



BEGUILING THE TIME

BJORN WALLANDER

AT THE HUDSON VALLEY HOME OF DESIGNER MARKHAM ROBERTS AND ANTIQUARIAN JAMES SANSUM, INTUITION DICTATES DECOR, RESULTING IN A RICHLY ROMANTIC SOPHISTICATION THAT FEELS AS GOOD AS IT LOOKS. PRODUCED BY TORI MELLOTT. WRITTEN BY KATE BOLICK.



When Markham Roberts and James Sansum bought their 1876 Second Empire house in New York's Hudson Valley, it was a wreck. Their first step, after ridding the attic of bats, and repairing the roof and gutters, was to rip out the ugly tiles covering the floors of the entrance hall, revealing the original wood beneath. "It looks like a bear chewed on it, but I like it that way," Roberts says. Opposite: The antique paisley on the table steals visual attention away from the mess of dog leashes, hats, boots, and coats. "A coat of fresh white paint helped to blend all the mish-mash and architectural craziness," Roberts notes. Previous spread: With three floors, 18 rooms, five fireplaces and overlooking 55 acres, the house is full of possibility inside and out.



MIGUEL FLORES-VIANNA/INTERIOR ARCHIVE. OPPOSITE: BJÖRN WALLÄNDER.

In 2007, when interior designer Markham Roberts and his partner, antiques and art dealer James Sansum, bought a defunct 19th-century dairy farm as a weekend retreat, they figured they knew what they were in for. Between them, the couple possesses many decades of historical knowledge, both aesthetic and practical. A restoration project, no matter how ambitious, can contain only so many surprises.

Sansum had first glimpsed the property while driving through New York's Hudson Valley, and fallen headlong for the elegant white-clapboard, three-story house with graceful slate mansard roof and a wide wraparound porch, overlooking six acres of verdant pastures. Built in 1876 for a gentleman farmer, it is a stellar exemplar of the Second Empire style so

popular in America during the Centennial, when Francophilia was all the rage.

Time had not been kind to the place. The grand rooms, with their high ceilings and tall windows, were in terrible shape, and bore conspicuous reminders of the three previous owners, including "crazy-hideous 1970s rugs and wallpapers," Roberts recalls. Taking care of that would be the easy part, he thought; presumably, whatever major challenges lay in store would be of the invisible, structural variety.

Then they moved in. It was early June, all blue skies and fair weather. Roberts and Sansum had long kept a storage space full of treasures they couldn't fit into their Manhattan apartment; emptying it out at long last was immensely satisfying. On their first evening, after a day spent moving their



In the front parlor, a mix of natural elements (custom matchstick blinds, rush matting, a rattan chair) and glamorous flourishes (gilt frames, Tibetan rug, a grandmother's fur throw) creates a deliciously un-Yankee voluptuousness. For the walls, Roberts worked with a painter to mix green, yellow, black, and brown to create a "sour bronze green" that unifies the disparate art. "If I could grab anything in a fire," he says, "it would be James, the dog, and that 1940s painting over the sofa [by a French artist named Favre de Thierrens]—it hung in my grandfather's dressing room forever."



old finds into spacious new living quarters, they brought their cocktails out onto the lawn. Before they could toast their good fortune, however, the air darkened and started to roar with the soft, rapid whirring of bats. “Hundreds of them! Thousands!” Roberts recalls. “It was like something out of *Scooby Doo!*”

That summer, a team of bat-removal experts in hazmat suits created funnels for the bats to escape through without returning, gently ridding the attic beneath that eye-catching mansard roof of an exceptionally massive bat colony. It was a fitting start to an ambitious restoration that’s now 15 years in the making—and remains ongoing. “It’s been daunting at times,” Roberts says, “but we took it slowly, and have never regretted it.” Along the way, they’ve created a deeply intimate living

space, one that touches on the macabre and speaks to the era of the house, mansard roof and all—a far cry from the polished, pulled-together decor that Roberts is known for.

Central to their unhurried pace is a budget that wouldn’t allow for fixing everything all at once, forcing them to progress in fits and starts, and relax into the unexpected pleasure of operating without time constraints. “I love what I do. But when I get home after a long day, the last thing I want is to make more decisions,” Roberts says. “Just like it’s easier to give emotional advice to a friend than to yourself, it’s easier to make a client’s design decisions than it is to make my own. For my own space, it’s so nice to have the luxury of time.”

