

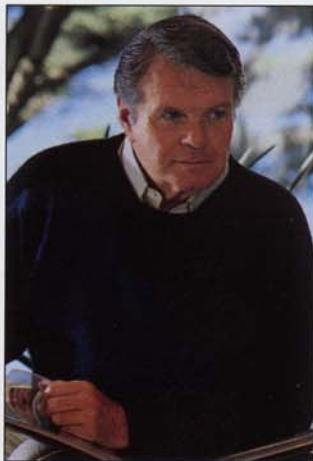
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"People should have the satisfaction of developing their own personal tastes and of expressing themselves in their own homes with originality," wrote Michael Taylor (above).

With the possible exception of Hollywood, no single force has brought California to the world more powerfully than Michael Taylor. More than a quarter century after he created the California Look—a bold, if pale, aesthetic that made use of natural materials, wicker, oversize furniture and large, sculptural plants—Taylor, for many, still epitomizes West Coast style.

"I was young, I was in California, and it was time, many of us here felt, for a fresh approach to decorating," the designer wrote, explaining the genesis of his new style. "I began to use a great deal of white, which has a way of opening up a room and giving it a fresh, open-air-living quality."

Taylor—who died in 1986 at the age of fifty-nine—traced the origins of his style to the white rooms created

DESIGN CLASSICS

MICHAEL TAYLOR

THE CALIFORNIA LOOK CREATOR IN SAN FRANCISCO

Text by Penelope Rowlands/Photography by Russell MacMasters



by Syrie Maugham in the 1920s. He believed that white was the most efficient color for capturing natural light. And light itself was as important to his interiors as the more solid organic forms that were to become Michael Taylor trademarks—the rocks, concrete slabs, slate floors. He brought geodes and other stone elements inside for the first time. And he daringly juxtaposed antiques of ev-

ery conceivable provenance, as long as they were good, with furniture of his own design. The latter was often outsize and made of something unexpected—concrete, perhaps, or granite.

"He had a preeminent eye for beauty and an intuitive sense of color and scale," observes Dorothea Walker, an old friend and a decorating enthusiast. Indeed, Taylor was a master at combining

styles and periods. "Attractive designs can be found in almost any period," he wrote. "And certainly there is no arbitrary law which says that an eighteenth-century French chair and a Sheraton can't be used in the same room."

As a designer, Taylor was far more chameleon-like than is generally acknowledged. Even as he forged the California Look he didn't hesitate to abandon it, if on-

OPPOSITE: The living room of Taylor's San Francisco house, which *Architectural Digest* photographed in 1977, mixed styles and periods, from a Régence mantel to a late-17th-century Chinese screen and a Jean-Michel Frank low table.

"I wouldn't describe myself as a collector so much as a student of line and form and harmony," said Taylor. ABOVE: The entrance hall's burlap walls and terra-cotta floors offset a Song painting, antique Irish chairs and a carved caryatid.



ly temporarily, when it failed to suit a particular project. And for all his appreciation of the spectrum's palest shade, he would blanket a room with color if he felt it was warranted or dabble in tones that might not have been his first choice in order to please a client.

"All his houses looked different," says Frances Bowes, a San Francisco art collector who was both a client and a lifelong friend of Taylor's (see *Architectural Digest*, December 1985). "He got excited about who his clients were. And their houses fit their personalities." For example, the San Francisco house of Dede and Al Wilsey—completed in the mid-1980s—has some distinctly un-Taylor-like aspects, including the liberal use of Dede's favorite colors, pink, green and yellow. His interi-



TOP: Ammonites and an Etruscan jar line a 15th-century Italian sideboard in the dining room. The overdoor panel is 17th-century Italian. Seventeenth-century Irish chairs join a 19th-century table inlaid with *pietre dure*.

ABOVE: A Chinese table in the hall holds a Ming statue and Han Dynasty pots. RIGHT: Taylor furnished his bedroom with slate floors and a 17th-century Spanish bed. A Matisse drawing and an 18th-century still life hang beside the fireplace.







ors had in common a transcendent beauty that was entirely deliberate—people felt better, somehow, in a Taylor room. “My approach is to combine everything suitable that gives a room the feeling of freshness, originality, and a more beautiful atmosphere for living,” he wrote.

Born in Modesto, California, Taylor grew up in Sonoma County. He learned

For Taylor, the California Look was represented by “rooms in which a feeling of air and lightness predominates.” LEFT AND BELOW: The lower-level office features dried cactus, a Byzantine mosaic and an 18th-century thresher.

about style as a child from his grandmother, who took him exploring in antiques shops, flea markets, redwood forests and beaches. In his eulogy at Taylor’s memorial service, designer and photographer Russell MacMasters recalled that Taylor and his grandmother “looked into the beauty of shells and tree stumps and rocks, the glorious flow-

The California-born designer attributed much of his inspiration to the state’s climate, quality of light and the “various types of growing things.” OPPOSITE: The master bedroom opens to views of the Pacific and the Golden Gate Bridge.





MICHAEL TAYLOR

ers, into the beauty of things that cost nothing." Later, the aspiring designer went to San Francisco to study at the Rudolph Schaeffer School of Design.

In 1970, after he became internationally known, he moved both home and office to a house overlooking Baker Beach in the densely foggy San Francisco neighborhood known as Sea Cliff. These days Sea Cliff is a fashionable place—actor Robin Williams and local theater impresario Carole Shorenstein Hays are among its residents—but when Taylor moved there it was social death. As Dorothea Walker remembers, "No one wanted to live out there on account of the fog."

Still, Sea Cliff proved to be fertile ground, for it was there, just as he was refining the California Look, that Taylor created what seems to be its antithesis—his own home.

"His house was a jungle filled with all sorts of odd pieces," Walker says. "But somehow, the way he put them together seemed natural and right." Almost twenty years ago Taylor referred to the place as "my design laboratory... a place where I can study forms and effects and combinations." It became a repository for the eclectic objects he acquired on his travels or shopping expeditions, ones he'd magically turn up with when designing an interior for a client.

"Michael had a William Randolph Hearst complex," says Paul Weaver, who founded Michael Taylor Designs with him in 1985. "He bought everything he liked. He bought things at Cost Plus, and he bought staircases that had been ripped out of fifteenth-century monasteries. His clients regarded his collection as the treasure of Ali Baba."

Taylor rivaled the legendary fashion editor Diana Vreeland in his use of maxims—"Red and green should never be seen!" was one of his favorites. "If in doubt, take it out!" was another, but he seems not to have abided by this one at all. And it was just as well: To peruse photographs of his residence—which was sold after his death, its contents auctioned—is to see clutter transformed into art.

Taylor's house "was very much his inner vision," MacMasters says. As such, it was an arresting juxtaposition. The structure's lower level—where the of-

fice and showroom were located—was entirely given over to the California Look and included such natural elements as dried Mexican cactus, wicker and stone. Yet in the two upstairs floors, which were filled with antiques, such a look seems barely to have been imagined. Few designers could pull together as many influences—African, Italian Baroque, Régence, Japanese, among many others—as Taylor did here, with such a stylistically coherent result.

His friends recall an almost mystical atmosphere at work in the Sea Cliff house. "It was a great exotic feeling. You could have been anywhere in the world," says Walker. The bold mix of styles encouraged this sense of dislocation, according to MacMasters. "If you were to look at it, you didn't know where you were, and Michael delighted in that sensation."

In what must be the greatest tribute to Taylor's work, many of the rooms he created so long ago are still in use today. "The Fishers just reorder the same material over and over," Bowes says, referring to Don Fisher, cofounder of The Gap, and his wife, Doris, who have their upholstery redone from time to time but leave the rest of their Taylor interiors alone; many other clients do the same. There's a consistent timelessness to his rooms. Almost forty years after he conceived it, a game room belonging to Maryon Davies Lewis in San Francisco's Pacific Heights seems startlingly contemporary. The use of color, which is limited to a set of Venetian chairs in citrus tones, is quintessentially Taylor—both sparing and luxuriant.

In San Francisco, where Taylor played out his extraordinary career, he's still very much a presence. At the time of his death he was working on the house of John and Frances Bowes, and the pure simplicity of their living room, with its granite tables, slate floors and pleasingly symmetrical row of square columns at the picture window, is Zen-like and tranquil. Perhaps because this room was one of the designer's last visions, it's also curiously moving.

Almost uncannily, Taylor and his signatures endure. Which just may confirm, as Paul Weaver believes, that "when Michael died, he went to the Mount Olympus of design." □