, orchids, and eucalyptus trees is the work of a Hollywood magician.

To younger or parvenu citizens of L.A., Tony Duquette is best known as the creator of an extravagant environmental sculpture called "Our Lady Queen of the Angels," which he gave to the city in 1982. Installed for a year and a half at the Museum of Science and Industry in Exposition Park, the central figure is 14

feet tall, and its face changes to represent different ethnic groups—white, black, yellow, and red. She is dressed in a robe representing the seasons and crowned with beaded flowers. She is surrounded by eight archangels, each 28 feet tall, four altars to the elements, and 24 embroidered tapestries or fabric mosaics. Synthesized music by Garth Hudson of The Band and a poem by Ray Bradbury narrated by Charlton Heston complete the exhibition, which has attracted more than half a million visitors. The piece is now installed at the Immanuel Presbyterian

Church in the mid-Wilshire district and still draws visitors regularly.

Duquette came to prominence as a designer in the 1940s, after he was discovered by interior designer Elsie De Wolfe, aka Lady Mendl, a woman who personified the elegance of the period and influenced the monied folk of Hollywood. At the home of the decorator James Pendleton, she spotted a table decoration by Duquette and called him the next day to commission a piece of furniture. "It was my sanctification in a way," recalls Duquette, "because of her great influence."



Duquette in his garden



A luxury of stimuli







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Duquette, who studied art and theater at Chouinard Art Institute (now CalArts), was creating flowers, figures, and furbelows for elaborate chandeliers and *secretaires* in the manner of a pastiche Cellini. "I thought they were being used incorrectly by other designers, so I started doing the backgrounds as well," he says.

A stint in the army from 1942 to 1946 crimped his budding career, but he redoubled his efforts when he got out. With the support of high-placed friends like De Wolfe, Duquette was soon working for such clients as J. Paul Getty, Doris Duke, Elizabeth Arden, Adrian, and the Duchess of Windsor.

As a natural illusionist, he was fascinated by the stage and claims, for financial reasons, that he had to reject a scholarship to the theater department at Yale. By the 1950s, however, he had begun contributing with sets in the film *Can Can*, the costumes in *Kismet* and *Lovely to Look At*, sets and costumes for the San Francisco ballets *Beauty and the Beast* and *Jest of Cards*, and productions of the operas *Der Rosenkavalier* and *Salome*. In 1960, he won a Tony award for his costumes in the Broadway production of *Camelot*, which critics called the only musical that leaves audiences "whistling" the costumes and the sets. The '60s and '70s led to big commercial jobs such as the interior of the Music Center and the Hilton Hawaiian Village, as well as the private homes of the Norton Simons and Henry Mudd.

The Duquettes built their home in the hills in 1949, but rented it to support their spacious West Hollywood design studio—formerly the silent film studio of Norma Talmadge—called Parc Duquette. Six years ago they moved back to the house, and in the adjacent lot, Duquette began the garden.

He had gained gardening experience by cultivating and planting his 150-acre ranch in the mountains of Ventura, as well as the roof garden of his Victorian home in San Francisco. But none is so exotic as the garden in Beverly Hills.

As Duquette puts it, "I believe that less is less." White walls, pastel rugs, and tasteful color-field paintings are not for him. "The refrigerator door holds no interest for me," he claims, gesturing toward his luxurious quarters. "This is what I must have. I'm not bored. I always have some pleasure for the eye, and there's always more. It's the magpie instinct: things are magnets that attract me. I always say, 'That's all,' but then it isn't."

This may be the legacy of a distant relative. His grandmother's brother was the Marshall of Morris, Marshall, and Faulkner, the firm that spawned the revolutionary 19th-century designer William Morris.

You enter Duquette's house through a dark, mirrored foyer where Elizabeth has painted life-sized figures on the doors of three walls: a butler to answer the entrance door, a woman bringing food from the kitchen, and another woman entering the powder room. This trompe l'oeil treatment prepares you for the illusionism of the rest of the house.

The drawing room ceiling is celadon, decorated with an enormous sunburst relief using gilt ornament. From the center of the sun hangs a huge but delicate chandelier of Venetian glass flowers. Painted floral lambrequins of stiffened fabric top the draperies. All of the carved and painted creations were made by Duquette and his wife. "We work," he explains impatiently. "It isn't just decorating because we *do* it, in actuality."

