

A 2001 oil painting from Dash's 'Florilegium' series hangs on a movable wall in the summerhouse studio. The armchair, a Mondrian/Rietveld/Mackintosh mash-up, is one of six that Dash designed for his dining room. To the left of the chair is an early work, from c.1961. The coral hue of the living room can be seen through cutouts in what was once a hayloft

# MISTER MADOO

From 1967 onwards, the late Robert Dash transformed the Long Island house and garden he dubbed Madoo (Scots for 'my dove') into a hotbed of his own seemingly boundless creativity. Despite being a masterly poet, painter, pianist and party entertainer, he has been overlooked by posterity – and Kendall Cronstrom, for one, regards the neglect as deeply short-sighted. Photography: Miguel Flores Vianna







Top: the large late-1960s painting in the summerhouse living room is Dash's rendering of Madoo. US mahogany furniture of c1900 surrounds a Jacobean-style oak table – the transferprint bowl on it is Wedgwood. The 1867 cast-iron stove is a find from New York's Finger lakes region. Above left: below Dash's early tondo of the Madoo gardens hangs a drawing by Elaine de Kaoning. A 19th-century American 'over and under' check coverlet drapes over an American bench with an adjustable spindled back. Above right: a rare two-seater bentwood rocker sits by a c1890 walnut torchère supporting a modern-day Ganesh

Top: the clay chimenea in the library is a Native American design, probably from New Mexico, where Dash went to university. The lath ceiling, not original, is intentionally exposed for enhanced linearity. Above left: the bookcases are backed in black paint for a more erudite air. A voracious reader, Dash typically kept books open on a c1900 oak three-drawer clerk's desk. A hadaloterdian clipping from the garden sits inside one of dozens of examples of American pottery vases collected by the owner. Above right: the floor's garden pavers came from a local stone yard – Dash laid them in sand in a hybrid Greek-key/zigzag design.





Top: an Oriental bridge spans a pond—with a fountain sculpture by Win Knowlton—that backs onto the summerhouse. Above left: inside there, this guestroom with splatter-painted floor features works by friends, including an oil on panel by Rebecca Purdum at top right and an Alex Katz pen and ink cityscape on the wicker hamper. Above right: works on another wall include a figure composition by Mary Frank and a Fairfield Porter cityscape. Opposite, a late-1960s portrait of Dash by Parter, his mentor, hangs in the guest bathroom. The sitter disliked the rendering, though he admitted: "At least Fairfield got the dog right!"







## THE PHRASE

**Jack of all trades, master of none** 'takes on a bittersweet twist when it comes to the late Robert Dash, who was a master of several, at least compared with lesser mortals. An accomplished painter, he was a contemporary of artists such as Willem de Kooning, Fairfield Porter, Alex Katz, Larry Rivers and Jane Freilicher, but never achieved their fame. An able and thoughtful poet, he was overshadowed by the success of his friends James Schuyler, John Ashbery, Frank O'Hara and Douglas Crase. He was also a concert pianist, a consummate entertainer and an author of witty, intelligent columns for the local paper near his home, in Sagaponack, Long Island, where he lived and worked from the mid-1960s until his death, at 82, in September 2013.

The house and garden Dash cobbled together from old barn buildings and fallow farm fields in Sagaponack, today America's second most expensive postcode, is perhaps his crowning achievement, the perfect coalescence of his wizardry with colour, his poetic grace, his writerly concision and his melodic sensitivity. Called Madoo, Scots for 'my dove', the property is a shy two acres comprising densely planted gardens and two residential buildings: a c1740 summerhouse (listed on the National Register of Historic Places) and an 1850s winter house. Dash would switch residences with the seasons. 'He had a very strict regimen,' recalls Robert Storr, a friend of Dash's since the early 1980s who is now the dean of Yale University's School of Art. 'He did most of his painting during the winter. The summer was for gardening and socialising.'

