

If you've got lots of money but you don't want to look like you spent it all at once, then Emily Todhunter is the decorator you should have on call. From castles to yachts, Todhunter's style is new England, says **Helen Kirwan-Taylor**

**A**s I sit leafing through the bound portfolios in interior designer Emily Todhunter's Lots Road studio, my thoughts start to wander. Sumptuous 3-D watercolour drawings depict French châteaux, country estates, superyachts, ski chalets, marble bathrooms the size of my living room, and underground swimming pools. In the world that Todhunter inhabits, the stress of having to decide where to place a vase simply

doesn't exist. There are no storage crises either, because, as in the case of Tamara Mellon's closet, ample space was allotted for her 240 pairs of shoes.

I want to fall asleep and wake up in one of Todhunter's drawings, but sadly my daydream is interrupted by her bustling and enthusiastic presence. In a sensible grey sweater and jeans, with chunky gold earrings and no make-up, I imagine Todhunter to be the kind of woman the Royals had in mind to marry Charles or Edward. Funny and alert, she reminds me of Camilla in the days before she became careworn, when she could pull up her shirt sleeves and pluck a pheasant.

I first met Todhunter in the late Eighties, when I was living in New York and she was a fixture at every party, having landed the plumpest job of them all, the design of the most happening nightclub, Au Bar. 'I filled it with black and white photographs of my grandparents and bits I found in flea markets,' she says. 'I turned this grossy rat-infested basement into an English country house. I gave it my heart and my soul.'

Todhunter was always part of the fast crowd, but lately she seems to have abandoned the party circuit and thrown herself headfirst into building a serious design practice that caters to oligarchs and well-heeled Britons and Europeans, including her personal friends Ghislaine Maxwell and the late Gordon White. She is married to Manóli Olympitis, a Greek businessman, and has three children: a daughter of ten and twin boys of five.

The It-girl who stayed until the bitter end of every party (but always looked, in dress at least, fit to meet the Queen) has grown into herself and then some. She commands a place - stylistically - between Nina Campbell and Kelly Hoppen, but, to her credit, her look keeps evolving. She did frilly English country at one point, then moved into Thirties Art Deco Park Avenue. 'We were really the first to go out and buy



# THE TAST



# EMAKER

PHOTOGRAPH BY ANDREW LAMB



Left: the interior of Ballinlough Castle (far left) near Dublin was another project

## 'We decorate the stables (even the ponies have stockings)'

country house. He has lovely taste,' she says.

The same cannot be said about Le Manoir aux Quat' Saisons which they designed. 'Borderline bad taste,' she says, grinning. Her team has just completed five new bedrooms, each more purposely preposterous than the next. One looks like a Park Avenue penthouse meets Tahiti. 'We were asked to push the boundaries,' she says. 'Raymond kept saying: "I do not want anyone to walk into the room and worry about their accountant!"'

Most of what Todhunter does falls into the category of turnkey design. She has done a few developments (such as the flat in The Phillimorea that Tamara Mellon later bought: the team had to adjust the already enormous closet to make room for more shoes), but mostly she works for the rich friends of rich friends.

She sits comfortably in that world, which makes that world sit comfortably with her. It is a world where budgets for furniture can run into the millions. After I spoke to Todhunter, her clients arrived to discuss the Twizzle project. You would have thought, from the solemn tone around the table, that this was a meeting of cardiac surgeons. Life for a designer who charges several hundred an hour revolves around details like towel rails. 'Of course if a client calls me I will leap on it [the towel rail]. One must worry about the minutiae of a house but the trick is not to worry about it too much,' she says. (In a boat, though, towel rails

need to be adjusted to within an inch of their lives.) When I tell her that a Kelly Hoppen house I visited had candles and orchids designed into the plan, 'Todhunter looked aghast. "Ridiculous!" she says. 'I guess if they want it, you do it, but we don't stress about those sort of things.'

She has vacated her previous Park Avenue-style apartment in Pimlico to become a green zealot in wellies (I suspect this is the real Emily). Her latest project, the Organic collection, is a range of organic materials that use a process that sounds vaguely like something you would find at a spa. 'Our fabrics are softened with aloe vera and beeswax,' says one of her many assistants, handing me a sample to stroke. The collection instantly won the Decorex best new product award, putting Todhunter at the top of the decorating pile.

In between flying to Chile to see clients, she has been visiting mills in Italy and looking at dyes. The fabrics are a collaboration with

Kathryn Ireland, another English It-girl and former classmate whose style caught the eye of the super-rich in California. 'See, Heathfield was pretty useful in the end,' says Todhunter. She's currently gearing up for Christmas in Wiltshire where every year 'we throw a children's party the weekend before with flares lighting up the garden, and the tree twinkling in the window like in Dutch fairy stories. We decorate the stables (even the ponies have stockings), we blare out Christmas carols - and Father Christmas comes,' she adds delightedly.

Some designers confuse themselves with their clients, but Todhunter is more down to earth. 'Of course I am not nearly as wealthy as my clients, but real people don't care how rich someone is,' she says. 'Most of my clients are unpretentious and only too happy to sit around a fireplace in my grotty cottage.' Of course, she is just as happy to sit on the deck of their \$5m yacht.

