

JULY 2021

# THE WORLD OF INTERIORS

## GROW WITH THE FLOW

How an eco encampment took root along a remote Argentine river



INCLUDES THE WORLD OF EXTERIORS:  
Coronation meadows, tulipmania and  
the prettiest potager outside Paris





TOP: LAS BRISAS (DETAIL); SLIM AARONS/GETTY IMAGES

## THE FRINGES OF SOCIETY

The photographer Slim Aarons, a keen-eyed observer of the privileged at play, had a poolside seat in some of America's most glamorous homes in the 1960s and 70s. Little did he know that the images he took – all perma-tans, palm fronds and parasols – would one day inspire the most dazzlingly upscale of umbrellas. In them Stephen Patience detects definite shades of nostalgia

Opposite: Santa Barbara Designs' umbrellas evoke the carefree spirit so characteristic of *Las Brisas Hotel*, which was taken in Acapulco in 1968, and other works by Slim Aarons. This page, from top: the photographer shot *Las Brisas* in the same Mexican resort in 1972; two of the parasols in the 'American Icon' collection

**IT NEVER** rains in southern California, or at least so we are told by a minor pop hit of the early 1970s. This may, perhaps, be an overstatement. But the climate of the Golden State has forced the umbrella to evolve along a different path there, adapting to fit its environment. It has grown huge, spreading wide its canopy of vivid colours; it has become static, if not strictly rooted to the spot. It lives in the garden, on the veranda, by the poolside, rather than inside a handbag or on the elbow of a pinstriped commuter. This version of the umbrella, the giant parasol, has reverted to the function implied by its Latin etymology, offering *umbra*, shade, instead of a bulwark against drizzle.

The species can be observed in its natural habitat in a number of photographs by the society portraitist Slim Aarons, most notably *Poolside Gossip* of 1970. The shot depicts the exterior of the Kaufmann House in Palm Springs, a Modernist landmark designed by the architect Richard Neutra immediately after the end of World War II. We find, reclining by the pool, former model Helen Dzo Dzo and Nelda Linsk, the lady of the house; the pair are drinking champagne and apparently entirely blasé about the rugged spectacle of the San Jacinto mountains before them. Standing practically at the centre of the composition is a huge double-tiered pool umbrella, its colour picking up on the tones of a bouquet of pansies and Linsk's flared two-piece – in the precise tone of canary yellow that was inescapable at that time, worn by every fashionable woman in America, acting as a kind of hallmark by means of which a film or a photograph of the era can be dated.

Aarons described his milieu as 'photographing attractive people doing attractive things in attractive places', and while his portraits couldn't exactly be described as candid reportage, they are not as overtly styled as might be imagined. 'There were no assistants, no make-up artists, no hairstylist, nothing,' Linsk later recalled. 'We just put on the clothes we had in our closets. Very casual.' All the same, the pulled-together feel of *Poolside Gossip* was something that was in Linsk's mind at the time: 'Our house was done in yellow: the umbrellas were yellow, the flowers yellow. So I thought I'd wear something yellow.' Casual or not, Aarons was fastidious about his compositions (one behind-the-scenes photo shows him using the mobile ladder of a fire engine to obtain the optimum angle for shooting a Las Vegas poolside) and considered his subjects' surroundings, interior or exterior, to be crucial – a style he referred to as 'environmental photography'. Although his portraits were shot to flatter (perhaps, even, *because* they were), close-ups were rare in his work.

*Poolside Gossip* became one of the defining images of a long career spent documenting the lifestyles of the rich and/or famous, helping to set the tranquil and optimistic mood of much subsequent travel photography. Its rarefied glamour is a time capsule of the mid-century and yet somehow feels equally tailored to an era of carefully curated social-media feeds. James Sheftel, presi-

dent and owner of the Californian firm Santa Barbara Designs, is a longstanding admirer of Aarons's work and is hoping to inject a little of its eternally sunny outlook into 2021 with a new range of umbrellas inspired by it – 'Something uplifting and happy, because of the times,' as he puts it. 'With the pandemic, folks have re-discovered outdoors.' This is not simply because being outside offers the benefits of better air circulation, but also because the necessity of being confined to a single place has led to a desire to re-create some of the luxury ordinarily experienced via international travel: 'They've really focused on their own backyards.'

Designed to mark the company's 40th anniversary, the 'American Icon' collection includes shapes echoing the double-decker silhouette of the poolside parasol at the Kaufmann House, as well as drawing on other Aarons images. A target-like pattern of concentric stripes, for example, evokes a shot from 1968 of the Las Brisas resort in Acapulco, where similar umbrellas punctuate a scene of graphically curving pools and trellises, like dots in a paisley pattern. Everything is made by hand – including the complicated cutting involved in the scalloped edges – using high-end, locally sourced materials.

Awnings are available in suitably uplifting colours, including bubblegum pink, swimming-pool blue and, of course, canary yellow, and there is a new polka-dot version of the company's signature 'Regatta' weather-proof fabric, with a reversible colourway that inverts the dots (so white dots on a yellow background, say, become yellow dots on a white background on the underside). 'I feel that I want someone to have the perfect umbrella,' says Sheftel – every order is treated as a custom order, and designed to last for decades.

The desire to revisit what Sheftel calls 'a funner, simpler time' through the medium of large poolside umbrellas is an understandable one, and seems somehow appropriate. After all, Aarons was fully aware that he was a purveyor of fantasy. As a war photographer in the 1940s he had been awarded a Purple Heart for bravery, and subsequently made a point of keeping grim reality far removed from his work. (Invited by *Life* magazine to document the Korean War, he replied, 'I'll only do a beach if it has a blonde on it.') Instead his subjects were ladies of fashion, and not ones who were likely to have taken a passionate interest in the emergent counterculture – they were the kind of lacquered sophisticates whose only point of contact with the psychedelic movement would be through the swirling print of a Pucci fabric. The image of Nelda Linsk and her gossiping cohorts, reminiscent of some of the poolside parties that Burt Lancaster traverses in the 1968 film *The Swimmer*, edits out all the turmoil and uncertainties of those times. Aarons's pictures present a carefully composed vision of tranquil luxury that is inherently escapist. And we could all do with a little escapism these days ■

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Opposite, clockwise from top: Aarons's *Poolside Host* shows Nelda Linsk and guests at her home in Palm Springs in 1970. She is in canary yellow on the far right, the actress and singer Lita Baron stands on the far left and the model Helen Dzo Dzo is in the centre, wearing white crochet; Santa Barbara Designs' 'Double Decker' parasol, with its two-tiered pagoda-style shade, and the 'Cirque' model; pink 'Cabana' stripe fabric with trimmings; 'Cabana' reversible polka dots



TOP: SLIM AARONS/HULTON ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES