

Interiors: White magic

A couple's shared love of Swedish design saw them transform a mansion flat in Hove into a Gustavian showcase for their furniture business.

By Faith Eckersall. Photographs by Nick Carter

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When you live in a home that is rumoured to have been built for a king's mistress, getting carried away with grand ideas, romantic schemes and wall-to-wall interior drama goes with the territory. And so it happened for Jo and Madeleine Lee, whose home started life as one of a handsome row of mansions on Hove's seafront. Now, according to Madeleine, it is 'a little piece of Sweden', her mother's native land and the inspiration that fuels much of the style and business that she and husband have created.

Like many who have found themselves on the East Sussex coast, the Lees were escaping from London, looking for a 'healthier, saner lifestyle'.

Madeleine was working as a singer, voice coach and designer, Jo as a songwriter and producer. They had dreamt of moving to Sweden, but 'the time wasn't right,' Madeleine says.



The drawing-room has become a place for Jo and Madeleine Lee to eat, entertain and show off their lifestyle to clients. The sleigh was a wedding present from Madeleine's father. The painted panel was commissioned by Madeleine Photo: Nick Carter

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'This was one of the first places we saw and it just called my name out,' Madeleine says of their first-floor flat. Despite the dark-stained Victorian parquet, layers of crusty paint and heavy atmosphere, the apartment's soaring ceilings, intricate cornices and generously proportioned rooms reminded her of the Scandinavian manor houses she had visited as a child. The view from the bay window in the drawing-room was just like the one from her grandparents' Swedish summer house. 'When the sea is calm it's like a Swedish lake in the winter, with the low light bouncing off it.'

The Lees devoted themselves to restoring the property. 'It was like a beautiful, grand lady who had been left neglected,' Madeleine says. They had the parquet stripped back to its original honey-coloured oak, and removed paint by hand from the doors and frames before re-painting them in pale hues of silver birch, lilac and soft whites. The hallway floor had been crudely dug up to install piping, so most of the parquet had to be re-laid; the drawing-room floor remained intact.

During all this, Jo became intrigued by the building's history. The terrace was built in 1886. 'These houses have an exceptional level of finish,' he says. 'Our flat has wonderful double sashes, which act as Victorian double-glazing. Next door has the most unbelievable marquetry floors.'

The walls are nearly 4ft thick, which keeps the building beautifully cool in summer, warm in winter and quiet, despite the bustle of the nearby promenade. 'We were told by the previous owner that one of King Edward VII's mistresses had lived in our house,' Jo says. Although he hasn't found any hard evidence, he did discover plenty of photographs of the king sitting out in the garden's little cupola, which was private in those days. 'It's a nice apocryphal tale even if it's not true.'

Madeleine redesigned the flat according to three Swedish interior styles. The hallway is in the gentle mood of a country manor house while the study, drawing-room and bedroom reflect the grander Stockholm Gustavian mansion. In contrast, the kitchen is created in the warm reds, oranges and earthy browns of a traditional stuga, a country cottage based on 19th-century folk-art colours.

Finding the inspiration and colours for these schemes was simple; finding the furniture was not. 'With large, high-ceilinged rooms you need big, light-coloured furniture,' Madeleine says. Their quest for giant, practical storage cupboards, sturdy tables and capacious chests of drawers resulted in their stumbling into a new career. During one of their frequent trips to Sweden, the Lees saw an antique sleigh for sale. 'Jo said it would be fantastic to use it as a seat in front of the drawing-room balcony, overlooking the sea,' Madeleine says. 'My father bought it for us as a present but as we had to ship it back, we decided to bring over some other stuff we'd found along with it.'

Soon they were crating up wardrobes, antique Gustavian sofas and chairs, chandeliers and vintage linens. to fill their home. 'Our friends started asking us if we could get the same sort of furniture for them and it just took off from there,' Jo says. Their company, Swedish Interior Design, was born, importing antique furniture and handmade Mora clocks as well as working on specialist interior design projects.

It also supplies handmade bespoke furniture from antique wood, an example of which is the Lees' own kitchen. 'I'd never want a fitted kitchen after having this,' Madeleine declares, flinging open one of the cupboard doors to reveal rows of balsamic vinegar and organic olive oils. 'The 1800s folk-art cupboards are huge and deep and the colours of the antique cabinets formed the theme for the kitchen itself. There are wonderful hand-painted inscriptions inside the doors and I love seeing that every time I open them.'

- Swedish Interior Design: 01273-734371; [swedishinteriordesign.co.uk](http://www.swedishinteriordesign.co.uk) (<http://www.swedishinteriordesign.co.uk>)

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