## HOW TO DECORATE FOR CHRISTMAS

- Always play Christmas carols loudly while decorating - it gets you in the mood. I wait for the Christmas holidays to begin so all the family can get involved.
- I believe in using the same decorations year after year: the children love it as it evokes memories. I was given my decorations as a wedding present by Kate Earle and the girls in the office 12 years ago - it's the perfect wedding gift.
- I buy our tree from the local man. Don't buy it in its sausage wrapper: insist they shake it out so you can see the shape and fullness. Also, don't worry if the top is wonky - you can cut it off. I always go for a corker.
- I do masses of lights: plain, little white fairy lights; nothing musical or flashy. Always buy extra boxes so you

- can avert any disasters.
- I have the same wreath that I bought from Appley Hoare Antiques years ago, with lots of berries.
- I only use red, gold and silver glass Christmas balls to decorate my tree - all different sizes, from Harrods.
- Strictly no tinsel - it's tacky. However, hang mistletoe everywhere.
- I only wrap presents in plain red, gold and silver Christmas paper, with ribbon that you can run scissors through to make it curly-wurly.
- Keep last year's Christmas cards to use as labels.



Forties French furniture,' she says. As soon as her look turned opulent minimal, she jumped on the eco wagon with a new range of organic fabrics, the Organic collection, made with designer Kathryn Ireland, which now line her purposefully unfussy, unchintzy Queen Anne house in Wiltshire, where she spends half of the week.

**T**odhunter is not a 'name' designer. 'My ego is just not that big,' she says. 'I think if you are genuine and normal and upfront, you get that sort of client. I tell them I am a mother as well as a decorator and I attract people with lovely fat budgets.' Those budgets got translated into castles in Ireland, estates in Norfolk and yachts the size of my local Tesco. In fact, when her team was showing me the drawings for SY 'Twizzle, a 55m award-winning superyacht that she is designing for wealthy British clients (their second yacht, in fact), I assumed it was a house. 'Oh yes, it has a (spiral) staircase and five bedrooms,' says Todhunter, sounding like she has one stashed away somewhere. Just to give you an idea: the yacht took four years to complete (one of her châteaux in France took a mere 12 months).

She now has her own range of fabrics, lighting, wallpaper and furniture, and charges David Collins-size fees in exchange for some pretty serious service (in her world that means being pestered by clients about towel rails late at night). Her clients are not rock stars but professionals such as Raymond Blanc and Mogens Thorstrup, who hope to capture some old-world glamour without looking like they're trying too hard. She is the pet designer of the ladies who lunch when it comes to restaurants (she did Daphne's, Christopher's and Floriana). Among her clientele is a 'nice' Russian oligarch, the late Nigel Nicholson (for whom she decorated the private rooms at Sissinghurst) and a sprinkling of over-rich English, Greeks and Europeans. In this world, the only thing that connects the dots is the private jet. But this world is not entirely foreign to her. 'Put it this way,' she says. 'I know how to dress and behave on a yacht.'



Above and left: a flat in Belgravia by Todhunter Earle



any residual effect. She went to work for Jim Smart, a specialist painter who had trained with her mother at Central Saint Martins. With a nose for where the action is, she moved to New York with the names of a handful of Park Avenue ladies whom (unlike most reticent British girls) she duly called. 'I was this junior little English girl and suddenly I was catapulted into this crazy world,' she says. 'I would get ten jobs a night at Au Bar then wake up not remembering whether I had dreamed it or not.'

Pretty soon, Todhunter was a name on the social scene, attracting clients such as Harry Theodoracopoulos (Tiki's brother). 'I did it all on a wing and a prayer. I felt very confident and had access to all the best curtain makers etc. This was the time when everyone wanted the faux English country look,' she says. Marbling, murals, chintz and tassels were the rage, and anyone who could do the 'posh' accent on top had an automatic in. The spoilt New York ladies quickly cottoned on to the fact that Todhunter was both sensible and hardworking, and though she was to be found (along with most of the other Brits) propping up the bar that she designed, unlike them, she could be counted on to show up for work the next day.

In 1990 she returned to London, where her office in Pimlico 'was neatly situated under the stairs'. She joined up with a business partner, the decorator Kate Earle, who 'replaced the boiler,' she says.

Referrals came at drinks parties and society weddings and soon they had nabbed their first oligarch. 'I call him the wonderful Russian,' she says. 'We did his flat in Eaton Place, then his boat, then his ex-wife's house, then his

Having been brought up with two siblings in rural Oxfordshire in a good English family (her father was a discount broker, her mother a botanical artist), the evolution of Emily Todhunter started when she failed to pass the Oxbridge exam after graduating from Heathfield School. 'I always thought I was quite bookish and it was a bit of a blow,' she says. Instead, she went to Bristol University to study psychology and philosophy, neither of which she says had



Above left: the superyacht MY Twizzle for which Todhunter designed the interior (above right)