

THE ICONOCLAST

THE FOUNDER OF ART HOME GARDEN MADE A NAME BY AVOIDING WHAT SHE DESCRIBES AS THE CLASSIC ERROR OF HER COLLEAGUES—BEING BEHOLDEN TO “STYLE”
BY ALEX TAYLOR

Stefania Skrabak's fascination with boundary testing her interior design firm and avoiding arbitrary rules began with her mom and dad.

“My parents were machinists back in the day in New York City, and that’s where my business approach comes from,” she said. “Very straightforward, very honest...a firm handshake, etc. But it also means that I love mixing metals [laughs]. It’s appreciating the beauty of raw steel, against high-end brass and coppers. When you look at my interiors, you see brass light fixtures, chrome hardware...iron seats.”

Art Home Garden, her Williamsburg design firm—one that tackles interior and exterior spaces and has completed projects in the city, Westchester, Long Island, and the Catskills—is noticeably distinct from others in its sector. A short look through its sketchbook will briskly convey that the company founder and her crew eschew the one-approach doctrine that brand-powers other designers—whether its minimalist modern, ultra natural, cluttered chic, etc.—but instead embrace fluidity and adaptability.

“What drives our design, and get ready for something that’s going to sound very corny, is what I call “wellness of living, of life,” Skrabak said. “It’s not about whether you should get a custom or rare leather sofa, it’s about how you live in your space. It’s not about who designed a chair, it’s about how you’re going to sit in it and drink your cup of coffee every day. Whether it’s a thrift shop piece or a designer chair, it’s about how we can enrich your life.”

And the company name is no coincidence; Skrabak started her journey with studies at Marist College, Franklin University, Fashion Institute of Technology, and School of Visual Arts, with degrees in fashion, fine art, art history, and design, a swoop of background diversity that has produced a gently obsessive desire to be involved in all aspects of the work.

“First, I design everything, and that is something I am strict about. But whether it’s mid-century or today’s modern, it’s never about me as the ‘designer,’” she said, adding that many colleagues insist upon placing preferred style in projects, a process she considers a conceptual error.

“I never get hired to do traditional, and I’m not traditional in any way,” she said. “I have a stay-at-home mom client, where everything is beautiful, creamy, soft, and elegant and that’s really fun, but then I’ll have an uber-hip couple who are all about the edge.”

Skrabak is also, she quickly added, continuously puzzled by other designers’ seeming unwillingness to think creatively about a budget.

“We are doing a 5,000-square-foot McMansion in New Jersey, and they want everything to look like RH Modern [a line sold by Restoration Hardware]. The owners interviewed 10 interior designers. Their budget was \$70,000, and all ten said that it couldn’t be done for that amount, I imagine because they came so frontloaded with visions of what had to happen. Unbelievable! I don’t do that.”

How to make budgets stretch for Skrabak begins with scouring sites like Overstock and Wayfair, and being a regular attendee at craft and furniture fairs like Field + Supply: A Modern Maker’s Craft Fair held in October in Kingston, NY.

What I’ll have at the end of the search is furniture that’s “off-the-shelf,” yes, but with great overall design and quality. That’s one of the things you hire an interior designer for.”

“The goal for me is to try to make people think differently about their design decisions,” concluded Skrabak. “If I give you exactly what you wanted without coming up with fascinating options, I’m not doing my job.” ■

Facing page: Stefania Skrabak. **This page:** A Park Slope design, in which Art Home Garden combined custom pieces (such as the bed canopy) with thrifty choices like a Wayfair desk.



Art Home Garden
917.907.0624 / arthomegarden.com