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Happy & Fun

PROBLEMS

FAMOUS DECORATOR
MOTHER/CLIENT

FINDING A PLACE
FOR OLD FAVORITES

FAMILY...

SOLUTIONS

GLAMOROUS
BEDROOM

BRIGHT,
CLEAR COLORS

FAMILY!

RIGHT: Ann Pyne's poodles, Louis Quatorze (reclining) and Marie Antoinette, are frequent visitors to the Southampton, New York, house of her mother, Betty Sherrill. They make themselves at home on the sofa—"and add to the French feel of the living room," Pyne says. "My mother and I spotted the '60s fiberglass coffee table by Alberto Bazzani on one of our jaunts down South Dixie Highway in West Palm Beach. She bought it for me, but now she won't give it up, despite the fact that all of her friends trip on its skirt. That vase is French, from the 1950s. We call it 'the Brain.'" Sofa fabric, Feria by Manuel Canovas for Cowtan & Tout.









"My mother's 'host of golden daffodils' on the mantel are from her planting of 50,000—and counting—at her old house," Pyne says. Sofas are in the same fabric as the curtains, Rose Cumming's Lace. Painting by Jules Cavaillès. **OPPOSITE:** The love seat fabric—Les Touches by Brunswick & Fils—pays homage to Sherrill's love of animal prints.



SLIDESHOW
SCAN THE
PHOTO TO
SEE A FAMILY
PHOTO ALBUM





In 1952, Betty Sherrill began her career as a decorator at the venerable design firm McMillen. In 1972 she succeeded its founder, Eleanor McMillen Brown, as president, a position she held for 30 years. Today her daughter, Ann Pyne—who wrote this account of decorating her mother's house in Southampton, New York—heads the company.

The foyer announces to everyone: “This house isn’t quite what you expect.” It’s all about my mother, and then it isn’t, and then it is. That’s what the C. Jere mirror does, looking you in the face right when you walk in. She and I bought it together—she thought it was for me, not for her. But it’s sunny and spunky, just like she is.

HOW THE PROJECT STARTED

So here’s the story. My father had just died, and my mother and brother decided to switch houses. She would move into his little house, and he would move into her big one (designed by Carrère and Hastings for Elihu Root, President Theodore Roosevelt’s secretary of state), where she and my father had lived for more than 50 years.

My brother called me. “You are telling everyone in Southampton that I am moving into Mother’s big house and putting her in my little house.”

“Stephen,” I said, “I haven’t said a word to anyone, but people have eyes!”

So we agreed that if he and I made his little house a bit bigger, and more appropriate for my mother, the problem of “appearances” would be solved. (He was planning to make it nicer anyway.) Specifically, we wanted to get more light into the living room, build a bedroom for my mother on the ground floor, reconfigure a maid’s room and a children’s playroom into a dignified guest room, and do an all-over upgrade of things like switching out hollow-core doors and clamshell moldings.

PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS

Problem No. 1: I had not one, but two *extremely* difficult clients. For one, imagine me telling a private equities guy, my brother, that he *had to* fork over his money, no matter what he thought of the proposition! For another, imagine telling a famous decorator, my mother, that she couldn’t have the final say in her own house! No, my mother was not about to be upstaged by an upstart decorator—me—so she’s making changes in every room of the house every time I turn my back. I can’t leave her alone for a

minute! Solution: Try to ignore the opposition and plow ahead with the plans. (They are not *really* clients, after all.)

Problem No. 2: The core of the house was small and had low ceilings, two conditions about which nothing could be done, short of bulldozing the whole structure and starting over. Solution: I approached the low ceilings as a plus—as conferring coziness and personality. I put valances in the seven-foot bays of the living room, and I played with the lowering effect of these valances by placing overly tall and skinny floor lamps next to them. The small proportions of the dining room allowed me to create (and to afford) a little trompe-l’oeil gazebo, with tall and ample-seated chairs—so that six people can sit comfortably, but 8 or 10 aren’t encouraged.

