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IN CONVERSATION WITH

AXEL VERVOORDT

The interior design legend's ethos of simplicity has become a multi-million pound business, which he's now passing onto the next generation. We talk art, A-listers and his much-imitated aesthetic

Words CHARLOTTE BROOK

Drop the name Axel Vervoordt into conversation and it's likely to be met with quiet. From the arts cognoscenti or interior design insiders, this is hushed reverence. From anyone else, it's an expectant 'who?'. The phrase 'tastemaker extraordinaire' is often used to describe the 70-year-old Belgian because he is difficult to define in a single title: indeed, as Vervoordt himself says, 'I don't like labels. When people ask what I do, I can't say definitely because my job changes all the time.' His task, he says, is to give objects a good life in a good place, and to create spaces that make people happy. And how exactly does one do that? If you're Vervoordt, that means you must become an art dealer, collector, antiquarian, interior designer, curator, furniture designer and restorer. He is also father to two sons who each head up parts of the Axel Vervoordt Company, and, as proved in new autobiographical book *Stories and Reflections*, an amusing and energetic raconteur. From a creative so esteemed for his discreet interiors and Hollywood client list, the storytelling twinkle in his eye indicates that Vervoordt is not to be pigeon-holed.

After all, this is someone who on one hand geekily collects ivory science tools from 16th-century Germany, and on the other, used to hang out with Yves Saint Laurent and rustled up a penthouse suite for his friend Robert De Niro's Greenwich Hotel in downtown New York. Although he's hit 70, there's no sign of Vervoordt slowing down: on the day we meet, he bounds around Kanaal, a derelict canal-side distillery just outside Antwerp that he has just converted into his company's sprawling headquarters and for which he has grand plans. The cultural quarter, which comprises art galleries, furniture workshops and over 90 privately-owned apartments, plus a farm shop and café, means that to his list of vocations Vervoordt □

Portrait Axel Vervoordt beside the *At The Edge Of The World* sculpture by Anish Kapoor (1998) installed in Vervoordt's new Kanaal headquarters. Opposite An apartment in Vlaeykensgang, the 16th-century street in Antwerp that Vervoordt bought, restored and designed over 18 years



PICTURES: ZOEMIN, ANDREAS VON EINSIEDEL

can also now add considerate, cultured and creative property developer. 'Architecture is all about proportion,' he says. 'When I first came to Kanaal, the empty spaces and [grain-holding] silos felt like Egyptian temples,' he remembers. 'We have tried to leave the spaces as they were as far as possible, be it concrete, brick or painted a chalky matt black. We haven't beautified the buildings.'

A

Antwerp born and bred, as a boy Vervoordt was obsessed with finding treasures – he funded his first 'buying trip' to England aged just 14 using saved pocket money. He spent the time scurrying up to the attics of private stately homes that were selling up to the National Trust – but even then he only bought things that appealed to his eye. This is a rule he has always stuck to. 'I only buy what I like. Nothing else. If I tried to buy things that I know will make a big profit but I don't actually like, it would be written all over

my face. "Ah yes, many people would like this... it would make a... superb investment?!" No, I cannot,' he laughs. Luckily, many people agree with his experienced eye – Calvin Klein, Pierre Bergé and the Getty Museum to name three. After buying Vlaeykensgang, almost a courtyard's worth of sixteenth-century houses in Antwerp's old town in his early twenties, and, contrary to the local council's recommendations to knock them down and build a car park, deciding to restore them, Vervoordt inadvertently took on his first interior architecture project. Arguably, it is home interiors for which Vervoordt is now best known, but the business of designing them came about by lucky accident – he moved into one of the Vlaeykensgang houses with his wife, May, and young family, and when clients visited his home they liked its look.

There is no prescribed era, culture, or style. Art-wise, Vervoordt loves his hometown's 17th-century hero Rubens as much as he does controversial Serbian performance artist Marina Abramović. 'Aged 14, my friends were all listening to the Beatles, but I was into Beethoven. Later, I was introduced to Fontana [a key member of the 1960s Zero art movement]. This was a milestone discovery.' He realised that he could enjoy, and cohere, the two: modern and classical. 'I love the dialogue,' he muses.

'There's not enough forest any more to make everything new, new, new. We have to try and make new things out of what exists already'

To the knowing observer, the Vervoordt aesthetic is easy to spot, but harder to describe. Distilled, the formula seems to be high-brow cultural objects happily rubbing shoulders with 'lowly' materials: rare artefacts placed against raw plaster, scrubbed floors, concrete and rough linens. If an original wall's paint is distressed and peeling, he will leave it. If a cornice is shabby or a Frits Henningsen lounge chair a little threadbare, he will restore it to the absolute minimum. 'I love the patina on old furniture, when the original lacquer is so worn it's like old leather. I hate it when a zealous dealer or interior designer over-restores something, it gets sanded and repolished – it's a crime! The piece or space has no soul any more.'

This is another reason Vervoordt's interiors have such a modern appeal: salvaging objects, floors, walls and buildings is a sustainable practice. Rescuing and re-housing furniture is much more eco-friendly than buying freshly manufactured design pieces. This year,

WABI

Sting will move into his huge new apartment in London's converted Battersea Power Station, the interior of which Vervoordt has personally created, despite his initial reluctance. 'I really don't like it at all,' he says with a smile.