With 18 rooms and five fireplaces, the house offers endless opportunities for arranging their vast store of paintings,



Because they use the dining room mostly at night, Roberts wanted the walls to be a dark saturated brown with plummy tinges of red and purple, which would be pretty during the day and moody and rich by candlelight. Philippe Starck’s Ghost Chairs provide a modern counterpart to the antique textiles. Opposite: He and Sansum spend a lot of time in the back parlor, where a pair of mismatched stools flanks a tufted turquoise linen sofa with low arms, suited to maximum relaxation. “Everything in this house is meant for the dog,” Roberts says, in all seriousness. “Harriet is a connoisseur of the fine art of snuggling, and needs comfortable furniture and fur blankets to make it happen.” The swan-neck floor lamp is by Vaughan.

BJÖRN WALLÄNDER. OPPOSITE: MIGUEL FLORES-VIANNA/INTERIOR ARCHIVE



In the back parlor, a pair of Chinese Han Dynasty dogs howling at an early 18th-century Chinese Kangxi porcelain vase brighten the dark 19th-century marbleized slate mantel.



In Roberts's study, an early 19th-century American chest of drawers displays a German watercolor collage by Ignaz Wansick and a French bronze of the Borghese Gladiator.



In the dining room, the curves of a 20th-century English George II-style gilt-wood console find a faint echo in the Chinese blanc-de-chine lidded jar and Indonesian bronze rain barrel.



Matchstick window blinds in the front parlor are elevated by a mid-19th-century blue glass vase-turned-lamp.



In the back parlor, a large Nelson Hancock photograph unifies a mini-exhibit of small framed paintings embellishing a bar that Roberts designed.



On the primary bedroom's mantel, Roberts displays curios including a mid-19th-century Indian bone dice cup and a late-19th-century Japanese bone crab *okimono*.



The hard right angles of a Russian neoclassical Karelian birch side table in Sansum's study are softened with a Pierre Frey floral wallpaper and gathered lampshade.



In Roberts's dressing room, a tall, dark, mid-19th-century French Louis Phillippe cartonnier happens to fit perfectly against a short wall.

Its walls covered in a vintage Clarence House fabric, Roberts's study is a mix of old and new innovations, from his own framed 20th-century photograph over the mantel to the French opaline lamps flanking it. The chair is upholstered in Schumacher's Gainsborough Velvet. Opposite: Dying for separate bathrooms, they made an additional one for Sansum out of a tiny room at the top of the stairs—originally a closet or a servant's quarters.



NELSON HANCOCK. OPPOSITE: BJÖRN WALLANDER/OTTO ARCHIVE.





objets, and fabrics into unexpected pairings and layers. The result is an irresistibly dark, textured moodiness in which lush Gilded Age mainstays—fabric walls and lampshades, tufted upholstery, fringed table skirts, antique bibelots galore—are refreshed with bare wood floors, white walls, natural textures, and a mix of old and new artworks.

Certain moments felt meant to be, as if fate had a hand in the decor: In the 1980s, while working for Mark Hampton as a fledgling designer, Roberts had pounced on the chance to buy fifty yards of Clarence House fabric that was being decommissioned. For the next 20 years it sat in storage. By the time he got around to doing his own study, he knew this was where the fabric belonged. He backed it with paper and used it to cover the walls. “There was exactly enough material to make it work perfectly,” he says.

Bit by bit, room by room, the couple eased into making the Hudson Valley their primary residence. Over the years, they’ve bought up the surrounding land, and now possess 55 acres. They even turned the falling-down carriage house into a studio, where Roberts can scheme and draft his work designs in peace, far from the clamor of ringing phones. “We’ve done everything we can that doesn’t require moving out,” Roberts says.

These days, Roberts limits his nonstop decision-making in the city to one or two days a week, freeing him to spend the bulk of his evenings exactly as he likes: snuggled on the sofa with Sansum and their Schnoodle, Harriet. The house has continued to throw the occasional challenge their way—there was a problem with bees, and another with squirrels—but nothing else, not yet at least, to rival the shock of that dark, whirring, swooping swarm of bats.

Displayed on the primary bedroom’s mantel, an early-20th-century African Lobi iron currency snake (and a bat sticker on the mirror) remind the couple that they aren’t the area’s only inhabitants. Opposite, from left: A custom-colored Carleton V fabric wallcovering envelops Roberts’s dressing room. The armchair is in Stone Texture by Schumacher. A nearly-20th-century Indian ceremonial cheetah painting hangs above the bed.

BJÖRN WALLANDER/OTTO ARCHIVE (OPPOSITE, FROM LEFT, BJÖRN WALLANDER/OTTO ARCHIVE, NELSON HANCOCK)