

ELLE DECOR



OCTOBER 2020

THE POWER OF

WHEN TO CHANGE EVERYTHING. OR NOTHING AT ALL

RESTRAINT

**A SECRET
GEORGIAN
MASTERPIECE
REVEALED**

**HOME-GYM
DESIGN TELL-ALL**

**LIFE-ALTERING
RENOVATIONS
AROUND
THE WORLD**

**IS YOUR CHILD
A DECORATING
DICTATOR?**

**NINA SIMONE
IN RESIDENCE**

THE POWER OF RESTRAINT

WITH HIS DEFT TRANSFORMATION OF A NEW YORK APARTMENT, **STEPHEN SILLS** PROVES THAT A JUDICIOUS USE OF COLOR—AND JUST A FEW GILTY PLEASURES—GO A VERY LONG WAY.

BY DAVID NETTO
PHOTOGRAPHS BY SIMON UPTON

In the living room of a Manhattan apartment by ED A-List designer Stephen Sills with the architect Charlotte Worthy, the antique French chairs are in a Clarence House silk, the sofas and slipper chairs are custom, and the cocktail table is by Hubert Le Gall. A pair of antique gilt wall consoles flank a Louis XIV marble mantel, and the wallcovering is by Lee Jofa. The striped artwork is by Gian Garofalo.

T“THIS IS MR. SILLS, AND HE PAINTS our apartment for us,” the four-year-old girl explained to her friend when they arrived at her home one afternoon. There, in the living room, one of America’s most respected decorators was on his knees with a paintbrush, white-washing the firebox for better contrast with the cobalt fabric wall behind it.

The child did not misspeak. Stephen Sills is a painter of apartments, in every way that can mean. He has spent his career conjuring illusions like a painter, the kinds of gestures that can transform a gemütlich four-bedroom Park Avenue apartment into something out of another place and time.

This project by Sills is an event precisely because he fills a space with the kinds of things we aren’t used to seeing anymore (except at the estate auctions of rich old ladies) but employs them in a whole new way. Call it New Connoisseurship. I don’t just mean good French antiques of the white-painted Louis XVI school, the easy stuff that Billy and Albert taught us not to fear. I mean the more opulent sophistication of periods like the Régence—the moment between 1715 and 1723 when Louis XV was still a minor and France was ruled by a regency. It takes a sure hand to go shopping for gilt-wood consoles like the pair in this living room, then turn them into an unapologetically modern composition. The best moments of that high style can be seen in the mid-1960s pages of *Connaissance des Arts*. Today, not so much.

So how did this environment come about for a family with three young children? How did the California-born clients know that Sills could give them

what they never knew they wanted—a home full of young energy, but with the repose of old Park Avenue? “We were looking to create a ‘house’ in New York City,” says the wife, who has a background as a professional chef. “I was a total fan and have followed Stephen’s work for years. I might also have been a little intimidated, but when I called, he just said ‘Come on in!’”

Architecture, always essential to any Sills strategy, was executed by Charlotte Worthy, with whom he has collaborated for years. “We have good chemistry, and we both love to explore the barriers between design and architecture,” Worthy says. “We motivate each other, in a way.”

Sills was born in Oklahoma, but his eyes were opened when he lived in Paris while in his 20s. This is where he really acquired his taste. In all phases of his career, he has proven himself one of the most, if not the most, deft American designers at using European antiques. He knows history and loves to use it. That said, he acknowledges that his style has lately “gotten bolder and crazier—and maybe happier.”

His prescription for using antiques is simple: 1. Live with them and don’t be scared. 2. Put them next to something modern. Repeat. 3. Showrooms only get you so far. Be willing to hunt through auctions to find just the right thing waiting to be reborn. “Out of all these sales,” Sills says, “you’re lucky to find two or three things.” A slog for sure.

But worth it: The suite of chairs in the dining room is a good example. They came from the 2017 Paris sale of Marjorie Post’s daughter Eleanor Post Close (Dina Merrill’s older half sister—and onetime wife of Preston Sturges). If ever there were a collection that expressed a kind of gilded, arcane French grandeur—one of zero relevance to the way any young family today wants to live—this is the one. But here they are, chic and bleached and looking mighty hip paired with cotton paisleys and a white Syrie Maugham-esque rug. “Those chairs were dark walnut,” Sills says. “No one saw the potential.”

Was anything suggested too outré? “Stephen wanted to strip our parquet



An 18th-century Italian chandelier hangs from a newly designed pendentive dome in the gallery, where the round settee is upholstered in a Donghia fabric and the antique wall sconce is Italian. The blue-stenciled wall borders were inspired by the Indian palace architecture in the photograph by Karen Knorr. The artwork (right) is by Koo Bohnchang.



de Versailles floors and stain them light gray," the wife says with a laugh. "We said, 'That's not going to happen.'"

As for Sills, he admits that when he first saw the tobacco grisaille murals destined for the dining room on a visit to the artist's studio, he thought they were beautiful but too dark. "I took a dry brush, mixed some white, and started lightening the background," he

says. "I did enough damage that I knew she'd have to paint the whole thing over."

I asked the homeowner if the shoe fits—in other words, whether all this sophistication feels like home. "It does feel like us," she says. "Perhaps the most sophisticated version of us."

As for the story about their young daughter catching him in the act of

painting their fireplace, Sills confirms its truth—and adds a missing chapter. "She's adorable! She wanted to paint, and I let her paint," he admits. "I needed to bond with her."

Says the man who spends his life pursuing and arranging beautiful objects: "There's nothing more beautiful than a beautiful child." Also true: A decorator is never alone. ■

CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: In the dining room, the canvas mural is a custom design by Sills; the antique chairs came from the estate of Eleanor Post Close, and the rug is by Beauvais Carpets. The library's custom sofa is in a Clarence House velvet; the antique cocktail table is Japanese, the vintage table lamp is Swedish, and the artworks are by Ellen Carey from Jayne H. Baum Gallery. The kitchen's custom banquette is in a Pindler fabric, the wicker chairs are by Bonacina 1889, the vintage pendant is by Hans-Agne Jakobsson, and the walls are sheathed in a Holland & Sherry fabric.





In the parents' bedroom, the bed is dressed in linens by Signoria, and the canopy fabrics are from Bennison and Elitis. The Rose Tarlow Melrose House chairs are in a Brunswick & Fils fabric, and the 19th-century desk is Swedish. The window banquette has a cushion in a de Le Cuona fabric, and the Roman shade is in a Scalamandré silk velvet. **LEFT, FROM TOP:** An artwork by Mark Saltz hangs near the door to the main bathroom, where the walls are clad in marble and the octagonal mirror is custom. In a girl's bedroom, the wallcovering is by Adelphi Paper Hangings, and the artwork is by Hunt Slonem. For details, see Resources.