

SPECIAL COLLECTOR'S EDITION

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SEA ISLAND

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THE WORLD COMES TO THE CLOISTER

Renewing an icon's timeless traditions

AN INTERIOR *life*

DESIGNER PAMELA HUGHES BROUGHT A WEALTH OF IMAGINATION AND A WORLD OF DREAMS TO THE CLOISTER. AND IT SHOWS

BY JIM BROSSEAU

PAMELA HUGHES can't remember a time when she wasn't sewing, drawing, painting or otherwise engaged in activities that would presage her career track. Although the end of yet another long day is fast approaching, the interior designer conducts a tour of her sprawling but homey studio in McLean, Virginia, outside of Washington, DC, as if she'd only just arrived at work. It was that sort of enthusiasm—not to mention a résumé filled with impressive residential and hotel commissions—that made Hughes perfect for the assignment of a lifetime: overseeing the interiors of the reborn Cloister hotel.

“We knew it was an incredible opportunity,” says Hughes, whose height and graceful bearing bring to mind the elegance of a time when women called “swans” set the standard for glamour and social comportment. Along with her design team, Hughes understood from the start that history, like summer zephyrs, would sweep in and out of The Cloister project. She also knew that giving the hotel's interiors the character of their revered predecessor would take all the resources at a modern designer's disposal. In short, to keep it local, she had to go global. So if the best craftsmen for a job were in Portugal (as was the case with the drapery trims), then they were the ones she needed to secure.

As Hughes has now shown, that level of dedication and love of history is not the province of another time. It is, though, the result of a worldview as alert as Hughes's wide hazel eyes. How did she come by her passion for doing things right? It wasn't entirely by design.

SEA ISLAND *When did you first show an interest in design?*

PAMELA HUGHES Even when I was a very small child, four or five years old, I was drawing and playing with fabric. My mother had a short stint as a fashion designer, so we were always sewing together. I spent so much time with her. She's also an artist, so we painted and drew. I just knew I was going to be an artist. I didn't know what a designer was that young, but I knew I was going to do something in the arts.

A close-up photograph of a textured fabric, likely a rug or tapestry, featuring a complex pattern of interlocking shapes and floral motifs. The color palette is dominated by deep navy blue and a rich, metallic gold. The lighting is soft and directional, highlighting the intricate weave and the three-dimensional quality of the pattern. The fabric is draped, creating deep shadows and bright highlights that emphasize its texture.

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SI **Where did you spend your childhood?**

PH My dad was in the aviation business, so we traveled from California to Washington, DC, a lot. I went to the University of Maryland. I studied applied design, which focused on all areas of design but particularly interior and fabric. It gave me a very thorough design background.

SI **So it was always about the visual?**

PH Yes, I'm very, very visual. Color is a huge stimulant for me. I loved my courses at Maryland, and I was an abstract painter. Also, being in Washington allowed me to spend hours at all the galleries, which I adored.

SI **What put you on the design trajectory?**

PH One day, I went to an interior-design studio, and that was it! I walked in, and, it was overwhelming: It was fabric, trim, furniture, woods, metals, flowers. It was everything! And I loved it. I remember the moment so vividly, and I knew then that was exactly what I wanted to do.

SI **Why do you think that was?**

PH It was because of my background—I had taken applied design and then I even took courses for interior architecture. So all that education just came together. And the rest, as they say, is history [laughs].

SI **Did you go straight into business for yourself?**

PH No. I worked for a company when I got out of college. Then I went on my own after four years. I was in Baltimore at the time. I was doing very high-end residential work, and one of my clients bought a hotel. He asked me to do the hotel, and I had never done one before. It was a big challenge, but I loved it. And I said to myself, from now on I'm doing hotels, because it was so much more than doing a house.

SI **In what way?**

PH When you do a high-end hotel, you basically use the same sources you do in a high-end home. So we were still using all these gorgeous fabrics and beautiful furniture and elegant lamps, but it was on a larger scale. And you actually got to *create*. Sometimes when you do a house, of course, the house is already there. With a hotel, it's almost like a theater set. I mean, you're creating a drama.

SI **So with something like The Cloister—**

PH You're talking history, and I spent a lot of time studying art and architectural history. I also visited so many places when I was younger. I love doing historical buildings, and The Cloister definitely is an historical building even though it's a new building. And that's what has been so much fun, not only for me but for [Head of Interior Architecture] Rodney Shirley, [Senior Interior Architect] Chukri Nassar, [Vice President] Kim Dettor and all of the design team.

SI **Tell me about the fun.**

PH Well, we went into The Cloister's archives and looked at all the old photos and the original Addison Mizner drawings, which are absolutely fascinating. It's really fun to put yourself in Mizner's head and try to visualize how he would have done these rooms. And we have a lot of reference books, of course.

SI **What was your first association with Sea Island?**

PH Out of the blue, about three and a half years ago, they called us,



Hughes, far right, with members of her design team. From left, Rodney Shirley, Chukri Nassar and Kimberley Dettor.

and we went down and interviewed for the assignment. We competed against several other firms. My group came in, and we met Bill [Jones III], Peter [Capone, the architect], and [Sea Island President and COO] David Everett, and we all felt extremely comfortable with one another. We really wanted to do the project.

SI **Had you ever worked with Peter Capone before?**

PH No, but it's been wonderful; He's incredibly talented.

SI **How did you feel when you first learned that you had received The Cloister commission?**

PH Well, of course, we were all extremely excited about it. None of us had any idea at that point exactly how incredible and thrilling this undertaking was going to be.

