



INTERIOR DESIGN

# CHANGING TRADITIONS

by *Susanna Salk* | August 31, 2015

Six fabled designers of traditionalist interiors talk about how their style and approach has responded to the times, while remaining, for the most part, consistent.

It's said "the more things change, the more they stay the same," but is that true when it comes to some of interior design's legendary traditionalists? Have their approaches and styles remained unchanged, or have they evolved with the times? We put that questions to a group of six such designers whose firms have collectively been fashioning rooms for some 275 years. While that number definitely makes one think "antique," we discovered that these veterans – busy as they are overseeing the projects of loyal clients around the world, creating furniture and fabric collections, committing to show houses and charitable industry causes, and even authoring a book (or two!) – still apply a novice-like excitement to their craft. And that means their signature "looks" keeps evolving.

To prove this point, we asked each designer to share a room his or her firm designed in the past and one of more recent vintage.

# Ann Pyne, president of McMillen Inc.

(Founded 1924)

## MCMILLEN, THEN



Photo by Drix Duryea

This 1928 photo is of the “new” drawing room of the apartment of our founder Eleanor Stockstrom McMillen at 447 East 57th Street. When I say “new” I mean lots of things. First, “new” because McMillen Inc., Mrs. McMillen’s firm, was only four years old. (Now we are 90.) “New,” too, because apartment buildings in that area were new. And with nothing around her but townhouses, Mrs. McMillen chose to buy on the 4th floor because she wanted to be living “in scale” with her neighbors — not way above them. “New” because, believe it or not, the look of this drawing room was “new” for the time — very un-Edwardian, and very uncluttered. And “new,” finally, because McMillen did not place the customary gilded mirror between the windows, but filled the space with a sheet of mirror.

More important, the vignette of the drawing room shows the classic McMillen taste. The oval forms of the Louis XVI chairs, the swag of the 18th-century console, the roundness of the bust’s breasts contribute to a lesson in harmony of line and form such as Mrs. McMillen had recently learned from Frank Alvah Parsons and William Odom, the founding educators of the New York School of Fine and Applied Arts, later to become the Parsons School of Design. Mrs. McMillen was bold in placing voluptuous busts right there, though she wouldn’t have spoken of them the way I have, if at all!



Photo by Bjorn Wallander/OTTO

This is the “drawing room” of a client at 69th Street and Park Avenue, done by McMillen, or, more specifically, by me, so I feel liberated to call it a “drawing room” — a phrase that is today eschewed and avoided, even by other designers at McMillen. (“We” say “living room.”)

This is a proper drawing room, just as Mrs. McMillen’s was — no TV, no card table, no books, no sofa that looks like it should be slept on. And it’s a room that strongly references the concept of socialization in France in the 1770s, which saw the most refined and elegant way of conversing in groups that has ever existed. No American sewing circle here, where one speaker blabs away at the expense of more civilized behavior. Rather, this drawing room seems to make its host say, “Come, sit here, and we can have a tête-à-tête ” or “Come, sit over here and we can join the others.”

When I say “drawing room” I’m also referencing the kind of formality, no matter how soft and luxurious, that is created by symmetry and discipline. The valences of the curtains are a good example — the pair is mirrored ever so slightly, given the McMillen preference for subtlety, but enough to announce that sofa between them is “authorized” to be there. (As an aside, Mrs. McMillen was not a fan of valences, but then she didn’t have to hide two sets of shades, as well as the heading of the sheers. Also, in 1928, no one was thinking much of the damage sunlight could inflict on furnishings and art, nor did she have Hunter College looking in her window, as this townhouse now does.)

I also mean "drawing room" in the sense that the objects in the room have their own tales to tell — whether they are tales of the 21st century, as told by the Thomas Houseago plasterwork mask, or of the mid-20th century, as in the mirror above the mantle, or of the 19th century, as in the garden statues, or, especially of the 18th century, as, for example, in the English open-arm chairs in the [Louis XVI](#) taste.

As to the [Andy Warhol](#) photograph by Scavullo, it arrived in the room quite by accident — in the very place where an 18th-century period cartel clock would have been placed, and in fact *was* placed there by me, until it crashed to the floor. (I had hung it on the tip of a picture-light outlet instead of on a nail.) But what a lucky crash that was! Because Andy Warhol's "mask" dominates the room and asks the same question the voluptuous bust does in Mrs. McMillen's drawing room of 1928: "Who are you, and what do you think I am doing here?" The design of each room answers that question.

## Ellie Cullman, co-founder of Cullman & Kravis

*(Founded 1984)*

### CULLMAN & KRAVIS, THEN



Photo by Durston Saylor

This photograph from 2000 is of a dining room, located in a [Georgian](#) residence in Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts, that we designed in the English country style, which was so popular at the start of my career. All the furniture is [English](#) or early 19th-century American, and the artwork follows suit with this glamorous [Severin Roesen](#) floral bouquet. Passionate about decorative paint from the start, we glazed the walls in a rich ruby red, derived from the room's antique [Bidjar carpet](#). The plaid curtains with valences and tassel-fringed edges, as well as the period tabletop accessories, complete this very traditional interior.