

The Adventuress

Our game-for-anything reporter
CYNTHIA KLING
does everything we'd do if only we
had more time and more nerve.



decorating

stalking a fancy decorator

It's only 9 A.M. and there's already an air of excitement in the room. Or maybe it's just the expensive perfume. Five young ladies make phone calls and take notes with blue Pilot pens (number 7 point). Off to the side, a wall of rectangular wicker baskets—one for each client—explodes with fabric samples, photos of furniture, vendor receipts, work orders and sketches. As I'm pulling myself away from one, Markham Roberts appears, talking on his cell phone in a soft Midwestern twang. He grew up in Indianapolis, went to Brown, and now decorates the homes of people whose names you might see on the plaque of a university building. They're rich, quiet and exclusive, and they all want him. Why? To find out, I begged to trail Roberts for one day. If I could learn about what went into creating beautiful rooms for the people who could afford anything, maybe I could apply the secrets for myself.

"Let's use Charles X bookcases for the Sun Valley place," he says. He stops and turns. "Becca, make sure they're delivering those chairs to

Long Island today." The chic, fresh-faced assistant is dialing again. "Do you always call vendors the day they're supposed to deliver?" I ask. She laughs. "Yes, and the day before, and the day before that too." Lesson 1: If you want those bathroom fixtures on time, call repeatedly to check in, order info in hand.

10:30 A.M. client meeting uptown As we enter a lobby on the Upper East Side, Roberts waves to the doorman like we're in some fun Fred Astaire movie, rather than an intimidating zillion-dollar building. Upstairs in the client's apartment, the giant living room is awash in lush textures: faux bone and tortoise, khaki linen, navy velvet. Then a cool blonde appears. She tells Roberts, who's been her decorator for years, that she'd like her grand room to feel smaller and cozier. Roberts talks about a print to warm up the now-beige sofa. Then he suggests a '40s chaise lounge beside the fire. It's a brilliantly simple idea (and my second lesson). You'd expect a chaise in the bedroom. Put it beside a fireplace, and you get instant intimacy in a living room.

1:00 P.M. takeout lunch in the office I join the group for a review of a Park Avenue project. Roberts pulls 20 fabric samples out of the appropriate basket. The same three colors keep reappearing—chocolate, caramel, claret—in big-patterned chintzes and solid velvets, crisp cottons, subdued linens. Each room in the apartment will have different textiles, but they'll all share the same palette. It's an interesting way to figure it out, fabric first. But then, this is Roberts' lineage. He worked for Mark Hampton, who worked for the legendary



the master in action
above: Markham Roberts, the object of my scrutiny, pulls grosgrain ribbon from the shelves at a favorite sewing store. left: Roberts and I chat with one of the owners of an exquisite (and intimidating) antiques shop.



decorating the adventuress

team huddle

A bevy of assistants helps realize Roberts' vision, which often starts with sketches for custom furniture (near right) or intricate plans drawn directly onto architectural renderings of a home.



David Hicks—'70s decorator and pioneer of bold graphic prints. Lesson 3: If you stay in the same strict color scheme, combining patterns can yield an amazingly rich consistency, like the inside of a pasha's tent.

Roberts furnishes his rooms with a combination of priceless antiques and inexpensive trinkets. Though he can shop anywhere, he gets a kick out of mixing high and low. In fact, he claims he never finishes a job without hitting the Chinatown emporium Pearl River (pearlriver.com) for ceramic dishes (he uses them as jewelry holders and coasters). Lesson 4: Don't be a source snob. Sometimes the perfect tchotchkes for adding polish to a space are the least costly.

2:30 P.M. one-of-a-kind shopping We're at Cove Landing, a tiny, elite Lexington Avenue antiques store that feels like an adventurer's library. We look into a cabinet dotted with curiosities—an English syringe case, a sailor's knot picker. (Alas, the fossilized river mud was sold.) Roberts recommends visiting exquisitely curated stores because they're like small museums—ideal places to develop your eye and knowledge. But I feel completely out of place. Chatting with one of the owners, Len Morgan, I discover that he's quite open to browsers, as long as they show real interest in his treasures. Lesson 4 1/2: If you're curious and polite in little haute shops, you'll probably find a salesperson happy to talk.

Next stop, M&J Trimming (mjtrim.com), an inexpensive, comprehensive notions store in Midtown. I ooh and aah over loose rhinestones and pearls and become mesmerized by a wall of elaborate Indian trim. But Roberts steers me to the crisp, bright grosgrains he uses as curtain tiebacks and detailing on furniture. "The trick to working with trim

without overdoing it," he says, "is to stick with a tailored look." That's lesson 5: Eventually, you'll get sick of a sequined headboard, but refined, understated grosgrain never feels old.

4:45 P.M. the morgan library Roberts wants to see the marble floors at this architectural landmark (morganlibrary.org). He's thinking of using them as inspiration for a client's place.

As we roam the library, he savors each detail, from the majestic columns to the filigree work on the bookcases. You can almost see his brain sparking up. "Decorating," he explains, "is really about borrowing great ideas."

I don't need to write this lesson down, because I realize that's what we've been doing all day—looking, really looking at ideas. They're everywhere, from museums to glitter joints in Times Square. The genius, of course, is in using them creatively. For this, I'll need a little more time on the inside. Maybe I can talk Roberts into taking me on as an intern. ■



Roberts enlists a surprising play of patterns to wake up a room that's short on natural light.

DESIGNER TRICKS THAT I CAN COPY

SHINY WALLS in colors like apple green, turquoise and deep plum create instant impact because they reflect light. Roberts uses pricey lacquer, but you can fake the effect with high-gloss enamel. FINEPAINTSOFEUROPE.COM

IDENTICAL HANGING LIGHT FIXTURES repeated throughout an enfilade (rooms that open onto one another) are an easy way to unify a whole house.

INEXPENSIVE MATCHSTICK BLINDS under lush fabric drapes not only introduce a touch of earthy color and texture but also deliver lovely dappled light. HUNTERDOUGLAS.COM FOR STORES

CUSTOMIZED LAMP SHADES Half-inch grosgrain ribbon added just above the base of a lamp shade can make ordinary lighting elegant. Roberts has an upholsterer sew on trim, but a glue gun works too.

SAME-COLOR VASES clustered artfully on a mantel always enliven a room, whether they're empty or filled with fresh flowers.