

AMERICAN BEAUTY

An illustrious parade of textiles and global antiques, plus a Persian rug caper that redefines the rules of decorating: **Markham Roberts** turns a New England Colonial into a grand study of the classics.



A custom sepia landscape mural by Anne Harris Studio envelops a curved staircase in the entry hall. Jute rug, Serena & Lily

OPPOSITE: The dining room's wall and sofa fabric are Braquenié patterns (Pierre Frey).





One of the best things about being a decorator is the feeling you get when you see a project for the first time—and realize what you're going to get to do.

It was a warm, sunny day in June when I first laid eyes on this one. Longtime clients were purchasing a house in the Connecticut countryside and had asked me to come have a look.

What I knew about the place was that it was built in the 1920s for one of the Rockefellers, so I figured it would be nice. But when the sea of pale pink rhododendrons parted and the Colonial-style house came into view, I nearly drove off the road (successfully mowing over a fair bit of pachysandra as I went, which were far too close to the driveway for their own good).

I've always loved grand old houses and the type of classic American decorating they inspire: rooms filled with export porcelain and mahogany furniture, exotic carpets and faded chintz surrounded by European paintings, books, and silver. An appreciation for these was instilled in me at an early age, primarily through my grandmother, who loved collecting and knew just

how a house should be run. When I became a decorator, I got to focus this affinity into a career. I mean, I started out working for Mark Hampton—what better immersion could I have found?

It's that layered and evolved assemblage of furniture and art of disparate styles and periods that harmonizes into something better collectively. In this country, we represent a great confluence of cultures, so it's only fitting our designs reflect the same. We embrace the best ideas from all over the world and synthesize the whole with new ideas of our own.

These particular clients, having grown up in that tradition, understood and loved great American decorating as well. They, like I, also fully embrace the idea that old doesn't mean out of date (personally, I am counting on it, hoping I won't be set out on the curb with the recycling one day soon). Over the years, the couple has collected extraordinary antiques, and

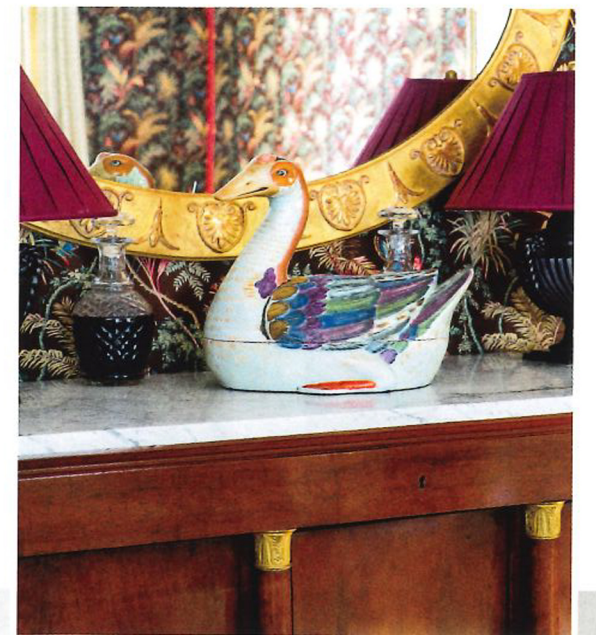
△ In the cashmere-upholstered **den**, Roberts turned to fabrics steeped in history. A cartouches printed linen (Rose Cummings) and a Kashmir wool paisley (Clarence House) adorn contemporary pieces like a custom sofa and slipper chair. Mandala artwork, Julia Condon

▷ "The way the **dining room's** intense pattern repeats across the walls excites me," notes Roberts, who trimmed the chocolate wall print in a rosy grosgrain gimp and mixed in a Persian bijar carpet and Swedish neoclassical chandelier.



◀ A Gustav III gilded wall clock (circa 1780) by royal watchmaker Jacob Kock hangs in the **entry** "and makes lovely sounds with the chimes and ticking." The mahogany chest is German, and the silvered petal lighting is Roberts's design.

