

THE MERYL STREEP OF INTERIOR DESIGN

Just how does the whip-smart, über-sophisticated,

East Coast-chic, West Coast-based celebrity designer,

Mary McDonald, disappear in her work so completely?

BY JACQUELINE SINACORI

LEADING LADY With TV shows, an elite client list and growing lines of high-end rugs, fabrics and trims, designer Mary McDonald has plenty to smile about.



While looking for inspiration to redecorate my bedroom a few years ago, I happened upon an image of a home office with a pitched ceiling; soft blue walls, carpet and upholstery; white, intricately carved furniture and lamps; and black-and-white fashion photographs in black frames of varying thicknesses, hung over a delicate, hand-painted tree. I fell in love with the pale hues and feminine accents contrasting with the bold, geometric black picture frames and black-and-white photographs. The room was traditional, yet the color palette made it fresh and modern. Everything in the space seemed to have a purpose and make a statement, but no single element overpowered the others—the room had an inherent sense of balance. Who had designed it? Some light Internet searching revealed that it was prominent Los Angeles-based interior decorator, Mary McDonald. Of course.

The next time I encountered McDonald was when I saw her as one of the stars of Bravo's *Million Dollar Decorators*. Watching the show, I got to know more about the woman behind the design sensibility I

loved so much. McDonald is a lot like her designs: bold, exuberant, opinionated and, yes, impossibly glamorous.

McDonald says she's proud of the process she goes through to please her well-heeled and celebrity clients as she executes her interpretation of their vision. She's found that her job is not unlike the role of a movie director. "Many clients like a lot of different styles, so I have to edit them and say 'Well, we're not doing that style here.' It's my responsibility to direct them to pick a lane and stick to it," McDonald says. She's mastered the art of direction quite well, as there isn't a design of McDonald's that I've seen in which there's not complete cohesion from ceiling to floor, wall to wall, inch by inch.

Take one of the designer's living room projects in which she chose to put the same leopard print on the walls, sofas, select side chairs and drapery. She breaks it up with a classic stripe on the window shades, two armchairs and a few pillows, mixes in some yellow and black accents and—*voilà!*—you have a spotted explosion that defies all comprehension to somehow work seamlessly as an ultra-chic, whimsical salon. Could this wildly patterned sitting room

SIMON UPTON (DINING ROOM); MELANIE ACEVEDO (OFFICE)



GEOMETRY LESSON "I think I brought a resurgence of the use of oversized geometric patterns on floors and Old Hollywood glamour with a modern twist." McDonald's own home office in West Hollywood; (LEFT) a dining room features classic details and a boldly patterned floor.





NO DETAIL TOO SMALL

The sitting area in the master bedroom of a guesthouse in West Hollywood; (OPPOSITE, FROM TOP) McDonald's French Conga abaca rug for Patterson Flynn Martin, coordinating fabrics and trims from her first collection for Schumacher, the Geode carpet for Patterson Flynn Martin and her Tiki Tape trim and Bermuda Blossom fabric, both for Schumacher.

MIGUEL FLORES-VIANNA (BEDROOM)

really have hatched from the brain of the same decorator who designed the calming, feminine, pale blue home office in the photo that inspired my redecorated bedroom? That's her secret sauce: invisibility.

When I tell McDonald that she may well be the 'Meryl Streep of decorating', she squeals in delight. "Oh, I looove that!" she says, "Who *wouldn't* want to be Meryl Streep?" Her Streep-ness lies in her ability to disappear behind her designs in a way that's a testament to her commitment to her clients, very much the way that Streep becomes the characters she's portraying so completely that you forget it's Meryl Streep up there on the screen.

In a creative business that can often be egocentric, McDonald doesn't push her own style on her clients; she lets them choose the design path and then leads them down it. "I think if you lined up all of my work, you wouldn't be able to pick out one thing that defines my designs and, I must say, I do like that about myself. Every client and every project is simply different," she says.

McDonald's interiors are at once striking and understated. Her rooms are so balanced that your eyes can take in the entire space as a whole and then float around to absorb all the well thought-out details. With so many high-impact designs in her portfolio, I'm curious to know what the designer thinks her greatest contribution to her field is. "I didn't invent the wheel, but I think I brought a resurgence to the use of oversized geometric patterned floors and Old Hollywood glamour with a modern twist," she says.

Though McDonald-designed spaces range from classic glamour to modern rigor, some would say she's known for being the Queen of Pattern, most notable in her use of chevron, the geometric pattern she's perfected on flooring. "I don't really think I have a signature look exactly, but I did do this pattern on a floor once and then I saw it in a room designed by someone else, and I thought 'Wait, that's my floor!'" McDonald says.

Although her clients can often be found on *Forbes'* wealthiest this-and-that lists, McDonald says she can find inspiration anywhere. "I love



the challenge of discovering design pieces in unique locations, even the 99-cents store. I'll go in there and find a beautiful printed piece of paper that inspires me," she says. She also admits to having "a storage unit full of found objects that I've collected over time for the fictional homes that I don't own." Speaking of her own home, if McDonald were to hire an interior decorator, who would it be? Without a pause she says, "My friend and neighbor, Jean-Louis Deniot. I would let him do whatever he wanted."

Successful in her own right before *Million Dollar Decorators*—McDonald is consistently ranked by *House Beautiful* on its list of "Top 100 Designers," has published a breathtaking book of her work entitled *Mary McDonald: Interiors: The Allure Of Style* (Rizzoli) and is working on a second book—she admits that "the global recognition and impact of *Million Dollar Decorators* has been tremendous." The only downsides to the show: "The filming was much more time-consuming than I ever thought it would be. Plus you're always trying to portray yourself as a stylish person, so you want to dress well and make sure you always have lip gloss on. Sometimes you just need to go to a job site in jeans," she says. The drama was not her thing either: "I do have my opinions, but I don't bash other people to get my point across. My focus is always on getting my job done."

McDonald has gone on to appear as an expert on another Bravo show, *Property Envy*, has made several international television appearances and continues to expand her fabric and trim lines with Schumacher, her lighting line with Robert Abbey and her rug collection with Patterson Flynn Martin. Now I don't have to hire McDonald to incorporate her style into my home. My next purchase is definitely an oversized geometric-print rug.

And she's not slowing down. The designer currently has projects in Palm Beach, Corona del Mar, Pebble Beach, Deer Valley and the Hamptons, among other tony spots. When these gigs are completed, McDonald will have enough material for a follow-up book. After all, even Meryl Streep shows off every now and again. **LE**