From the glass doors on the south wall of the drawing room, Duquette walks onto a terrace surrounded by a faded coral Victorian balustrade and surveys his garden. "Trips to Cambodia, Thailand, Burma, and Indochina were a tremendous influence on me. I brought back the fragments that are here. Rooftops, balustrades, porcelains, gables, ceramics, doors, windows, irresistible things from demolitions and antique stores. Of course, this was many years ago, when they were not so expensive or so difficult to get out."

On the terrace, red geraniums sprout from ceramic pots shaped like frogs. You have to tiptoe among the crowd of jade trees, kalenchoe, and yucca, their fat, spongy leaves erupting from the green Chinese porcelain pots. Duquette points out the soaring flax, curling impatiens, thick fuchsia, and deep purple wandering Jew. There are also terra cotta tubs of a thorny vine covered in red



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flowers. "That's euphorbia," he says. "It's the plant used for the crown of thorns, and the flowers symbolize the blood of Christ."

As the terrace bends west, around the corner of the house, you come upon Duquette's collection of bromeliads, ominously large with their tongues of pink flowers. Overhead, a trellis supported by bronze fluted columns in a patina of verdigris shades a spacious length of terrace where pots of hydrangeas sit like poodles on 18th-century Chinese grape-root chairs. From above hang ivy, ferns, succulents like Donkey's Tail, and bird cages made of bamboo, macramé, and tin. Pegged to the walls of this greenery, giant clam shells hold wild spider plants. "I have a love affair with bromeliads and succulents and the sense of the jungle," Duquette quips. "The lawn syndrome has no interest for me."

From this vantage you can see what Duquette calls the "canyon house," composed of the coral façades of Thai houses carved with gilt-covered vines and topped with a Thai version of Gothic church steeples. This guest house, Elizabeth's painting studio, various gazebos, the brick patio, and the swimming pool are all linked by intricate walkways, bridges, steps, and ladders. One trellised walkway is actually pieced together from a gangplank Duquette bought at a Navy surplus sale. The structures' appearance of age is not entirely authentic. Duquette has artificially faded their color with white paint.

In nooks and crannies there are figurines of animals. Lanterns are tucked everywhere, and there are also pagoda-shaped lights made of stone, tin, or plastic. One of Duquette's elaborate wrought-iron chandeliers, painted coral, lights a red dining pavilion off the patio where he entertains. Food is served on gold- and silver-plated dishes by waiters in gold brocade jackets, while Balinese dancers provide entertainment. The dining table is also of Duquette's design, a glass top mounted on a base of coral grape-root; patio chairs of bent iron shaped like the skeletons of maple leaves were inspired by his childhood summers spent in Michigan. "I see myself, although sophisticated in approach, influenced by the primitive," he explains, referring to the motifs from nature in his work.

With each visit to the garden, it seems changed. There is always more than you remember, a luxury of stimuli. "That's the idea," says Duquette. "So you can always see something new. I'm interested in the dimension beyond. Where will a door go? What is in that trunk?" Even the colors he uses—coral, crimson, and jade—"in an astral sense are very important colors. They also have the dimension beyond," which releases "whatever magic, surprise, or treasured memory is held by a fabric, a painting, or a piece of furniture."

When creating this garden, Duquette didn't forget the "dimension of smell." Jasmine, eucalyptus, and Victorian boxwood trees perfume the air. Standing nearly as tall as the trees are Duquette's sculptures, metal sunbursts painted in coral or white, mounted on the tops of telephone poles. They are called "Summer Sun" and "Winter Sun," while the shorter versions are labeled "Son of..." and one ovoid coral shape is entitled "Egg of Summer Sun." His other sculptures include obelisks and panels covered with chips of abalone shell, and tall standards mounted with the carved ends of temple roof decorations and tassels of bronze bells. These are his personal assemblages, the source of inspiration for many aspects of the "Angels" project.

Although Duquette still takes private clients—he just finished two houses for Herb Alpert—he is most enthusiastic about a new "ceremonial environment" of angels that he will create in a turn-of-the-century synagogue in San Francisco. These projects he now finds the most rewarding because he can be his own client.

"You see very little of the spectacular or beautiful anymore, and I think it's of tremendous importance. After procreation and eating, I think man's greatest need is the sense of magic. To me, it's the most important dimension. I want to give other people a sense of something beyond." Turning to gaze at his verdant valley, he says, "The least common denominator is my enemy. I like individual expression." □