

ARCHITECTURAL DIGEST

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THE ALLURE OF SUMMER



BLISSFUL BEACH
GETAWAYS

A MAGICAL
ITALIAN VILLA

THE STUNNING
RESTORATION OF A
HAMPTONS ICON

PLUS
SEDUCTIVE SWIMMING POOLS



TAP FOR
CAPTION

GUIDING LIGHTS

Fashion entrepreneurs Louise and Vince Camuto restore Villa Maria—one of Long Island's most majestic manors, with an enchanting waterfront setting—to its original 1920s grandeur

TEXT BY MITCHELL OWENS PHOTOGRAPHY BY SCOTT FRANCES PRODUCED BY HOWARD CHRISTIAN





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MORE PHOTOS

The home's front façade.

For shipyard magnate Edward P. Morse, the late 1910s were very good years. Buoyed by a fortune amassed during World War I, he constructed the world's largest floating dry dock on the Brooklyn waterfront, where his triumphs included refurbishing the USS *George Washington's* interiors in just 76 hours so President Woodrow Wilson could sail to the post-armistice talks in Paris. And in 1919, Morse and his wife, Ada, began a breathtaking expansion of their Victorian summer house in the Long Island, New York, hamlet of Water Mill, jettisoning its creaking charms in favor of noble monumentality.

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The columned west terrace, where new windows top the original classical-style frieze, is Louise's favorite spot to relax at the end of the day. The space features Janus et Cie furniture.



Xanadu decked out with leafy stone capitals copied from an ancient Greek clock tower and a ballroom crowned by deep coffers. Rising boldly alongside the main road at the entrance to the village and overlooking Mecox Bay, the sprawling residence was a tribute to Morse's riches and to his taste for conversation pieces—his stables, as all his neighbors knew, housed another prized acquisition: General Ruxton, the late Theodore Roosevelt's beloved saddle horse.

Glory days often tarnish, of course. The Morses tired of their pleasure dome barely a decade after its completion and decided to sell. It eventually ended up in the hands of Roman Catholic nuns, who occupied the 15-acre estate, which they dubbed Villa Maria, for most of the next 70-odd years—first using it as a school, then as a retirement home, and, finally, as a spiritual center. Handsome rooms were subdivided into dormitory-style accommodations. Purely practical alterations, such as the installation of aluminum-frame windows and asphalt roof tiles, undermined the

From left: Louise and Vince Camuto take a stroll on the lawn. The west terrace, ornamented with carved stone urns, looks out to a limestone fountain framed by hydrangeas.



TAP TO SEE
ALTERNATE
VIEW

building's refined character. Decay took hold, too, with rot opening a gaping hole in the entrance hall ceiling.

By the time the property was put on the market in 2005, it had fallen squarely on hard times. Nonetheless, fashion entrepreneur Vince Camuto and his wife and business partner, Louise, were smitten, even after they were informed that roughly one quarter of the structure—the kitchen wing and an adjoining section of the house—was so water damaged it would have to be largely rebuilt.

“There was something magical about the place. Though the nuns couldn't afford the upkeep or the taxes, they wanted a buyer who would take care of it,” says Vince, who launched the popular footwear brand Nine West in the 1970s and is now CEO of the Camuto Group, a privately held

Furniture and umbrellas
by Janus et Cie outfit
the sandstone-paved
pool terrace.



lifestyle firm. (In addition to the Vince Camuto line of clothing, accessories, and fragrances, the company owns the Jessica Simpson fashion label, has a partnership with Tory Burch's footwear business, and holds the shoe license for BCBG Max Azria.) "Louise and I told the sisters we wanted to restore it, no matter how long it took, and we wanted to live there."

Villa Maria is not the first preservation project for the Camutos; among the other significant properties they have rehabilitated is the early-20th-century French Norman-style estate in Greenwich, Connecticut, where they reside with their son, Phillip. In fact, recalls Louise—the creative director of the Vince Camuto line and a former Miss Sweden—the couple discovered a mutual interest in antiques and architecture on their first date.

The paneled gallery is furnished with a pair of circa-1820 daybeds from Anglo-Raj Antiques and a 19th-century English turned armchair; the curtains are of a Rogers & Goffigon fabric, and the sisal is by Merida Meridian.



