

The **BIG**
ADVICE
Issue

WHAT
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EVER
TELLS YOU

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TRADITION NEEDS A KICK

Twenty years ago this apartment would have been wall-to-wall chintz. Here's what tradition looks like now.

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Instead of an Oriental, try a striped rug. It leads your eye into the room.

Interior design by
KIRSTEN FITZGIBBONS
& KELLI FORD

Interview by JAMES SERVIN

Photographs by
JAMES MÉRRELL

White Venetian plaster walls and an ebonized floor—both waxed to a high sheen—give the entry of a traditional New York apartment a dazzling modern touch. Stripes take the formality down a notch, as does the Phillip Jeffries grass cloth on the walls. Network rug by Crescent from Cornell Carpet & Design.



Q JAMES SERVIN:
How did you make 'traditional' look so fresh?



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Gold is back in a big way. A few accents will really warm up a room.

A KIRSTEN FITZGIBBONS:
With classic pieces, clean lines, subtle patterns.
KELLI FORD: Simple window treatments, simple rugs, neutrals with splashes of color.



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Dark walls do the opposite of what you'd expect: They make a small room feel bigger.

ABOVE: The telescope in the "tower room" is a favorite accessory: there are sweeping views of Manhattan in three directions. Dark charcoal grass cloth—and no art on the walls—makes the cityscape the focal point of the room. Sofas convert to twin-size beds for guests. Wallcovering is Phillip Jeffries grass cloth in Ebony. OPPOSITE: The living room is "fresh, crisp, and uncluttered, with an emphasis on comfort," Kelli Ford says. Antique French armchairs mix easily with a contemporary sofa and coffee table, Bridgewater club chairs, and a Hinson side table. The celebrity in the room is the mirror that Ford designed: "We love convex mirrors, and we love starburst mirrors. So I combined them and added colors and a gold frame."

‘New traditional’ really sums up your style.

FITZGIBBONS: That’s one way of putting it. I would say it’s ‘modern classicism.’ We’re grounded in tradition, but we mix antiques with modern pieces to create a fresh spin, a cleaner look. It’s eclectic, but it’s not trendy. You won’t have to change it in a year.

FORD: Our clients lived in a very traditional house in Texas—lots of chintz and heavy curtains. He said, ‘We have six layers of curtains on every window. We can’t even *find* the windows. You pull this back, you pull that up, you keeping pulling until finally you see daylight.’ They were ready for some airiness, a more contemporary look. They wanted a place that breathes.

How do you strike the balance between tradition and now?

FITZGIBBONS: We don’t go too far in either direction. A good rule in general when you decorate is: Know when to stop. When it feels right, just stop. Otherwise more is just more. It’s not better.

FORD: We always think about balance. We like to keep a balance of legs and skirts on the furniture. You don’t want everything to be solid, or it would feel too heavy. Or so leggy that the room doesn’t feel anchored.

FITZGIBBONS: And we tried to balance formal with casual. The striped rug is a nice play with the Napoleon III chairs. It relaxes the room. And the stripes lead your eye into a room from the entry.

FORD: Those high-gloss reflective walls in the entry are balanced by the natural texture of the grass cloth on the living room walls. And the leather-and-nail wall in the library is softened by the cashmere throws.

That wall takes the potentially fusty quality of a library and gives it a fresh spin, and a little bit of an edge, too.

FITZGIBBONS: It’s like an art element. And it adds so much texture. Using different textures instead of so many colors and patterns is a lighter, more contemporary look.

Actually, as I look around, I see quite a few patterns in this apartment. They sort of sneak up on you.

FORD: You don’t feel accosted by them because the colors are quiet. And we prefer simple, linear patterns.

Then why the big circular pattern in the bedroom?

FITZGIBBONS: This room is a bit of an aberration. Sometimes something just strikes you



and says, ‘I’m it! Pick me!’ I didn’t want to do something boring and predictable in the bedroom. It’s a floral, but it’s a contemporary floral.

How did you manage to make the room feel so restful with a pattern this bold?

FITZGIBBONS: One of the challenges of using any pattern on the walls is that everything else in the room has to be simple—at least with our style of decorating. Another thing: If you use a large pattern on a wall or a window, you want to bring it down into the room. We put a gingham check, which is equally bold, on the bed frame and chaise. It also

keeps the floral from feeling too feminine.

Was that important to you?

FITZGIBBONS: Very much so. It was important to us not just in the bedroom but throughout this entire apartment to appeal to both the man and the woman, the masculine and the feminine. I dislike frilly, girly rooms or ultra-masculine rooms. He just loves this bedroom. He said, ‘This room is so cozy, I just want to dive into that bed and never leave.’

That dark room is pretty cozy, too.

FITZGIBBONS: It’s very enveloping. FORD: I love that room! People often worry that dark colors will be confining or dreary or make a room feel smaller. I feel the opposite. We chose charcoal because it’s the height of elegance both day and night. It also draws the eye outward and doesn’t compete with the amazing views. A dark color can erase the boundaries of a room, making it feel bigger.

Those entry walls also have an expansive quality. What makes them so luminous?

FITZGIBBONS: It’s white Venetian plaster that’s been waxed to a high sheen, like car finish. It’s very labor-intensive. But it’s a crisp look that adds a lot of dimension to a space.

And what about those super-glossy floors?

FORD: We ebonized them. They’re very high-maintenance. I have them myself, in a house with four dogs, and I won’t do it again. On a less-than-perfect floor, imperfections you wouldn’t see with a flat paint are glaring with a high gloss.

Would I be right in thinking that one big piece of advice you’d have is that certain things are best left to the experts?

FITZGIBBONS: About 15 years ago, we got it in our heads to faux-paint Kelli’s dining room to look like a tortoiseshell box. We thought, ‘We can do that. How hard can it be?’ It was just such a classic story. Three days into it, we realized we couldn’t do it. We were so well intentioned, and it was a disaster.

FORD: It looked like the wall was melting. We gave up and called a pro.

PRODUCED BY DORETTA SPERDUTO



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Keep throws under control. Fold them lengthwise, then in half, then tuck them into the cushions.

ABOVE: The owners didn’t see the point of having a dining room—they preferred a table in the living room—so the designers turned it into a library. OPPOSITE: Leather wall tiles by Edelman, studded with pyramid-shaped nails, create subtle pattern and texture on a wall and an appealing backdrop for the Fernand Léger lithograph. When the cashmere throws aren’t being used, they become “part of the design element,” Kirsten Fitzgibbons says. “We always fold them like this.”

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Every room
needs a little tuft.



"We like to upholster chaises with a shirred edge," Ford says. "It's a great way to bring in texture without adding more fabrics." OPPOSITE: The blues of the master bedroom repeat in the master bath. Blue Celeste marble from New York Stone on the walls evokes sky and clouds. The tub is by Kaldewei.



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Four lamps are better than two. You need ambient light for mood and direct light for reading.

“She loves the contemporary floral on the walls, the celestial blues, the cloudlike feeling. He loves the neutrals, and the way the room envelops and soothes him.”

KIRSTEN FITZGIBBONS

The Manuel Canovas wallcovering is a strong pattern, but the soft colors make it a livable choice for a bedroom. And the Rogers & Goffigon gingham check is “cozy, comfortable, and warm,” Ford says. “It’s called Picnic and the colorway is Cookies & Cream. What’s more comforting than that?” The designers like canopied beds because they’re so “neisty.” They put platinum leafing on the bed frame: “It brings a little shimmer to the room.” It’s available from their Dallas store, Madison. FOR MORE DETAILS, SEE RESOURCES

