Decor Score: The mood-altering power of color

by Rose_Bennett_Gilbert

Q: Where we live, everyone has traditional houses with antiques, crystal chandeliers and oriental rugs. I'm not brave enough to be really different. Besides, I grew up with and still love traditional rooms. But lately I find myself wanting a new look. Any suggestions?

A: You can have your traditional and update it, too, if you're brave enough to experiment with a few new ideas about colors and patterns in wallpapers, fabrics and paint.

ENERGY TO SPARE - Cross-referenced colors and a blend of patterns update and energize an otherwise traditional room. CNS Photo courtesy of Thibaut. One of the most smashing rooms I've ever seen was traditional all over, but still dynamite. It had slick, black walls, bright, white woodwork and other surprising ideas, like black patent upholstery and black-and-white inlaid vinyl floors. The room itself clung to 18th century architecture: French doors, carved mantel, brass chandelier. But the net effect of the clarion contrast was to bring it up to date with breathtaking speed.

If that image makes your ears ring, you can still harness the mood-altering power of color and patterns by using softer contrasts and gentler designs. In fact, the room we show here couldn't be more traditional in styling, at least at first glance. From the crystal chandelier and tall clock to the formal mantel, French chair and fringed curtains, the furnishings are all classics.

What saves them from looking too familiar, too yesterday, is the low-frequency mix of different patterns and cross-referenced colors, from the oversized floral on the walls and skirted camelback sofa to the large plaid on the ottoman, both underscored by the sotto voce texture on the solid-color rug. The space fairly hums with color, but they all get along harmoniously, bringing 18th century style happily into the 21st. (The wallcoverings and fabrics are from Thibaut, by the way. You can see more at www.thibautdesign.com).

The moral of this story: You may be surprised to discover what deep and vibrant colors our forebears favored ... and weren't too timid to live with. According to the architectural historian of Colonial Williamsburg, the citizens of the 18th century Virginia capital were as bold in their color choices as their politics. Think vibrant oranges, bright reds, deep greens and aquamarines. You can adopt their "revolutionary"

palette today, thanks to manufacturers Pratt & Lambert and Martin Senour, who are licensed to reproduce the colors the curators trace back to their origins. See more at www.williamsburgmarketplace.com.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Often, it's more than meets the eye, literally. Take silhouettes, for example. Speaking of Williamsburg, we learned on a recent visit to the historic town that the still-charming shadow-box portraits were named after a famously stingy 18th century French official, one Etienne de Silhouette.

Why? Because in the days before photography, the paper silhouettes were a very cheap means of capturing one's likeness for all the world to see.

There are other decorating eponyms sure to brighten cocktail conversation. The Recamier chaise gets its name from the beautiful Juliette Recamier, who may or may not have unwittingly married her own father, but who surely knew her way around Napoleonic Paris. England's beloved little Pembroke dropleaf table comes from the same-named lady said to have ordered the first one. And the heavy, X-shaped Savonarola chair is named after the morally rigorous Dominican priest Girolamo Savonarola, who chastised the Church, organized the real bonfire of the vanities (to get rid of "sinful" pride in possessions) in 1497, and got himself burned at the stake in Florence in 1498.

The moral of this story: Don't take your furniture at face value. What tales these tables, chairs and chaises could tell!

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