Problem No. 3: Make it feel “new” but still be very much “her.” Solution: When selecting “new” things, I had a rule. They ought to be something that popped up in American design at around the same time—the ’50s and ’60s—that my mother made her own appearance. When we went around looking at things, she could always come up with the names—Parzinger, Laverne, Robsjohn-Gibbings (whose book *Good-bye, Mr. Chippendale* she began quoting).

HOMAGE TO MY MOTHER

The living room is the room that was most emphatically intended as an homage to my mother. For instance, one of her trademarks as a decorator is putting bay windows into a room. So I put in two new bays, making three in total. Another of her trademarks—“markings,” as I call them—are animal prints. So on the sofas in the opposing bay windows there is a red-and-white version of her leopard print, without looking too much like leopard.

My mother also loves floral prints, and flowers—but not flower arrangements, just vases filled with one kind of flower. Daffodils, tulips, roses... those are her favorites. Essentially, I wanted the room to feel as if everything was blooming right out of the floor, without too much discipline, but underpinned by various seating arrangements, like plantings, because my mother likes to entertain. She is always pulling people off to the perimeter of a room for little tête-à-têtes, and this room certainly allows for that. It actually has four distinct seating groups, which is something I thought my mother would be proud I could achieve. >>

LEFT: “The inspiration for the dining room was Eleanor McMillen Brown—my mother’s mentor and the founder of McMillen, who died in 1991 at age 100—and the small yellow dining room in her apartment on East 57th Street,” Pyne says. “As Mrs. Brown’s preferred look was chic and severe, I tried to achieve the effect in there. The trompe-l’oeil trellis on the walls and the diagonal squares on the floor were hand-painted by James Alan Smith, who often collaborates with me and is a friend of my mother’s. She always complains to *his face* that his prices are too high. But I think it’s a form of flirtation.” A Marc Bankowsky plaster ceiling fixture from Maison Gerard hangs above a bronze table by Philip and Kelvin Laverne.



1. A Victorian hat rack and ceramic stool from Sherrill's old house flank the back-hall entry to the living room. Wallpaper is New Vase by Clarence House. 2. A Dora Frost painting above the post-modern Russian dresser in the "decorator" guest room is fittingly titled *Elsie de Wolfe*. 3. One of the dining room's four statues representing the four seasons, cast from 1930s originals by Wheeler Williams that were in Eleanor McMillen Brown's dining room. 4. In the foyer, a Raindrops mirror by C. Jere hangs over a vintage Edward Wormley shell console table. 5. A 1950s Tommi Parzinger cabinet in the dining room holds a Christopher Spitzmiller lamp and Albert Paley candlesticks. 6. "I originally thought the guest room should have a queen bed," Pyne says, "but I noticed that my mother's friends like to put their clothes and things—or their pet—on one bed, and themselves on the other!" 7. A close-up of the curtains, in Clarence House's Beekman Place. 8. Another Dora Frost painting, titled *1951*, found a home in the room because "it looked just like the curtains." Pyne created the console with heavy concrete bases—"something my mother will have a hard time switching out!"



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There are a pair of Louis XV fauteuils, a pair of Louis XV bergères, a pair of Jules Cavailles paintings that my mother and father bought on their first trip to Paris in the late '50s. Cavailles was known as "*le peinteur de bonheur*"—the painter of happiness. This all adds to the feeling of sociability and French savoir faire (I guess I should say "style") that my mother adores.

But as to the impression her decorating makes, my mother is all-American—hence the feeling of freshness, and the happy colors and the lack of patina. Nothing *triste* or moody or muddy for her. The needlepoint bench, which she claims she did herself, is totally unlike any needlepoint you would see in a French home. (Or in a New England home, for that matter—she is American, but not New England-y.)

HOMAGE TO DECORATING

The guest room was inspired by the choice of curtain fabric, which I see as an homage to decorating—the fabric has images of little slipper chairs, valances, rods and rings, lamps, doors.