And socialise Dash did. In the 1970s and 1980s he partied with the artists who, like him, had decamped from New York City, drawn by the Hamptons' open fields and legendary light, and he kept the candle burning into the later years, as Long Island's East End began to take on its current jet-set sheen. Dash was the ultimate host, Storr recounts. 'He'd have new paintings on view in the studio and loved to put on various accents with guests. He'd tell

stories, sing Broadway tunes, recount old movies, read French literature and rehash society gossip from the 1920s. One weekend we listened to Ella Fitzgerald all night long and he danced with a vacuum cleaner, doing wild Fred Astaire moves.'

While Dash continued to paint, with varying degrees of success, he was also building a garden, which is open to the public and has been maintained by the non-profit Madoo Conservancy for 21 years. It includes many classic motifs – a knot garden, quincunx beds, a rose walk and rill, an Oriental bridge and a laburnum arbour, a nod to his great friend Rosemary Verey's Barnsley House in Gloucestershire – and yet it is too dense and sinuous to ever be described as a classic garden *per se*. '[Verey] really admired him, and found his breaking with traditional British garden design very exciting,' Storr says. 'They were tight as ticks. They would get down on their knees in the garden and obsess about the shape of a blossom or a blade of grass. She also had the same capacity for alcohol that he did, and they both began drinking very hard – they'd start their mornings with Cointreau. She was very naughty, and he loved that.'

Dash enjoyed practising his bold experiments on Madoo's interiors as well, particularly in the J-shaped summerhouse, fashioned from a series of interconnected outbuildings that sheathe a small courtyard and terminate in a converted double-height barn and hay-loft, now an airy studio on one side and a formal living room on the other. For years the latter's walls were stark white, but for more than a decade they've been painted a vivid coral, which shows off his early Abstract Expressionist canvases of the once barren-looking Madoo to good effect. 'Red does rev me up,' he wrote in his column in the *East Hampton Star*, 'and I enjoy my red living room of a shade pure bordello as much as my guests.' Bedrooms are kitted out in vibrant sky blues and apple greens, with even dresser drawers and chairs often slathered in bright hues. The splatter-painted floors, says Alejandro Saralegui, the Madoo Conservancy's director, are not a homage to the drip paintings of the famous Hamptons artist Jackson Pollock, but rather 'a tradition borrowed from the seaside cottages on Cape Cod. Bob was very learned, and always trying something new.'

Dash's dabbling with colour, unsurprisingly, 'started in the garden,' adds Storr. 'He decided not to paint a picket fence white, and that led to not painting things obvious colours. But he was by nature a terrific decorator. He was a great antiques shopper, and... he would discover many things on the side of the road or in second-hand shops, though he'd occasionally buy something with real provenance. He had old-fashioned good taste, though he wasn't anti-Modernist. He believed in things that were lovely in their own right and thought about style as being organic, something that connected people.'

Hence the alluring mishmash in the living room, including an 1867 cast-iron stove from Geneva, New York, a bent-willow double rocker, a wall of found mirrors, a fire screen fitted with Dash's rendering of Madoo's rooftop (it sits on an American Empire table), and thousands of books about gardening in the adjacent library and dining room, the floors of which are lined with glazed tobacco-hued pavers. Framed bits of poetry, gardening-seed packets and a portrait of Dash by Fairfield Porter hang in the bedrooms, all untouched and much as they were the day the occupant died.

In many ways Madoo is a living museum, though Dash claimed not to be a sentimental person and would likely rail against the thought. 'He was an amazing gardener and a really good painter,' Storr says, 'and ultimately the really good painter suffered.' In his late adulthood Dash became an often incorrigible alcoholic and ruined many friendships, but people have always loved to get lost in the garden. Its enchanting deep-green nooks and crannies are appealing even to easily bored children, particularly the very young ones, still oblivious to the stranglehold of ego and mortality ■  
*The Madoo Conservancy, 618 Saggy Main St, Sagaponack, NY 11962, USA. For opening times, ring 001 631 537 8200, or visit madoo.org*



Opposite: Dash painted the kettle in his modest little kitchen with the same sweeping brushstrokes he used on many of his canvases of the garden. This page: an American Federal pier mirror of c1820 with a verre-églomisé panel in the upper third hangs above the sink. In the master bedroom beyond, framed poetry manuscripts line the wall