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## Interior motives

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# Quiet Luxury

TEXT CAROLYN ASOME | ILLUSTRATION ALEXIS BRUCHON

**P**ossibly the best description of quiet luxury I've heard is the one offered to me by the architect William Smalley describing the hall in Andrea Palladio's Villa Saraceno in Vicenza. A room six metres high by eight metres long, it makes up a third of the house. It is sparsely furnished and, if you were hosting drinks, guests might congregate in it. It is also a beautiful space to walk across – and really that's about all that happens there.

Sadly, Palladian villas in Italy are not that easy to come by (even for an oligarch), and good luck trying to fit even a narrow console into the hallway of most houses. But the appeal of having such a space – one that offers a visual calm – is undeniable. In a world in which everything is shouting at us, quietness in itself is a luxury.

Not so long ago, you couldn't throw enough patterns, prints or stripes at your sofa or your walls. This pile-it-on, layered look, a confection of wit and eclecticism, is the mainstay of English country-house decorating. But have we reached a tipping point? From the soothing Loro Piana colour palette of the interiors in TV shows like *Succession* to the collaboration between high-street behemoth Zara Home and Belgian designer Vincent Van Duysen, the thought of spaces that do not demand our attention is balm.

Quiet luxury is, it seems, best summed up by the intangibility of a visual stillness, rather than interiors filled with statements. At its most literal, these are rooms that are effortless, timeless and tranquil, which sit in the muted spectrum of a Mary Norden textile picture or a Grace Watts oil painting. This isn't anything as stark as minimalism but it is manifested as thoughtfully designed spaces, in which quality natural materials and textures – wood, stone, linen – are the defining elements in place of an overriding aesthetic.

Another Belgian designer, Axel Vervoordt, did not grow up in a grand house, but his mother took care to make it beautiful. 'She lit candles every night,' he recalls. 'I love rooms with atmosphere.' He believes 'a minimum use of materials can often lead to maximum results' and his projects invariably involve natural materials that become more interesting over time. A collector and dealer, he is known for an approach and aesthetic that chime with the movement towards exquisitely made craft pieces, judiciously chosen: a buy once, buy well philosophy. 'I have always experienced a deep emotion when I see nobility in poor, humble objects,' he says.

For Bernie de Le Cuona, founder of fabric company de Le Cuona, it is texture that is the quiet storyteller. 'You don't need big prints



in bright colours but, rather, textures and layers to create a sense of practical elegance in a room,' she says. Does quiet luxury have to be expensive? Bernie would argue that expertly made, fine natural materials do not come cheaply: 'Timelessness isn't a trend. If you buy into that, these pieces will improve with age and offset costs.'

For others, the answer is more nuanced. 'If you can replace luxury with the word expensive, you've got it wrong,' says William. 'Luxury doesn't need to be expensive, but it does need to have an ease.' For Axel, it's about 'honesty and authenticity. I prefer enjoying a home cooked meal with friends at a table with flowers from the garden to eating at a fancy restaurant. Intrinsic quality is important'.

Quiet luxury is like tapping into a frequency, one that is not so easy to discern but which envelops you in the gentle thrumming vernacular of balance and restraint, of considered proportions and superlative but simple artistry. It is easy to forget interior design used to be about creating rooms that would last forever. 'The aim of most interior designers after the Second World War and until the turn of the millennium was to create interiors that would achieve a sense of timelessness and stillness, and need not be changed,' says architectural and interior designer Jonathan Reed. 'However, now we live in a time in which interiors are considered very much a fashion statement, to be shrugged off with the next fad.'

Jonathan believes that true quiet luxury should be about something that is permanently good and retains value: 'It is the opposite of chaotic design, in which everything has to be a "thing" so that people know you have it. That cannot be quiet, cannot be still – it can only make you anxious' □