▽ A Chinese export porcelain tureen (John Rosselli) in the **dining room** rests on an early 19th-century French Empire cabinet made by Jacob-Desmaller for Queen Hortense of Holland (James Sansum Fine and Decorative Art).



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they know that it's how we use and love these pieces that guides how we see them in the context of now.

As such, we filled the rooms in this Colonial with an interesting mixture of American, English, and Continental antiques, Scandinavian pieces, Asian lacquer, and good custom, comfortable upholstery. I added a few furniture designs of my own, like the horn-segmented card table in the library and a bleached-oak low table in the den to make the antiques relate a little more to the present.

Artwork and accessories likewise come from all over: from China to India, Africa to the Americas. And I used old favorites from the great fabric houses,

which I particularly enjoyed in spaces like the dining room. With its old-fashioned arched glass vitrine cabinets and staid mantelpiece, I felt like I needed to liven things up, and fortunately, my clients were not afraid to mix patterns. I gleefully ran with it, lighting up the room with the intense pattern of Pierre Frey's Papillons Exotiques, which I balanced with a quaint stripe on the curtains. Incidentally, we had chosen the scheme for the room before finding the rug (anathema to what they supposedly tell you in design school, so I may be drummed out of the decorating core), which led us to look for an old Oriental rug to add to the mix of patterns. Despite my intern's warning that I was “going about this entirely the wrong way and should completely rethink,” I was confident.

One blisteringly hot day in the dead of summer, Sotheby's had a rug sale, which I had been anticipating for exactly one day. (The catalogue for it had miraculously landed on my desk with 24 hours to spare, having been addressed to one Malcolm Roberts and previously delivered to my former office building.) There was one rug in the entire offering that worked with the proportions of our room—a Persian bijar—and it could not have been more perfect to my eye. I arranged to quickly take the client in to see it before the sale. When they rolled it out, I dumped the fabric samples from my decorator canvas bag and

△
New furniture designs like Roberts's custom horn card table make the plentiful antiques more relatable. In the **library**, it lends modernity to a George III mahogany drafting table and a German trompe l'oeil collage watercolor (1810). Persian garden wall print, Brunswick & Fils

▽
In the **living room**, a French bergère from the Art Deco period mingles with a 19th-century Indian shield, Chinese famille noire vase (1780), and an English peat bucket (1850). Chair upholstery, Cowtan & Tout. Antiques, James Sansum Fine and Decorative Art



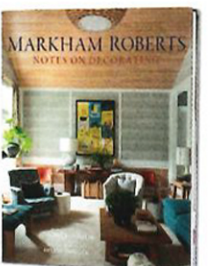
stood back with a huge smile on my face. I looked at my client and said, “If it looks this good under these hideous fluorescent lights in an awful storage room, imagine how it will look in your dining room.”

We expected to pay dearly for the rug, but something magical can happen in the dog days of summer, when everyone has fled the city and shifted their focus to rosé and Negronis. We got it, and for well under what we had budgeted, so much so that we were able to buy a beautiful 19th-century landscape painting with the leftover. And let's just be honest: Scoring that rug meant I didn't have to admit to my Tracy Flick-like intern that he was right. That would have been utterly humiliating.

Luck certainly played a part in this, but I felt somehow that the rug had been destined to fall into our laps. And how lucky I further felt to get to work on a project like this in the first place, with clients who share the same affinity for global influences and old-world decorating as I. ♦



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Roberts designed the plum velvet chaise (Marvic Textiles) to fit snugly in the corner of the **bedroom** by the fire. Accompanying it are a Japanese Meiji table and Victorian papier-mâché chair. Headboard fabric, Fabricut



This home and more appear in Roberts's second book, **Markham Roberts, Notes on Decorating** (Vendome Press), out in September.