

By Cathy Whitlock  
All photographs by Neil A. Landino Jr.  
except where noted.

# Everything is **OLD** is **NEW** Again

CONNECTICUT DESIGNERS EILEISH VAN BREEMS  
REINVENT THE CLASSICS

Dark wood panels provide an impressive backdrop and balance with the light furnishings and geometric patterns in the Library at the 2014 Holiday House NYC.

**D**esign extremists anxiously anticipate each new decade, expecting something outré or the never-yet-seen, but no matter the decennial, count on it being the well-designed classic—retooled or refined for a new generation—that is the standout in every decade.

In the eighties and nineties, the classics meant design elements that comprised English Country Style and was popular in what can best be described as the *Bonfire of the Vanities* period (named after the author Tom Wolfe's best-selling book). Loved by Anglophiles, it was a time where rooms were filled to the brim with chintz-on-chintz patterns, dog paintings hung from satin moiré ribbons and no self-respecting room was complete without a mahogany chest or two.





Photograph by Simon Upton



Top: Swedish design experts Rhonda Eleish and Edie van Breems of Eleish van Breems Ltd.

Opposite page: Flanked by carved Rococo armchairs, a circa 1770 Gustavian blue and white gingham settee is front and center in van Breem's sitting room.

Soon the millennium ushered in a more tailored and pared down aesthetic, as minimalism and sleek crème-toned rooms were de rigueur. Contemporary light-filled monochromatic looks coupled with Midcentury furnishings and statement art have been in vogue for the past couple of decades.

A change is in the air as everything old is new again. Clients are posing the age-old question,

**“What do I do with the inlaid zebra wood card table I inherited or the Biedermeier chest that cost a fortune decades ago?”**

Rhonda Eleish and Edie van Breems of Eleish Van Breems are two interior designers who have successfully navigated these waters.

Specializing in Swedish and Scandinavian design, they have found the style's clean and elegant lines when mixed with a touch of “brown” furniture or antiques marry both classic and modernism in

a very successful way. Friends since childhood, they have a penchant for combining painted Scandinavian pieces from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with antiques as van Breems says, “When you put an eighteenth-century Gustavian console table next to a Danish piece from the mid-twentieth century, they have a dialog with each other. They work together because the forms are pure; there is no extraneous detailing.”

Eleish and van Breems first discovered antiques on a buying trip in Stockholm (both have a Scandinavian background and Eleish's





Photographs by Simon Upston

Top: Hand restored wide planked chestnut flooring provides a balance with the Gustavian furnishings in van Breen's 18th century farmhouse.

Opposite page: Elish along with Richard Cerrone and Lisa Hymen designed the room for Lillian August.

