







# Vision Aerie

Suzan Fellman may be the coolest designer you've never set eyes on. But that's about to change **By Andrew Myers | Photography by Peden + Munk**

With a speck of a mid-Wilshire shop sandwiched between a nail salon and a shoe repair store, Suzan Fellman reigns—quietly and without fanfare. But design royalty she is, with full sovereignty on a clutch of U.S. exclusives for such hallowed home interiors names as Cecil Beaton, Catherine Greenup and Celia Birtwell.

"I courted Celia like a lover, sending her handwritten notes," says Fellman, who, in the end, got the former Hockney "It" girl's line of magically modern textiles and images. And when it came to Beaton's line of jaw-dropping fabrics (think bold florals, parasol-toting ladies and inter-locking, ahem, sailors), the client courted Fellman. "They pursued me, and granted me the rights," she says.

And now, after years in the biz, it seems everyone from up-and-coming actors to fellow decorators and furniture designers is courting the Fellman and her singular approach to interiors.

It's an approach that includes her very unorthodox mode of getting to the heart of a room. When working with new clients, Fellman skips the swatch piles and instead attempts to divine their decorating souls with long conversations and incisive but quirky questions. Queries sent to one of her recent clients, TV writer and supervising

producer Byron Balasco (*Without a Trace*), asked him to play favorites between Iggy Pop and Frank Sinatra; the Cohen brothers and Coppola; pizza and steak; T-shirts and neckties; and the Cotswolds and safaris. "These are more a way of finding a first impulse of what a client is attracted to or repelled by." And while Fellman would ideally like to follow new clients for several days, observing morning and nightly rituals and the thousands of choices that take place in between, she is, despite her facility with fantasy and decorative arts knowledge, eminently practical—especially about such things as her clients' time, budgets and boredom thresholds. "Is it important that someone appreciate the complexity of his basketball-stitched sofa's construction?" she asks rhetorically.

This confidence and compassion, combined with design erudition, hands-on know-how and overall Yankee gutsiness, make sense once her own personal project board is laid out. The oldest of three girls, Fellman hails from New Hampshire where Dad, owner of a haberdashery (Mom was the buyer), built the family house. Literally. "He dug the foundation and felled trees, but we all pitched in—at least as much as three little girls could," she says. "We carried the spirit stick."



**MARRAKECH EXPRESSED!** Suzan Fellman's Hancock Park house is all about high-ceilinged, low-slung, Moroccan cool. Suzan relaxes with her Cairn Terrier, whose name is Fellman.





"I never understand it when clients give me images from magazines. It's like when a child is drawn to a shiny toy. A home will never be the shiny toy."

Design in her DNA, Fellman studied fashion and photography at Minneapolis College of Art and Design before moving to New York, checking into the Barbizon Hotel for Women, and opening a cowboy store. Yep, a cowboy store. Four hundred and fifty square feet in what was then gritty SoHo, Sioux City became a destination for the likes of Andy Warhol and his ilk, where they might don mink tail jackets, leather tooled belts in metallic purples and pinks, mini saddle handbags, and basically all the duds needed by rhinestone disco cowboys.

"It was totally avant-garde," says Fellman, who was soon a Studio 54 habitué herself, on such good terms with Bobby the Bartender that when her parents visited, and when she of course carted them off to 254 West 54th Street, he provided reams of free drink

tickets. "I came back from the dance floor with my dad and found Mom drinking her scotch and nodding sympathetically at Steve Tyler, who had his arm around her," Fellman laughs. "She thought he was a cute kid and he was hitting on her!"

After her clothing store was broken into and cleaned out a few times, Fellman eventually landed in Beverly Hills (via Palm Beach) and was promptly discovered on the street. "I was at a party at a new Champagne bar and a picture of me ran in *W*," Fellman explains. Sure as Lana Turner at the Schwab's counter, a casting agent from Paramount called Fellman in to meet with Richard Zanuck and Ron Howard for a role in *Cocoon*.

Cut to a 14-year Industry career during which Fellman worked as an actor, director,



*From top:* In the living room, Suzan opted for Belgian linen drapery and a globe-trotter's mix of furniture, including a pair of Howdah chairs and Chinese sconces. Fellman (the dog) relaxes in the master bedroom where a Celia Birtwell textile makes for a stand-out lampshade. *Opposite page:* In the dining room, Hayward Wakefield table and chairs contrast with a Victorian plaster lighting piece.









## Suzan's Exclusives!

Fellman's mid-Wilshire shop carries some of the country's best one-of-a-kind finds.



### MAD PATTERNS!

*Above:* Cecil Beaton's Sailors fabric. *Left:* Fellman's 22K gold-plated Scarf Chandelier. *Below:* Beaton's Tic Tac Toe fabric.



"I'm a huge fan of vintage and antique. We all come from somewhere, and using things from the past can enrich the present."  
—Suzan Fellman



### HOT SEAT

Fellman's Reserved Seating collection includes this three-scarf, Lucite-legged piece.





producer and, perhaps most in line with her future in decorative arts, costumer and set designer. To help finance her theater work, she launched Chest N Drawers, a line of French-seamed womenswear made from reused fine linens: there were bloomers made out of pillow cases, and bedspreads turned into corsets. “I toured with Lilith [the music fair] for three summers in the mid-1990s, during the theater off-season,” Fellman says.

In that time she made enough to buy her house, a 1924 Spanish Revival in Hancock Park, its main room a dramatic 650 square feet with 17-foot ceilings. “It was in horrible shape; nobody had lived in the house for decades,” she says. “Everyone wanted to tear it down.” Not Fellman. She meticulously restored it—knocking down walls, building up the garden, picking out tiles in Morocco that she later cut and installed herself.

Inevitably, friends and colleagues who saw Fellman’s house asked her to design their own, and the word spread. A creative outlet, to be sure, but Fellman wanted more, so three years ago she opened a small shop on Wilshire near LACMA. It was initially supposed to be an office, but it quickly morphed into an “environmental theater” in which Fellman

now stages design-exhibition-retail happenings that run for six months, and are then replaced a week or two later with something entirely new. Some of her recent shows have included *Chinoiserie* (the tagline was “pas trop twee”), *Hand Made*, *Yippie* (from the 1960s counterculture Youth International Party) and the last, *Celia Birtwell*, *A British Re-invasion*, a showstopper in which the David Hockney muse flew from London for the launch of her eponymous textile and wallpaper collection.

Next up is the debut of the Cecil Beaton collection of textiles and wallpaper, a blowout bash for which Beaton biographer Hugo Vickers is flying in from the U.K. to speak. “It’s a fantastic collection, and they just launched the Sketchbook line, with his drawings of Garbo’s Eyes, Beaton Sailors and Beaton Eyes,” says Fellman.

Which makes sense: Cecil was a multitasking multitasker who loved a party, too. And just as important is his *je ne sais quoi* that seems to pervade so much of what Fellman does. As writer/actress Risa Mickenberg says, “I know that’s why artists like to work with Suzan. She understands design and art. And she knows the difference between good and great.” ■

A vintage Dunbar sideboard gets paired with a vintage painted scenic in the living room. *Opposite page:* Fellman had the gate made to mimic the one found in Yves Saint Laurent’s Marrakech home and then had it painted turquoise, “the color of hospitality in Morocco.”