

# SAVOIR FLAIR

Architect and interior designer Martin Brûlé's Paris studio is a showcase for the art of living, says *Alice Cavanagh*

Photography by *Matthieu Salvaing*



Right: Martin Brûlé's office in his pied-à-terre in Saint Germain-des-Prés, Paris. On the wall (left) is a c1930 plaster shell sconce in the style of Serge Roche. Far right: the interior designer sits on an Alfred Porteneuve After "Tardieu" bronze, alabaster and leather chair by Émile-Jacques Ruhlmann, at his c1966 steel Jean Garçon desk. On it sits (right) a Maison Desny Macassar-ebony and silver-plated tray

## “HE BALANCES SO MANY DIFFERENT STYLES AND PERIODS, AND EVERYTHING LOOKS VERY ALIVE”

Ruhlmann, which was once owned by Chow, sits in this salon. It can be locked in a flat or slanted position to display magazines or books. “His work is the epitome of elegance in harmony with utility,” Brûlé says of Ruhlmann, whose work, characterised by refined craftsmanship and a preference for exotic materials, is dotted throughout the room. There is also his low Cabanel Basse-Boule table, a pair of modernist vitrines, and a round mirror inlaid again in deep chocolate tones of Macassar ebony.

Other signatures of the art deco period – low stools by Jean-Michel Frank and a side table with intricate gold-leaf marquetry by the American designer Eyre de Lanux – are arranged in a layout that has the ambience of an elegant home. “[Brûlé] has such a reverence for beautifully crafted pieces and balances details so wonderfully, there’s so many different styles and periods, and everything looks very alive,” says Agron.

Visiting clients and friends get to experience it in this way. When they call, they perch at the 1970s black-lacquered oak bar with its silver rail, or they might venture down the end of the room to the low-slung cream sofa by the French art deco designer André Sornay – often before or after a meal at Le Voltaire.

The mix of dark and lacquered wood and metals looks lush against a backdrop of ivory (not cream, he insists), wall-to-wall Codimat carpet and hand-plastered panelling. Luminosity abounds, thanks to floor-to-ceiling mirrored panelling across the back and exterior walls. “It’s enveloping, like a blank canvas,” Brûlé says, adding that the decor will evolve to accommodate items he admires from his own collection and the galleries he works with. “It is a canvas for my expression and a lab for experimenting with styles.”

The reception room serves as an *enfilade* from which the more private rooms – Brûlé’s office and bedroom – can be accessed. “The layout was one of the selling points as it is a small and liveable space with the floor plan of a grand Parisian apartment,” he explains. It has the circular flow of a Haussmannian layout, though much is cleverly concealed.

The office, where he often takes his meals, has a distinct feel due to jet-black walls bookmarked at one end by a black gloss marble fireplace. From here, there is access to a small powder room fitted with a shiny black vanity and circular mirror that echoes Ruhlmann’s work in the main salon. The bathroom is modular: unsuspecting guests won’t notice the door that pops open into a black-tiled walk-in shower. “It’s completely concealed,” Brûlé smiles, closing the door again. So, too, is the small bedroom on the other side of the bathroom, accessible from another door concealed in the panelling at the far end of the salon. The bedroom walls are cloaked in camel-coloured cashmere with matching curtains; the back of the door is padded and quilted. It is a cocoon-like refuge, and this thread of secrecy lends everything a certain decadence. “There is a dance between light and dark, hot and cold. This is constant in my work,” the architect says.

One of Brûlé’s talents is his use of artisanal finishes, especially on larger surfaces. He rarely paints the walls a solid colour: there is always a specific texture or a level of craft. The plaster panelling in the salon, for example, is a trompe-l’oeil parchment, hand-patinated by a young Belgian artisan, Mathilde Van der Schueren. He and his team tried countless (up to 60) different configurations both on paper and in situ before getting it right. “Designing my own space is a joy as I have freedom and ultimately can tailor everything to my vision and my needs,” Brûlé says. He might be his own toughest client. “I like to take my time and try different options. Sometimes, many options... It can be a painful process,” he smiles. ■HTSI



Left: Brûlé in front of a mahogany and fabric André Sornay sofa, c1937. In the foreground is Eugène Printz’s palm-wood Gueridon table, c1930-1935. Below: a pair of Jean-Michel Frank oak stools c1935 flank Émile-Jacques Ruhlmann’s Macassar-ebony and rosewood Cabanel Basse-Boule table, c1918-1919. On the wall hangs (*Untitled*) Marrone, c1966, by Agostino Bonalumi