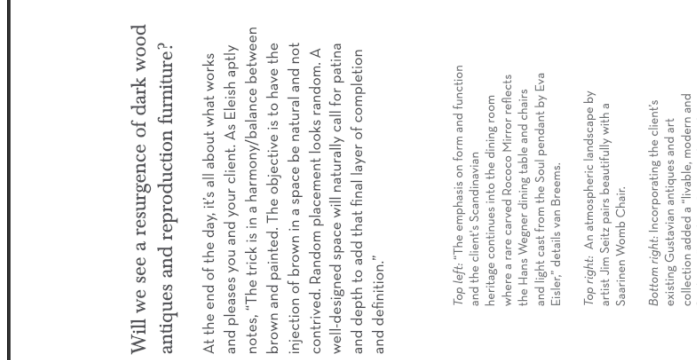
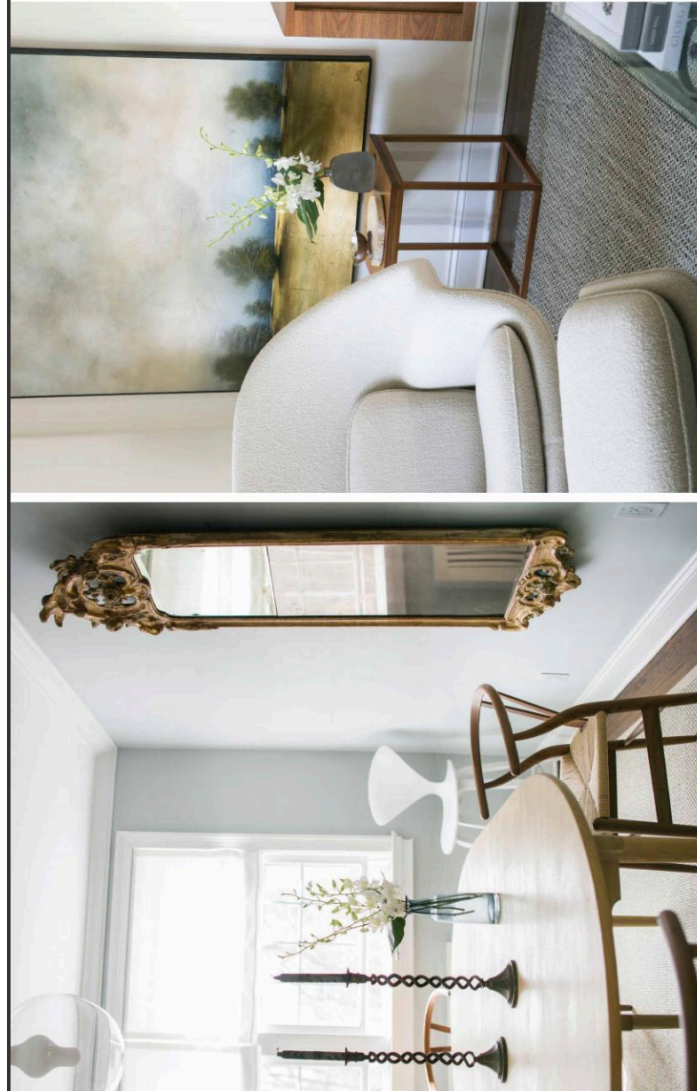
great-aunt Titan Gullers who was a well known antique and textile dealer. Filling a 40-foot container in three days, they opened a shop in a charming historical house in Woodbury, Connecticut in 1997 (they have since moved to Westport) and created lifestyle displays specializing in 18th Century Swedish that were right out of an Ingmar Bergman film. Quickly Elish van Breen became the go-to destination for all things Swedish and Gustavian.

Their projects have included everything from a French chateau in Connecticut and a 40s Georgian-style estate outside Minneapolis to a modern Swedish style house on the beach. "The Scandinavians do a better job than anyone

mixing periods of high and low together. It's all about natural materials, woods, metal, glass and everything is very layered," says van Breen. "People think it is all about white-on-white and one note, but it's really about mixing neutral and layering such as the addition of an 18th-century bucket or a Midcentury modern chair for example. It's all about soul and craftsmanship."

As the pair wrote in their third book *Reflections on Interiors* (Gibbs Smith, 2013), "Swedish Style mixes the old and the new. Swedish homes are highly personal and antique heirlooms are mixed side by side next to the most current designs creating sophisticated design dynamics." Much like contemporary, the style often consists of





Will we see a resurgence of dark wood antiques and reproduction furniture?

At the end of the day, it's all about what works and pleases you and your client. As Eleish aptly notes, "The trick is in a harmony/balance between brown and painted. The objective is to have the injection of brown in a space be natural and not contrived. Random placement looks random. A well-designed space will naturally call for patina and depth to add that final layer of completion and definition."