Says Vince, “You have to share the same path, the same enjoyments, the same loves.”

His passion for historic buildings took root on his first trip abroad, 30 years ago, as a young shoe designer who had been born and bred on Manhattan’s Lower East Side. “I remember walking the streets of Florence after dinner, until three in the morning,” Vince says, “imagining the history and the people who had lived there. When I came back to the States, I knew I wanted to live in something old.”

To revive Villa Maria, the Camutos called on New York City architect Andre Tchelistcheff, with whom they had previously worked on several residential and commercial projects. His four-year restoration, which involved the extensive deployment of period-sensitive materials, ranged from replacing the clunky wood balustrade of the central staircase with a regal sweep of wrought iron to constructing a cupolaed carriage house attached to the main

Twin sofas and an ottoman, all slipcovered in a Calvin Fabrics linen, are grouped with a Giacometti-inspired cocktail table and side table by Carole Gratale in the living room; the set of six marble-top bronze tables is by Lucca & Co., and the antiqued mercury-glass mirrors are by APF Munn.



building via a glass-walled loggia. “The idea was restrained elegance—to modernize the house completely but without touch screens everywhere,” says the architect. When asked how the word *restrained* could be used for an 11-bedroom getaway with a living room stretching 60 feet in length (it used to be the ballroom), Tchelistcheff observes, “What’s interesting about Villa Maria is that although it’s big, it feels summery, not ostentatious.” The grounds, designed by eminent landscape architect Edmund D. Hollander, are grand in scale but laid-back, with rows of boxwood mingling with swaths of hydrangea.

Abundant sunlight helps to relieve the building’s formality, with illumination pouring in through French doors, new dormers, and carefully enlarged windows that have been left bare or lightly dressed with translucent curtains. Enhancing the radiant effect is a primarily white palette. “Vince and Louise wanted to keep the atmosphere

In the breakfast room, a chandelier from English Country Antiques is suspended above a Lars Bolander iron table with a bleached-oak top; the settee is by Roark Modern, and the antique Swedish side chairs are upholstered in a Holland & Sherry linen.



light and comfortable because it's a beach house," says Carol Egan, a Manhattan interior designer who worked closely with the Camutos once the restoration was complete. "And Louise, who was also a decorator, is drawn to Gustavian simplicity, which helps balance the grander aspects of the architecture."

Pale hues dominate—oyster, putty, chalk-white, butter-yellow—but a variety of textures, from parched to polished, add soul to the otherwise reserved rooms. The walls of the master bedroom gleam with a pearly finish, while the library is paneled in creamy cerused oak, and here and there gilt-wood softly glimmers. "Vince and Louise really liked a house I decorated for clients in Palm Beach," Egan explains, "where the lines of 18th- and 19th-century furniture pop against neutral backgrounds."

A similar approach can be seen in the former ballroom, historically used for glamorous evening events and now an

The kitchen, painted in a Benjamin Moore white, features custom-made holophane lights by Ann-Morris Antiques and cabinetry by Eppley Building & Design; the oak bench and ebonized bobbin chair are antique.



inviting place to lounge any time of day. Its vast square footage is broken up into three seating areas and its stateliness tempered by clean-cut sofas and armchairs slipcovered in off-white linen, all atop earthy sisal floor matting. Against this mostly monochromatic scheme, the room's darker elements—such as Renaissance-style sconces and bronze low tables—stand out like sculptures.

The outdoor spaces, even when palatial in character, also have a relaxed feeling. A double-height portico framed by enormous stone columns, the west terrace is furnished leanly with metal seating whose simple lines bring to mind the villas of ancient Rome, an effect underscored by the presence of four overscale urns mounted on pedestals. "It's my favorite part of the house," says Louise, adding that it's the perfect spot to end a lazy summer's day: Wine and cheese are served at five, gulls glide and squawk overhead, and Mecox Bay—just a hundred yards away—glitters, reflecting the ruddy tints of the setting sun. □

In the media room, brass chandeliers from English Country Antiques overlook slipcovered seating by Montauk Sofa.