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# INSIDE STORY

TO TRANSFORM A WEST VILLAGE CONDO INTO A  
COMFORTABLE RESPITE, A DESIGNER TAKES CUES FROM  
THE HOMEOWNERS' MOST LOVED POSSESSIONS.

WRITTEN BY CHRISTINE DEORIO / PHOTOGRAPHY BY ZACH & BUJ







Part of New York City's mystique is that the buildings lining its streets reveal so little about the homes that take shape within their walls. For interior designer Sara Gilbane, that potential for discovery is one of her favorite things about decorating in the city. "That's the best part of my job: to walk through a door and think, 'Where am I now?'" she says. "You're transported."

That was the case when a couple with two young children enlisted Gilbane to personalize their new West Village condo. The owners had already begun renovating the space, which was quite unlike the building's contemporary copper-and-glass façade. "They wanted the stage to be set; to get the main ingredients right," Gilbane says about the couple's design choices of rich patinated finishes, reclaimed ceiling timbers and wide-plank antique wood floors. "And to me, that's more than half the battle." But that's where the couple stopped. "They had moved in old pieces of furniture and painted the walls gray, and it was so dark and dreary, you almost didn't notice the special floors," the interior designer says. "It was like you were in a bowl of oatmeal."

Also nearly lost amid the neutrals was an impressive collection of English and American antiques, oil paintings and early American folk art. The soft blues, reds and greens found in many of these pieces reflected the colors of nature—which, for Gilbane, provide the ultimate luxury in a city apartment. "That connection to the outside world is what people in Manhattan are always missing," she says.

Guided by those heirlooms, Gilbane set about creating warm, authentic interiors that belie their contemporary shell; rooms that feel comfortable for the couple and their children

but also incorporate the bold shades and patterns that get their pulses racing—reminiscent of the timeless homes of Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis and Italian style icon Marella Agnelli, and the theatrical yet livable rooms created by Italian designer Renzo Mongiardino. "If you look back at some of those great designs, there was a combination of different things; it was not necessarily all chintz," Gilbane says. "What made it interesting was the 'wow' color or the odd piece of wicker furniture. We wanted to keep that in mind and let my clients live with the things they love first."

In each room, Gilbane created a base layer of personal and sentimental belongings to which she added more contemporary pieces. In the great room, two landscape paintings—including a Milton Avery original that hangs above the mantel—inspired leaf-stripe slipcovers on a pair of sofas, a playful bent-brass fireplace screen and a porcelain garden stool finished with swirls of green paint. "You have to choose your moments to weave in unexpected things," Gilbane says of the latter, "but they're what give a room that lived-in feeling."

The mix is equally eclectic in the dining room: Antique chairs reupholstered in a bohemian block print surround an antique Irish wake table, an African basket turned chandelier hangs overhead and a pair of weathered blue doors frames a niche that displays a painted folk-art tea box.

Inspired by the wife's vibrant wardrobe, the designer lavished patterns on walls, floors, draperies and furnishings. "For people who are out working all day, it's really important that they come home to a space that makes them feel relaxed and good—a mix of patterns does that for the human eye," Gilbane says. Some prints, like the vine pattern trailing along a hallway, are fanciful. Others are "clean and simplistic, like their Early American furniture," she points out. And in the master bedroom, where the wallpaper's budding-branch pattern evokes early spring on the Hudson, they're downright dramatic.

Remarkably, the addition of so many patterns, colors and textures resulted in spaces that feel far lighter than they had previously. "It's all about choosing wallcoverings with the right base colors," Gilbane explains. "You don't have to go stark white to get lightness. Our brightest color is a warm ivory." For windowless rooms, she chose deeper hues—charcoal-gray walls and built-ins in the master closet, a pink-and-blue pineapple-patterned wallcovering in the children's bathroom—because "darker colors actually make smaller spaces feel bigger," she says. "You lose the angles and the walls recede, and it becomes more about the 'wow' factor."

For Gilbane, it's these daring design moves that make all the difference. "People are so afraid to bring something they find and love into a space because they don't want to mess it up," she says. "But I like the idea of letting go of perfect. A lot of times it's the imperfect that makes a space memorable and remarkable." And, in a New York City home, it's also often the source of that coveted element of surprise. ■

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Interior designer Sara Gilbane softened the entry by upholstering the walls with Nina Campbell's Innis Stripe fabric in linen and wool and placing a vintage Turkish flat-weave rug on the wood floor. The table is an antique and the Christopher Spitzmiller lamp features a custom shade in Lisa Fine Textiles' Kashgar fabric.





Gilbane updated the homeowners' antique dining chairs by reupholstering the seats in a sage-green leather by Holland & Sherry and the backs in Lisa Fine Textiles' Rambagh Reverse Coco linen. A Tanzanian basket-turned-chandelier hangs above the family's antique farm table. The stool and folk-art box are from the homeowners' collection.





**Below, left:** A hallway leading to the bedrooms doubles as a home office. A Hoffman side chair from Design Within Reach rests atop a vintage Turkish runner from Double Knot.

**Below, right:** "I wanted a dramatic wallpaper that was large-scale and could handle lots of art being hung on it," says Tharp of her choice of Neisha Crosland's bold Caterpillar Leaf wallpaper for the hallway.





**Opposite:** A mix of old and new items—an antique corner hutch, custom sectional sofa and ottoman made by J. Edlin Interiors, and *Into View*, an oil painting by Rose Umerlik—mingle in the cozy family room. The wool, hemp and linen rug is by Vanderhurd.

**Below:** Rattan-and-iron Palecek barstools, a woven rug and glazed Moroccan backsplash tiles by Ann Sacks lend the kitchen a rich layer of texture. The subtle diamond pattern on the wide-plank wood floors was achieved with stain.



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**Above:** The master bedroom's needlepoint tiger-print rug from John Derian Company is an unexpected foil for the homeowners' antique highboy dresser. Soft blue eel-skin upholstery complements the graceful lines of Oly Studio's hand-carved hardwood Neta bench.

**Left:** Clarence House's Flower Quince wallpaper makes a dramatic statement in the light-filled master bedroom, which Gilbane furnished with soft, neutral pieces: an upholstered antique armchair from 145 Antiques, a vintage Swedish table from the homeowners' collection and a bed dressed in handmade linens from Julia B.



**Opposite:** Adelphi Paper Hangings' exuberant pink-and-blue Pineapples wallcovering and the Urban Electric Co.'s Punch light fixture give the children's bathroom a fun vibe.

**Below:** For a look that's feminine but "not too girly," Gilbane furnished the daughter's room with a vintage French Directoire-style bed from 1stdibs. Custom Julia B. shams and D. Porthault's heart-print Coeurs boudoir pillow complement the pink velvet headboard. A Vaughan sconce is mounted above a bedside table from Chelsea Textiles. The Marthe Armitage wallpaper is from Hamilton Weston Wallpapers.