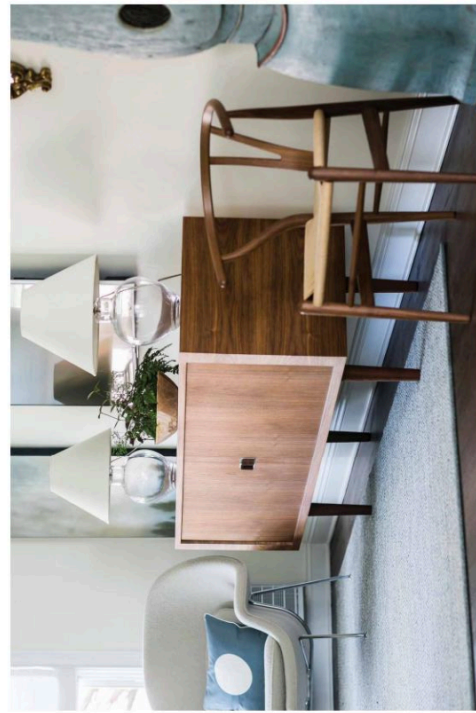
*Top left:* "The emphasis on form and function and the client's Scandinavian heritage continues into the dining room where a rare carved Roccoco Mirror reflects the Hans Wegner dining table and chairs and light cast from the Soul pendant by Eva Eisler," details van Breems.

*Top right:* An atmospheric landscape by artist Jim Seitz pairs beautifully with a Saarinen Womb Chair.

*Bottom right:* Incorporating the client's existing Gustavian antiques and art collection added a "livable, modern and fresh spin" to their Greenwich pied-à-terre.

Whether you are adding a mahogany console or a walnut end table, success lies in the balance of the room. "The best brown piece to add to a Scandinavian interior is the anchor," details van Breems. "It adds the grounding element and soul to an interior." This can translate into a light armchair and bed. "Browns are actually an incredibly versatile neutral that we find go with almost any accent color—some of our favorite combinations with brown are blue, pink, orange and green added as pottery, textiles, art and especially antiques," explains Eleish. "In a way, brown really is the new grey. Because the trend in decor these last fifteen years has very modern and hard edges, there is a return to warmth, exotic layered textures, fabrics, lots of color and wood furniture."

Furnishings with graceful lines, tone-on-tone palettes with light floors and walls as a backdrop and like traditional, has deep roots in history and woods that help define a sense of place. "Brown furniture injects soul into a space. I am excited that brown is coming back into vogue as it has soul and depth. Anything with a patina brings life, warmth and comfort," details Eleish. She also brings up another reason for the resurgence in darker furniture noting, "People work in contemporary office spaces with hard edges and LED lighting and they want to come home to warmth." And not to mention millennials are catching on to the looks of the past. "There is a whole generation that hasn't done floral or pretty. This is of interest to our clients in their 20s and 30s."



200 Lex has numerous showrooms featuring antique and traditional furniture—and they're making a comeback.

#### Baker Furniture Suite 300

The Baker Stately Home Collection was founded by Sir Humphry Wakefield, an authority on English antiques, who continues to act as consultant as he travels the globe searching for storied pieces to reproduce. Wakefield has even loaned pieces from his personal collection for reproduction, such as his father's desk when he was minister in Winston Churchill's government and Regency chairs from his English castle, Chillingham. [bakerfurniture.com/design-story/designers-and-collections/stately-homes](http://bakerfurniture.com/design-story/designers-and-collections/stately-homes)

#### Wood & Hogan Suite 812

Founded in 1927, Wood & Hogan has been managed by the same family for three generations. In addition to its collections of traditional English reproductions and fine antiques, the showroom is complete with exceptional prints, lamps, china and decorative accessories. [woodandhogan.com](http://woodandhogan.com)

#### Colombo Mobili Suite 1618

Using methods passed through the Colombo family for six generations, the Italian-based Colombo Mobili company continues to produce beautiful classic furniture which draws from European designs. The buffing technique used during production is the same technique used four centuries ago. [colombomobili.com](http://colombomobili.com)

#### Hickory Chair Suite 102

Although the American company Hickory Chair does not manufacture traditional furniture exclusively, it does collaborate with designers, specifically Alexa Hampton, whose collections are made of antique reproductions. Hampton's late father, the legendary Mark Hampton, also collaborated with the company in the '80s. [hickorychair.com/furniture/6500053-Alexa-Hampton](http://hickorychair.com/furniture/6500053-Alexa-Hampton)