SI **Given the weight of The Cloister's heritage and the attention to detail required of a commission such as this, did it ever for a moment seem overwhelming?**

PH We weren't overwhelmed, because we had done very large projects a number of times before. We just take it step-by-step. It's a progression. We had almost the whole office working on it. We started out as a fairly small group but our team eventually got bigger and bigger as we got into more and more detail.

SI **Tell us a little about that process. What is the progression?**

PH Well, the first thing you do is a lot of research. We do that on every job. We visit the location, we walk around, we get familiar with the surroundings. We talk to people. We try out the restaurants. We get a good handle on the environment and what's there.

SI **What happens next?**

PH Then we go back and study the history. We got our hands on everything we possibly could and just devoured it. We read all the books about Sea Island. We read Mizner books. Books on Palm Beach architecture. And then a picture starts gelling in your brain. So the research is very, very important. At that point Peter [Capone] had done a base building plan and had developed his concept for the hotel, so we started looking at the drawings as a whole. You study the drawings, and start to visualize—because you've done your research—and you can begin to get an overall picture. A vision, let's call it a concept, of where you're going.



Bundles of fabric swatches used for inspiration by Hughes (opposite page) hang in her studio outside Washington, DC.

SI How important is teamwork to this process?

PH The entire team talks and participates in this research process. We all share ideas. We went out and about in town to chat with people. And we read the local newspapers to get a sense of Sea Island, because we needed to permeate our building with that sense.

SI How else do you gather information?

PH Well, once we had the job, we would tell our friends, and they would tell *their* friends that we were working at The Cloister. It was amazing how many people had been there, stayed there or had gotten married there. Stories were coming to *us* about all these significant and memorable times people had had at The Cloister. That was very helpful, because that told us all the wonderful things about the old Cloister that we needed to create a new one. And, of course, we spent a lot of time talking to our Sea Island client.

SI How did Bill Jones's aesthetic affect your work?

PH Bill is definitely a visionary. We came to the point where we felt we understood his vision and could add to it. That's when we started drawing. This was great fun, because Bill wanted it to be the most spectacular and beautiful resort in North America. He allowed us to do some wonderful things, such as getting the rugs handmade in Turkey and having these fabulous light fixtures made. He gave me and the firm a lot of freedom, which is always a good thing to do. You get your best work that way. And he had the best taste, so he was a wonderful client. We were on the same wavelength.

SI Do you remember any guidance in particular that Bill Jones gave to you and your team?

PH It was that, throughout, history was very important, as well as maintaining The Cloister traditions. So we paid a lot of attention to those traditions—down to specific little things like tabletop items.

SI What do you hope guests will say about the new Cloister?

PH We want the guests who have been coming for generations to feel comfortable and to feel that it's still their Cloister—that when guests come back, they feel that they're back home again. We didn't change it all. We didn't make it new and shiny. It's still there, it's just better.

SI How do you help maintain the hotel's sense of continuity?

PH We used a lot of the old art from the original building and we paid a lot of attention to tradition: That's number one. Number two is that when guests are at Sea Island, we want them really to be *immersed* in Sea Island.

SI How did you make that happen?

PH Well, we designed sea oats on the chargers for the main dining room. We custom-designed fabrics that have Sea Island images in them. The damask in the ballroom has the live oaks, and so many other fabrics were custom-designed with these local images. The ballroom carpet, for example, has all these little critters from the area in the design.

SI What about the artwork?

PH A lot of it is of Sea Island by local artists or artists from the South—whether old or new art.

SI It's imperative to establish a sense of place?

PH Everywhere the guest goes in The Cloister, we want them to feel that they're at Sea Island, which is obviously a very special place. We don't want them to

feel like they are in New York or Atlanta or anywhere else. So we took every opportunity that we had to emphasize Sea Island.

SI Family is such a vital part of the Sea Island experience.

How did you address that factor in your designs?

PH That's a big thing, because Sea Island is a very special place for families, and we were quite particular about that. Throughout the building, you'll find what we're calling "Cloister History Walls." We have, for example, a Mizner wall where we've reproduced a lot of his old drawings. We have other history walls showing beach scenes—the pool, the casino. But outside the Main Dining Room we also created a place for the kids to meet: We've got these really fun benches that came from yachts. The backs flip depending upon where the sun is, and I think the kids will have great fun on those.

SI What else have you done in The Cloister for children?

PH We've got this fabulous settee from the Parisian flea markets, and we put all the Cloister kids' photos there—photos of children from the past and kids with families. So we're hoping that parents will say to their children, I'm going to meet you at seven o'clock by the benches or the settee. We'd like it to be a gathering place for the children. The Library has books for the whole family. We also have tables with puzzles and games. And everywhere, there are places where families can sit and be together. Like a big home.

SI How did you give The Cloister that residential feel?

PH We have seating groups; people can sit down in twos or fours. Even though it's a grand scale in many of the rooms, we have small areas where people can talk to one another and have tea or a cocktail. There are, of course, some large spaces in the building but we worked hard to create vignettes for people to feel comfortable, as comfortable as they would in their own house.

SI What other touches give the hotel that sense of home?

PH There is no shiny marble. Everything has a patina. All the fabrics have a residential feel. That same feeling is in the furnishings and finishes, as well. Most of the furniture is custom-designed, so people never will have seen these things before. The lamps are custom-designed. All the table linens are custom. The idea was for somebody to walk into this beautiful building and say, "This must be where the Jones family has lived for the last four generations." ■

