

# 'I'm definitely not matchy-matchy'

A palette based on a pair of Christian Louboutins and patterned carpets to hide paw prints – welcome to the quirky family home of an Estée Lauder boss

REPORT Emma J Page PHOTOGRAPHS Bénédicte Drummond

# Home!

Opposite: the rear of the first-floor sitting room, with original conservatory, a folding painted screen by De Gournay and armchair upholstered in a Josef Frank fabric. This page: the snug outside Demsey's office, with red and white enamel tables by David Schaefer and Fortuny corner light



The first-floor sitting room, with the 18-seat Willy Rizzo sofa. Below, from left: the exterior; Demsey, with Grace Jones portrait by Jean-Paul Goude and Tom Dixon chair

With its clashing colours, standout patterns, eclectic artworks and one-off treasures, it's hard to know where to train the eye when you step over the threshold of John Demsey's six-storey New York townhouse. And that's just how he likes it. "There's always room for another layer," he smiles. "I'm definitely not a matchy-matchy person."

In this Upper East Side home, which is filled with more than 600 photographs and pieces of art, Fornasetti ceramics jostle with Baccarat glassware, boldly upholstered Eames chairs are home to Gucci cushions, and Fortuny lighting rubs shoulders with modern sculptures.

When Demsey, who is the executive group president of Estée Lauder, bought this property, two doors up from a townhouse he'd rented for nearly a decade, he had little idea it required so much work. "It was an excavation, not a renovation," he says of the project, which saw his architect unearth century-old editions of *The New York Times*, used to insulate the building's inner cavities.

"You don't quite know what you are going to discover until you open up the patient," he says. "I found the mechanics quite daunting. There was so much to do, down to replacing



every inch of wiring." The basement was rearranged to accommodate a laundry, storage and playroom for his eleven-year-old daughter, Marie-Hélène, the ground floor was gutted and the top floors reworked to create cohesive spaces out of a warren of rooms.

Working with interior designer Bibi Monnahan, Demsey found inspiration in unconventional places. "I fell for a pair of Christian Louboutin boots owned by a



The palette of the sitting room – blue, mustard and white – was inspired by a pair of Christian Louboutin boots



The house contains more than 600 photographs and works of art



The ground floor hallway is lined with some of Demsey's favourite pieces, including Chris Levine's Queen Elizabeth II

friend," he explains. "They were navy and mustard with hints of white and – bam! – I knew that was the starting point for the colours of the parlour floor's sitting room." Both of them loved the vivid palette of David Hicks' designs from the Sixties and Seventies, so they commissioned densely patterned bespoke rugs from flooring specialist Stark that evoked the same feel.

Inspiration also came from an 18-seater Willy Rizzo sofa that Demsey's parents bought via New York socialite CZ Guest in the Seventies, which was re-covered in azure velvet by Romo. "It has a lot of sentimental value and inspired much of the furniture, including a Vincenzo De Cotiis coffee table."

Evidence of Demsey's magpie eye is everywhere, from the Christian Liaigre sofa upholstered in an Hermès orange in the study to the cupboard door handles created by jeweller Lisa Eisner. However, Demsey's daughter is unimpressed. "She'd rather everything was kitted out by one-stop shop Target," he laughs. Demsey's mother, Renée, was department store Bergdorf Goodman's artist-in-residence during the Seventies and



The master bedroom, with lips photographs by Len Prince and Look mirror by Elisabeth Garouste

Eighties, and her work can be found in the guest bedrooms. "I came of age in that era and I love its louche, glamorous feel," Demsey says.

Though he grew up in the Midwest, Demsey's creative eye was honed in California, New York and Paris, where he hung out in Andy Warhol's apartment on Rue du Cherche-Midi. "I bought my first photographic print at a flea market in Paris," he says. "It was a studio shot of Brigitte Bardot, when she was still a brunette." Nowadays, inexpensive pieces sit beside heirloom treasures. "I choose pieces that embody fashion, paparazzi and celebrity," says Demsey. "I don't take it too seriously."

Weekends are spent hanging out with his daughter and their seven dogs and three cats. "It generally involves piling into bed streaming movies," says Demsey. And with so many pets, the patterned rugs are a godsend. "Yes," he admits, "they are great at hiding paw prints. But I also get a sense of feng shui from pattern."

Demsey says this is a house to be lived in. "I admire minimalist, pared-back spaces greatly because it takes incredible rigour to create them," he reflects. "But ultimately I am just a 'more is more' person." ■