AMERICAN EASE

Martina Mondadori Sartogo talks to interior designer Markham Roberts about unique objects, trusting clients and his favourite room



PHOTOS: NELSON HANCOCK

(Above) Markham Roberts

(Opposite) In a New York townhouse on the Upper East Side, the walls were covered with squares of natural bark paper, installed by the previous owner's decorator. Roberts kept them and worked up a new scheme around them

Markham Roberts is renowned as one of the greatest interior designers at work today – *Vogue* called him a "master of timeless American style". Based in New York, he has over 20 years' experience in the industry. His projects have taken him across the country and abroad to create some of the most daring and exciting rooms tailored precisely to his clients' needs.

WHAT'S THE "AMERICAN STYLE", IN YOUR OWN WORDS?
To me, American style represents the complete amalgam of all the varying cultural influences that make us up as a country. As Americans, we come from everywhere, and design in America reflects not only that diversity, but also and consequently, it reflects a synthesis of those different elements into something unique. American style has a sense of ease. It feels comfortable and, whether formal or casual, it doesn't and shouldn't take itself too seriously.

HOW IMPORTANT ARE THE CLIENTS' NEEDS? HOW DO YOU REACH THAT FINE BALANCE BETWEEN YOUR VISION AND THEIRS?
Clients' needs are the driving factor for the design. They're the ones living in the rooms, and no matter how much a decorator may wish things were different, a room's success should only really be measured in how it suits the client.

Sometimes there are differences in what a client envisions and what I would like to get them to see, and I work towards my goal, explaining my view as carefully as I can, hoping I will be able to convince them when it is important. Ultimately, if a client has unruly dogs and children, for example, I have to work in a practical manner and design around their specific lifestyle – so the costly upholstery job with the fragile, antique textiles I had wanted isn't really going to do well with peanut butter and jelly.





(Left) A New York apartment featuring an 18th-century Georgian console

(Opposite) This tree-of-life mural by artist Bob Christian was inspired by all the fabrics in the room of this Nantucket home

I KNOW YOU LOVE SOURCING UNIQUE OBJECTS FOR YOUR OWN HOMES. HOW DO YOU APPROACH THIS WITH CLIENTS?

Many clients already have their own interesting collections, and I love learning about them and getting to work with those pieces, incorporating them into the design. But it is also very satisfying to be able to introduce clients to new things and to convey my interests or enthusiasm about art or objects to them. I have a client-friend with a beautiful house we did in Indiana who shares my interest in both Neapolitan gouaches and lithyalin glass, and so we researched and found interesting examples for him that put my own collections to shame. It just makes for a fun type of competition, I guess.

WHAT IS YOUR FAVOURITE ROOM YOU EVER DID AND WHY?

The entry hall of a grand triplex apartment in a Candela building in Sutton Place, New York, which I did for Charlotte Ford. It was the first project I took on after leaving Mark Hampton's office to go out on my own, and it was an incredible thing to get to work on – especially for someone just starting out. This room was the first one I ever published, and it was photographed by my great friend Fernando Bengoechea. It ran in *House & Garden* in 2001 and it was featured in my first book, *Decorating the Way I See It*.

The apartment had belonged to Charlotte's first husband, Niarchos, and had originally been decorated by Stéphane Boudin in the 1960s. The entry hall had lovely, Louis XVI-style panelling, which I painted in a faux spotty limestone inspired by some decorative paintwork in one of the early French Renaissance galleries at Château de Fontainebleau, which I had fallen for while studying on a semester abroad in Paris.

I found the grandest table I had ever seen, a magnificent carved and gilt Georgian Baroque marble-topped console in the manner of William Kent, and I made the faux-painted marble columns and porphyry urn uplights to flank it, having been inspired by the entry hall in the de la Rentas' New York apartment. The lantern – a twin to one in the Musée Nissim de Camondo in Paris – was something I saw at Frederick P Victoria, one of the great New York dealers at the time. God, it was fun finding extraordinarily beautiful things like the Kangxi bowl on a French gilt bronze stand, which I used for flowers; the gilt-bronze photophores; and the beautiful blue-and-white vases to go under the table. It still amazes me what one could find in the shops in New York in those days – all those fantastic dealers, many of whom are sadly long gone.

The room has a fabulous wrought iron and brass bannister staircase, original to the apartment, on which I used the great Stark Ocelot print runner, and the floors were highly polished black marble with white cabochons, which I honed just a bit to give it the softer feel of age. I loved this room then as I thought it a real statement about what I could do, and I still love it, thinking of the fantastic client and the trust she placed in me as a young person just starting out. ■

Martina Mondadori Sartogo is the editor of *Cabana* magazine

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