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CELEBRITY, SCANDAL & OPULENCE: TESSA KENNEDY'S FLAT

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November 2017

With clients including George Harrison and Elizabeth Taylor (not to mention two very famous sons), interior design legend Tessa Kennedy's Knightsbridge flat is a testament to her fascinating life and opulent, eclectic style. From being serenaded by Frank Sinatra at her wedding (when she eloped to Cuba at age 18) to working with some of the richest and most demanding clients in the world - meet Tessa Kennedy and get a tour of her incredible home.



Go through an arch on a small back street in Knightsbridge, squeeze between the rows of million-pound cottages, and there, looming ahead, is a large early-nineteenth-century house, for all the world like something out of *Great Expectations*. We're only a stone's throw from Harvey Nichols, but it's eerily quiet. Double doors lead to a double flight of stairs, at the top of which is the spectacularly theatrical flat in which the interior decorator Tessa Kennedy has lived since 1992.





Tessa is a legendary figure in the world of interior design. Born in 1938 into a wealthy Scottish-Croatian family, she has lived an extraordinary life and worked for some of the richest and most demanding clients in the world. Drinking tea on a disconcertingly pneumatic Victorian sofa from Elveden, she explains, 'I never saw my parents until I was five. I was shipped off to New York for the duration of the Second World War and loved being there, so it was a shock to come back to London and rationing and these strange people who turned out to be my parents.'



At the age of 18 she ran away with Dominick Elwes, the 26-year-old son of a society portraitist, but her father took such a dim view of the match that he instituted legal proceedings to prevent their marrying. Overnight it became a cause célèbre, and they fled, pursued by half the world's press, via Scotland to Cuba, where they married in January 1958. 'We had a wonderful time,' Tessa recalls, 'until the revolution came along and we had to escape on a raft with a pair of journalists from *National Geographic*. When we got back to England, Dominick was imprisoned for abducting a minor - me - and I was made a ward of court.'

Her move into interior decoration happened almost by chance. After his release from Brixton, Dominick became an editor and publisher; in 1963 he launched Britain's first full-colour directory of interior designers, among whom were the young Davids - Mlinaric and Hicks. When his friend Jimmy Goldsmith came looking for someone to redesign a hotel, Dominick recommended Mlinaric, but it was too big a job for Mlinaric on his own. 'How about getting Tessa to help out?' someone suggested, and Tessa - stuck at home with three young sons - leapt at the chance. It was an auspicious start and, in 1968, after winning a competition to redecorate the Grosvenor House hotel, she set up on her own.



Much-lauded schemes followed for Claridge's and the Ritz, as well as private commissions for clients ranging from Eric Clapton and the late George Harrison (at the fabled Friar Park) to King Hussein of Jordan and the colourful Prince Jefri of Brunei, for whose Park Lane apartment she designed a revolving drawing room. Her work at the Ritz bar and casino proved a particularly useful calling card. 'They're public spaces, which helps,' she says, 'and for the casino I designed an Amber Room that was twice the size of Catherine the Great's - I suspect many of my Russian commissions came through that.' A second marriage, to the film producer Elliott Kastner, added Hollywood royalty to the mix, as attested by snapshots of Tessa exchanging grins with the likes of Paul Newman and Marlon Brando.





Her style is eclectic, opulent and leavened with a healthy dose of (often Catholic) kitsch, brilliantly exemplified by her flat, which has two huge rooms - the drawing room and main bedroom - and three tiny ones - the spare room, dining room and kitchen - opening off a small square hall. This was originally an odd, awkward space, lit by a high window, but Tessa hung the walls with a striped taffeta from Lelièvre and made a tented roof out of translucent silk dress fabric that filters the daylight to create a rosy glow.



To the right of the entrance is the red velvet-walled drawing room, stuffed with richly upholstered furniture and mementos from Tessa's family and friends. Every object has a tale to tell, for example the ormolu plaques above the chimneypiece, which belonged to her grandmother, a shipping heiress who lived in Monte Carlo and counted Prince Rainier among her friends. The plaques were from her yacht, but they were so heavy I couldn't think how to get them back to London, until Richard Burton said, "I've got use of a private plane, so why not borrow that?" Tessa recalls.





A lobby from the hall leads to the main bedroom, once the private chapel for the house, the religious atmosphere of which Tessa has, if anything, intensified. The window is hung with [Rudolf Nureyev's](#) curtains - 'they came from his apartment on the Quai Voltaire and were exactly the right size: a miracle' - but the room is dominated by an enormous Gothic bed, which Tessa paid for by renting it as a prop for *Eye of the Devil*, the 1966 horror film starring Deborah Kerr, David Niven and Sharon Tate.







To the left of the tented hall is the spare room, painted pale violet, with a pretty French four-poster bed and cut-glass pub mirrors 'to make the room look bigger', as Tessa says. Next door is a snug little dining room, hung with a bold Claremont toile, which leads to the kitchen, a utilitarian space enlivened by more star-studded photos. Surely that's [Cary Elwes](#) [in Another Country](#), I say, admiring the picture of a devastatingly handsome boy. 'Of course,' says Tessa, 'he's my son.'









All stories, sadly, have to end, and this one is no exception, for Tessa has decided to sell up and retire to her country house. Many of the contents will be sold at Christie's in March, and I couldn't agree more with their head of furniture, Nick Sims, when he says that 'we hope that, presented together, the pieces will tell the story of Tessa's incredible life. If only this collection could speak.'