

## New York Designer Gideon Mendelson on Inheriting His Mother's Flair for Whimsical Design

*The Brooklyn-based designer has a modernist signature that nods to his beloved late mother, eminent interior designer Mimi Mendelson*

Growing up in Scarsdale, New York, Gideon Mendelson was his mother's biggest admirer. "She had impeccable taste. Everything she did was flawless. And while her personal style was traditional, she appreciated all types of design and could execute almost anything," says the Brooklyn-based interior designer. So when he launched Mendelson Group in 2003, calling his mother—late interior designer Mimi Mendelson—out of retirement to be his partner seemed like the natural thing to do. She, of course, was only too happy to oblige, Mendelson recalls. After all, they had always had a thriving creative partnership. Only this time, it was being ordained for the world to take notice.

For Mendelson, interior design wasn't always the obvious choice. "I was a better tennis player than a student, and had no intention of applying to Columbia until my tennis coach, Bid Goswami, sent me a note inviting me to visit," he recalls. As it turned out, the coach and the campus—with its storied tunnels and neoclassical architecture—were enough to sway him, as was his father's delight of learning that his son had been accepted to an Ivy League. "A Jew who had fled Russia with his grandparents at 11, he was ecstatic at the idea of an Ivy Leaguer son. He gave me that Russian look to say, 'You're going there,'" Mendelson remembers.

At Columbia, he majored in architecture, regularly sneaking his mother into class, where they'd sit at the back and share tuna bagels. But after graduation, his interest in architecture began to wane. "It was around this time that I joined a two-year training programme at William Morris Endeavor, a talent agency. One day, my boss asked me to rearrange her office while she was travelling, and I serendipitously found that I had a knack for design," recounts Mendelson. The accidental discovery inspired him to pursue a degree at the New York School of Interior Design. After graduation, he worked for West Village-based designer Steven Gambrel for a year. Mendelson Group was born not long after, out of an opportunity to design a house for friends of his parents.

Of Mendelson's childhood memories, one that remains emblazoned in his mind is of his mother's attention to scale and proportion. "Our home, growing up, was traditional but she added her own modern and bohemian touches. I can remember walking around our house and thinking how beautiful it was and how elegant her compositions were. She took tremendous pride in her work," he reminisces. He has inherited the habit, he admits, citing the example of the Westchester Tudor he designed for a lawyer couple and their four children a few years ago. The clients desired a home that would remain evergreen, with decor that would always stay true to the times. For Mendelson, this meant balancing the steeply pitched roof, tall windows and

cantilevered forms with thoughtfully proportioned details. "The goal was to make the interior more open and luminous and bring in a classic vibe with modernist furniture," he avers.

Mendelson's obsession with 20th-century design—mostly from the 1930s-1960s—is no secret. "That being said, I'm very client-driven. I listen and try to create spaces that feel personal for my clients. They often come to me having seen my work, so we're usually on the same page," he says, adding, "But I love a good challenge, and certainly enjoy working on different styles." For the designer, the "different styles" are usually all at once, in the way of layered patterns that straddle muted and maximalist, modern and traditional. Speaking of layers, he also has a particular flair for layered lighting, and most of his projects—such as the one on Mecox Road, New York, completed in 2015—feature a potpourri of chandeliers, pendants, flush mounts, sconces, standing lamps, table lamps and picture lights. "And everything has to be on dimmers!" he declares.

The Mecox Road renovation was special for Mendelson, inspiring a nostalgia that knocked back to his childhood. The clients—a Manhattan-based couple with three young children—enlisted him to transform their traditional, shingle-style build into a cosy summer nest that paid homage to their roots. "We were tasked with designing a comfortable, casual but sophisticated country home for weekends and summers that would work for multiple generations—from grandparents to young children," says Mendelson. When it came to the aesthetic, he took inspiration from the clients' heritage. "She is from the South, and loves Lily Pulitzer, so we dialled up the colour and created lots of show-stopping moments," says Mendelson, referring to the emerald-toned wallpaper in the dining room and the living room's popsicle accents.

While in primary school, Mendelson would often visit his mother during lunch breaks. "Her office was a few blocks from my school and I remember being as much in awe of her technical drawing skills as her renderings. I knew I wanted the same skills," recounts the designer. In an effort to fuel his imagination, Mimi would encourage her son to draw at home, a skill she knew would hold him in good stead later on. Nowadays, Mendelson's design process encompasses many other steps. "We start each project by learning about the clients' living habits and tastes, down to their favourite music and colours. The team catalogues each item in the house before any work begins," he shares, adding that the furnishings that he doesn't custom-design himself are sourced either from Europe or locally within the US.

In one West Village home he designed in 2019, Mendelson notched up the pizzazz with dramatic juxtapositions. "The clients—a couple with three small children—were drawn to modern glamour, but also wanted a liveable, kid-friendly design," he says. The solution, he found, lay in masquerading contrasts as complements: gilded monochromes here, fluorescent dioramas there, sombre tones, theatrical accents. "It's exciting, yet calm. Youthful, yet sophisticated. It's where modern glam meets family function, proving that high-end design can also mean low-maintenance living."

Today, Mendelson's style doffs its hat to prominent international designers. "I'm very drawn to the work of Italian architects Ico Parisi and Gio Ponti, French designers Jacques Adnet and Jean Michel-Frank, and American designer Edward Wormley," he says. "I want to create spaces

Vaishnavi Nayel Talawadekar

that make a family's life easier, more interesting, more relaxing, more fun. I believe design can do that."