'It's so "whoosh", so ostentatiously new. But it's on a site where industry once was, so I've made the apartment very industrial, humble and hard-working inside. It's going to look contemporary, but is made from old materials. There's not enough forest any more to make everything new, new, new. We have to try and make new things out of what exists already.'

Vervoordt's 2010 tome, *Wabi Inspirations*, is required reading for interior designers today. It's a lesson in what he calls Wabi: his, and his long-time collaborator, Japanese-born, Brussels-based architect Tatsuro Miki's take on wabi-sabi, the Japanese aesthetic where beauty is found in imperfection and quietude, which Vervoordt came across when studying Zen Buddhism and Korean philosophy in his twenties. It remains one of his best-known books, and the Vervoordt Wabi aesthetic has spread (see young Belgian creative Joris Van Apers' stripped back projects, and the way British dealer and designer Rose Uniacke delicately mixes a modern, frugal paint palette with timeworn antiques). Does he mind this? 'No!' he says. 'It's a big compliment, especially if I get the chance to show and explain my projects properly. It's only a shame when people copy badly, because then the idea of Wabi becomes superficial.' □

SABI

Clearly, Vervoordt's clients are very high-end, operating on a blue-sky budget. So are his designs too refined, too rarified for the rest of us to take inspiration from? Definitely not – this is the man who rescued beams from a skip and used to tot up the cost of a whisky in a bar versus prices for tiles on his current project – he isn't tyrannical in matters of taste. 'People think that I only like empty and Wabi. And I do, I like empty and Wabi, but I also like very full. However, it should not look too ostentatious... it should look like a real home.' His look is also enjoyably down to earth. 'A room should have fabulous pieces mixed with ugly things you've received from old friends, which you don't want to throw away because you love them,' he muses. 'That's what creates a warm atmosphere.' Essentially, lives aren't perfect, so neither should homes be – Vervoordt is very keen on taking neither too seriously. 'I always think of the English way of life. You know, the beautiful Gainsborough on the wall above a fantastic looking modern console table, and all the Wellington boots falling about underneath it. Live with great pieces casually, and with grace.' □

So, what's next? Aside from polishing off Sting's gaff, arranging the Anish Kapoor sculptures at Kanaal and working on the interior of a St Petersburg house, a Tokyo apartment, a Greek island villa and a project in Texas, of course. Axel and his wife, May – who has been an unofficial creative consultant throughout his career – are both enjoying executing a slow and happy handover to the next generation. Elder son Boris, 44, heads up art, antiques and the designed-in-house furniture collections, while Dick, 40, is in charge of the family company's real estate, as well as repurposing historical buildings. With the biggest endeavour he's ever worked on built and ready to house the 100-person-strong firm for years to come, they could not be taking over at a better time. Describing restoration projects, from the medieval castle the family calls home to the new distillery-turned-cultural quarter, Vervoordt observes he is literally and metaphorically building bridges from history to the future. 'Kanaal is writing its own story,' he notes – and the same could be said for his company. axel-vervoordt.com **ED**



Above A private home in London's Kensington designed by Vervoordt Detail, left A signature single stem in a vase, taken from new book *Stories and Reflections* (£22.50, Flammarion)



'People think that I only like empty and Wabi. And I do, I like empty and Wabi, but I also like very full'

WABI-SAVVY: HOW TO SPOT A VERVOORDT INTERIOR

TIMBER Raw, scrubbed or re-used wood is a signature sign. 'One day in Paris I passed the Louvre and saw all these old beams lying on the floor, about to be taken away as waste material. I talked to the project manager and bought all 1,068 of them, so now a farm near Bruges I was working on at the time is held up by the Musée Louvre's old bones!'

BELGIAN LINEN Flax has been grown in Vervoordt's country of birth for centuries and woven into robust linen that is amongst the best in the world. For the Wabi look, cover classic armchairs and sofas in stonewashed varieties.

SPARE DESIGN By this we mean areas that are unfurnished. 'The empty space is as important as the full one,' says Vervoordt. 'That's why I love to work with architects. They have a wonderful phrase in Russia: "Empty space is gold".'

NATURAL WALLS Limewashed or raw plaster and a curved finish, as opposed to metal, glass and angles. 'I appreciate Le Corbusier and Van der Rohe's Modernist style a lot, but I also think it's fashionable. In 1,000 years I'm not sure if we will appreciate that, or the 11th-century village hidden in the Japanese mountainside. We need to go with nature, not work against it.'

OCCASIONAL OPULENCE 'I like things that are ultimate. Usually, this is ultimately simple, ultimately calm, ultimately humble. But a fabulous dinner at Buckingham Palace is nice as well – I like opulence when it is proper opulence,' he says. 'I don't want to live in a monastery!' So you will also find the occasional jewel tone or gilded frame in Vervoordt's work.

SCULPTURAL BRANCHES A single stem in a bottle or a Japanese porcelain vase is typically Vervoordt. 'I like humble flowers, things you find in natural meadows rather than very stiff red roses,' he says.