So given that I had what I thought was an "homage-to-decorating curtain," I decided I might as well have an "homage-to-decorating room." And it being a guest room, I thought this was all right—guest rooms can afford to be a little gimmicky, so to speak, as you don't have to live in them every day of the year. Also, I think it's restful to be in a room where everything makes sense (matches in colors, is coherent in volumes and shapes). But what to do with the walls? They also had to "match" my curtains, it seemed to me. Prints of chairs and tables? Illustrations of curtain designs?

By luck I was looking at some of the recent art of Dora Frost, whose work I collect, and who happens to be the daughter of the woman (a close friend of my mother's) who painted the little yellow table in the living room. And *bingo*—a large mixed-media work looked exactly like my curtains. Of course art is not supposed to "match" something so inconsequential as decor, but I couldn't resist letting this happen. After all, the room was meant to be fun. In addition, the large work was titled *1951* (the year I was born).

I call this a "decorating room" because it all "goes" together—an idea now looked down upon as "matchy-matchy." But the process of making it go together is essentially at the heart of decorating and design, whether the end result is obvious, as in the case of this guest room, or more subtle, as in the case of more important rooms. How is that for a bit of pompous editorializing! To add: I hate the notion, now quite in vogue, of just plopping something into a room that doesn't relate to anything else in the room and proclaiming it "unexpected."



THE GRAND FINALE

The bedroom we built for my mother was the "battle royal" of all the conflicts between my mother, my brother, and me. The idea was simply to make the room glamorous for her. It was to make her friends say, "Wow! This is your bedroom!!!" The bed, especially, was meant to be a real eye-popper.

The starting point was the wallcovering—a birds-and-flowers fabric from Zoffany that comes in panels. I showed it to my mother and she adored it. From there, we looked at fabrics to go with it, which had to be pink, since my mother has always announced that bedrooms "have to be pink." And then the battle began, because the pink that went with the Zoffany fabric was what my mother claimed was purple.

"But Mother, the pinks you like look awful with this fabric—can't you see?" I said to her.

"I don't agree with you," she said. "And furthermore, I *hate* purple."

"I don't care what you hate," I said. "You have to have this color. *And* furthermore," I added, "have you forgotten that purple was Didi's favorite color?" (Didi was her mother, so it was a stroke of genius on my part, if I do say so myself, because she loved her mother.)

My mother had lost the battle over the pinks, except to retort, "I hope you don't treat all your clients this way." To which I retorted, "Well, maybe I do and maybe I don't, Mother."

To which she ended, "Well, if I were your client, I would fire you!"

That was the battle with my mother. But a battle royal has to have other opponents—in this case, my brother, who didn't like the price tag on the new bed, a four-poster totally upholstered, trimmed, and gussied up. The "pink" turned out to be pink *satín*, and the "sky" for the canopy, a sunburst pattern (naturally, the bed had to be royal), can eat up quite a bit of fabric.

"Why does the bed have to be this expensive?" my brother accosted me.

But I wasn't one to be bullied. "It doesn't have to be," I said. "But it's *going to be!*"

Anyway, when the bed came (before the curtains were installed—big mistake), my brother stalked around it like a great white hunter without saying a word. (I won't say who had to pay for it in the end.)

After that, my mother and a friend—both near 90—came to see it. They lay down on it together and looked up at the sky and started giggling. "My, my..." They thought it was much too grand for either of them.

But now that the room is finished, with lots of her favorite things from the old house, both my mother and my brother say to guests: "You must come and see the bedroom! It's *fabulous*."

The starting point for Sherrill's bedroom was the Zoffany wall fabric, Snow Blossom, from which the palette was drawn. She designed the mantel with her daughter—a bolection molding in steel around a marble panel. Numerous rug, Fedora Design. **OPPOSITE:** The "eye-popper" bed is a luxurious sea of pink satin—Cowtan & Tout's Salsa silk satin on the canopy sky, the headboard, and the coverlet. The bed curtains, valance, and skirt are in the same fabric as the curtains, Klotz by Country Swedish. FOR MORE DETAILS, SEE RESOURCES