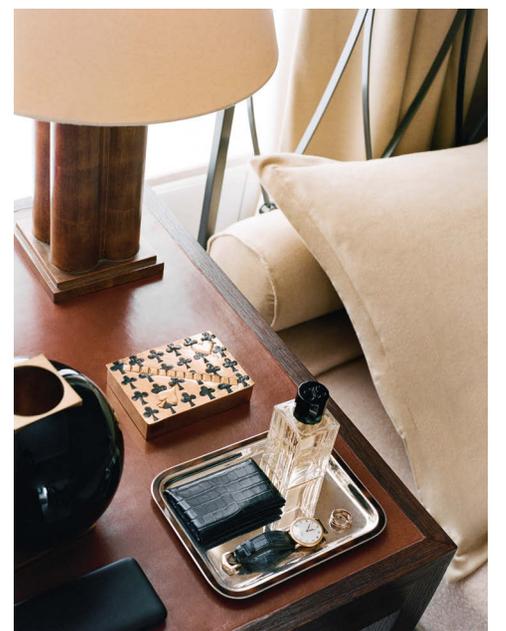
Above: the concealed black-tiled walk-in shower. Right: books and stationery on Brûlé’s desk







Above: the stainless-steel kitchen by Abimis. Left: a Gilbert Poillerat c1940 metal bed in the bedroom; in the bathroom, the mirror echoes Ruhlmann's design. Below: a Jean-Michel Frank walnut and leather games table, c1930, in the main salon



**F**or Montreal-born, New York-based interior designer Martin Brûlé, the lines between work and home are necessarily blurred. This is especially true of his new Paris outpost, a 100sq m studio/pied-à-terre in Saint Germain-des-Prés. “It’s really about the art of living, and having a creative space that allows me to show my work and ideas, with a place to rest in between. There aren’t any boundaries,” he says over tea one January afternoon, dressed in his uniform of a navy Loro Piana knit, black jeans and John Lobb moccasins.

Brûlé, who is self-trained, established his New York City studio in 2016. His portfolio, mostly of private homes, which are rarely published, reveals an appreciation for discreet opulence and European *savoir-faire*. Using lavish materials and high-craft finishes, he specialises in emblematic period furniture and objects, particularly from the early 20th century.

“The way Martin thinks about interiors is very romantic,” says the American actress Dianna Agron, a client of Brûlé’s in New York. “He sees a whole narrative play out in front of him – he has your first dinner party planned before you have.”

Brûlé started looking for a Paris base two years ago: a place to welcome clients as the demand for his services continues to pick up on this side of the Atlantic. He was drawn to the Left Bank, a long-time haunt for collectors; its narrow streets are lined by antique dealers and run perpendicular to the Seine. “The galleries are a huge part of the experience. There are so many incredible personalities and characters here,” says Brûlé of the mood around his new pied-à-terre.

The 37-year-old found the apartment through one such character: 80-year-old antique dealer Alain Finard, whose shop, Galerie Alain et Gerard, has been an institution on Rue de Beaune since the late 1970s. In the 1980s, Finard took on a second site across the road – a first-floor apartment he used as an exhibition space for his most prized rarities. There he hosted well-known

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collectors and aesthetes such as Yves Saint Laurent and his partner Pierre Bergé, Hubert de Givenchy, and even Rudolf Nureyev, who lived in a sumptuously furnished apartment nearby on Quai Voltaire.

“It was like a cabinet of curiosities,” Brûlé says of his apartment’s former life, adding that when he picked up the keys, the site had not been touched in more than 30 years. “The ceilings were falling apart and the silk wallpaper was water-damaged,” he recalls. He stripped everything back and addressed practical needs first: converting two small rooms that sit off the side of the entrance into a kitchen, fitted out floor-to-ceiling in stainless steel by the specialist Abimis, and a corner office for his satellite team to work in.

The main salon, which flows directly from the hallway, is a large, long rectangular room with 4m-high ceilings flanked by large windows on one side. The narrow proportions lend it a gallery feel, which is how Finard had envisaged it – rig lights and all. Brûlé has honoured that idea to some extent. Most of the furniture and objects in this room are from the art deco period – a style that permeates his Manhattan home as well. “The values always find a way into my work and expression. I think it’s a point of view, a question of taste,” he says of a long-time “obsession” with the design epoch, which is experiencing a revival. “The clean, utilitarian aesthetic seems to be appealing to more people again... That being said, art deco has always been at the centre of great collectors’ homes,” he adds, citing the collections of fashion designer Jacques Doucet, the legendary Maharaja of Indore and his Manik Bagh Palace, and tastemakers Michael and Tina Chow.

An adjustable Macassar-ebony table, named the Cla-Cla (c1926) by the French furniture designer Émile-Jacques

Right: a framed photograph of *Mademoiselle Pogany*, c1912, by Constantin Brâncuși rests on Émile-Jacques Ruhlmann’s Macassar-ebony Cla-Cla table, c1926

