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Made to Measure

Interior designer Michael S. Smith shapes the decor of a New York City apartment to make the most of the museum-quality art collection on view.

Text by Rob Hohlf "Photography by Michael Mundy Produced by Howard Chisston"
A FEW MONTHS AGO, WHEN THE DESIGNER

Michael S. Smith was flipping through a book about Maison Jansen, the renowned 20th-century Paris-based decorators, he came upon a familiar painting. In the pale-blue dining room of a magnificent Fifth Avenue residence designed in 1989 for Charles Allen Jr., founder of the investment firm Allen & Co., hung a Monet canvas Smith had recently installed in an apartment several blocks away on Manhattan’s East River. “I couldn’t believe it,” Smith says. “Here were two chapters in the history of this one painting.”

There was a time when a formal French salon like Allen’s, filled with 18th-century European furniture and Impressionist art, represented the pinnacle of New York style. Today’s grandee is more apt to commission decidedly eclectic interiors to set off his important acquisitions. So when a hedge-fund executive and his wife approached Smith to assemble a collection of antiques that could hold its own with the art in their first home together—a classic flat in a 1920s Sutton Place building—he saw it as a dream project. “My job was to bridge the art and the extraordinary apartment,” Smith explains. “The clients wanted furniture that was at the level of the art. For so long the decorative arts had parity, but somehow painting won the race, and that’s sad. How many artists spent as long on a portrait as it took to make a classical French commode?”

To prepare their new home for the furnishings to come, the couple enlisted Peter Pennoyer, an architect known for his historically sensitive and opulently realized interpretations of classicism. (He is also working on a book about Cross & Cross, the firm that, with...
Rosario Candela, designed the building in question.) Pennoyer's CV gave the clients confidence when the architect advocated tearing down walls and reconfiguring the apartment to effect a tactful separation of public and private spaces. The rectangular floor plan was divided into two approximate L shapes, with an elevator landing and entrance hall at its center; public rooms were arranged to the south and east, with bedrooms, sitting rooms, and the like to the north and west.

"I was trying to take advantage of the fact that the apartment has exposures on all sides, which is so rare in Manhattan," Pennoyer says. To highlight the views, he removed the windowsills, recessed the radiators, and extended the moldings to the floor, keeping the details refined. Interior spaces, meanwhile, were invested with new drama—floors inlaid, ceilings leafed in precious metals, walls ornately carved and paneled.

Beyond the foyer, with its hard-soft interplay of richly veined black marble flooring and fabric-covered walls, lies a gallery in which palace grandeur is counterpoised with whimsy. On the walls, which Pennoyer ornamented with fine flutes of plaster and beading inspired by the Viennese Secessionist movement, Smith juxtaposed a pair of significant paintings and a Venetian mirror; he underlined this triad with an Empire table whose legs are carved into sphinxes, and suspended a pair of bronze Diego Giacometti lanterns from the ceiling. His clients heartily approved.

"Within the couple, he's very much the art collector," notes Smith, "and she's the one interested in decorating. She has all the books, knows every designer's work, and she did all her own houses for years." Smith joined the wife on five trips to Paris and London, where they wove through galleries and auction houses primarily in search of what in antiquities-dealer parlance is often called FFF: fine French furniture. "We truly collaborated," Smith adds, "which is always the better way to work."

The signs of their success appear throughout an enfilade of private spaces to the left of the gallery, including a library, study, and master suite. To the right is the dining room, where Monet's water lilies preside, as they did in the Allen apartment a half-century before. Unaware of the connection to the Jansen-decorated space at the

Right, from top: In the kitchen, Greek Key chairs by Jonas are pulled up to a table with a base by Craig Van Den Brule; the ceiling lights are by Ralph Lauren Home. Below a Japanese screen in the media room is a sofa by Jasper covered in a Rose Tarlow fabric. Opposite: A water lily painting by Claude Monet graces the dining room. An Empire chandelier from Perrin Antiquaires is installed above a Maison Jansen table; the chairs are by Quatrain, and the antiques Malay carpet is from Mansour.
Right: A painting by Edgar Degas is set against a hand-painted wall covering by de Gournay in the master bedroom; the gilt-wood chairs are upholstered in a Fortuny cotton. Opposite, clockwise from top: The room’s Swedish neoclassical mirrors are from H. M. Luther, and the bed is dressed in D. Porthault linens; the 18th-century French chair is covered in a Leleuër floral. Rossa Aurora and black Portoro marbles sheath the wife’s bath; the gold-plated hardware with rock-crystal knobs is by P. E. Guerin, and the bathtub is by Kohler. A walk-in closet features custom-made shelving.

time, Smith happened to select a circa-1940 Louis XIV–style dining table by the designers for the room.

At the gallery’s far end is the living room, where the focal point is a marble mantel attributed to the Georgian-era architect Sir John Soane. Its simple geometry and modest scale, complemented by the 18th- and early-19th-century furnishings, set off the generous windows. But while the room feels thoughtfully planned, it has none of the strict, stately preciousness of the French-themed salons of yesterday. Credit for this goes to the major Francis Bacons that dominate a pair of walls, but also to Smith and his mix of Chinese sculpture, rich jasper and porphyry tabletops, and plush contemporary seating.

The resulting coziness makes Pennoyer and Smith’s design an admirable modern update on the Allen aesthetic. “So often now in New York an apartment’s history is either ignored in favor of eclecticism or it is supercharged,” Smith says. “This time it was nice to stay more or less in the French idiom. But the reality,” he adds, “is that the apartment is very American—which is to say really, really comfortable.”