

# The New York Times

## Home & Garden

DESIGN NOTEBOOK

### In Defense of the Decorator



From left: Stewart Cairns for The New York Times and Trevor Tondro for The New York Times

Brand-name decorators like Bunny Williams, left, and Scott Salvator help to support a community of makers and vendors.

By PENELOPE GREEN  
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**DONNA MAY WOODS** is trying to explain the complexities of a hot-pink and turquoise silk brocatelle.

“If you’ve ever been to camp or rehab,”

she begins encouragingly, using the humble potholder you might make there as a reference for a rapid-fire tutorial on the history of fine textiles that ranges from the practices of Italy’s 15th-century mills to the mountains of Afghanistan, which in the decorating world is known less as a training ground for terrorists than

as a producer of ikat, the voguish, woozy-looking fabric.



Fritz von der Schulenburg

A living room like this one on the Upper East Side, designed by Brian McCarthy, a Parish-Hadley alumnus, might contain the work of six different artisans, from the custom-made sofa to the faux-parchment walls.

The brocatelle is one of hundreds of fabric samples pinned like bright flags to foam-core boards and stacked in swirling piles that cover every surface of her office at Clarence House, the half-century-old fabric company in the Decoration and Design Building in Manhattan.

That’s where Ms. Woods, a textile designer, has been working on a line of luxury fabrics that will make its debut early next year. Bob Appelbaum, the president of Clarence House, believed there was a hole in the market at the very

high end. In other words, there was no product quite right for those who have an appetite for \$1,000-a-yard silk damasks woven in 200-year-old European mills.

“It is not unusual for our clients to have a chair that’s worth a million dollars,” Ms. Woods said. The fabric, she added, “needs to match that.”

With the economies of entire countries in smoking ruins, it would seem an odd time for such a venture. But as economists like Paul Krugman point out, life at the top has never been better, as the superwealthy have doubled their share of income in the last three decades. What this means for society as a whole is troublesome; what it means for the arcane world that Ms. Woods and others inhabit, the Galápagos-like ecosystem of artists and artisans, vendors and installers (the upholsterers, decorative painters, furniture finishers, antiques dealers and, yes, the decorators who employ them all) is that extinction has been put aside, once again.

Decorating is a profession that often ends up as a punch line in a takedown of the 1 percent. But it remains the support system for an entire industry of makers, the manufacturers, craftspeople and artisans whose skills can stretch back to traditions hatched centuries ago, in much the same way the fashion business used to support those in the garment district.

But despite the rising fortunes of a few, this is a curious, and not altogether stable, moment for a profession that has been repeatedly battered in the last two decades, its numbers horribly thinned, first by AIDS, then by three recessions.

Add to that a paradigm shift away from the old decorator-assisted living for those at the high end, engineered by years of relentless D.I.Y. cable programming, along with shelter guides like Martha Stewart Living and the late Domino. They exhorted young money — new money — to do it themselves, while promoting the fortunes of a curious breed of designer celebrities you’d have to have serious judgment issues to let loose in your house (cue Bravo’s “Million Dollar Decorators,” now gearing up for its second season).

All these forces have created a climate in which, as Stephen Drucker, who has been editor in chief of House Beautiful and Martha Stewart Living, put it: “It’s not so cool anymore to credit the decorator. You’re supposed to have curated your own eclectic, wonderful life, not order Mario by the yard.”

Which is not to say that the big brands aren’t working as hard as they ever did.

At 76, Mario Buatta is still answering his own phone, as he always has, to take care of clients like Mariah Carey and the financier Wilbur Ross. Bunny Williams, who though only 67 is the decorating world’s grande dame, noted that while business has steadied in the last year, “no one is taking it for granted,” she said. “Everyone is working harder than ever.”



Ms. Williams said that on any given day, “There might be 300 or more people doing something for our jobs: the people who make the down pillows, the cabinetmaker from Salisbury, Conn., who can be a stay-at-home dad because of his craft, the furniture restorer. It goes on and on. And their work is what makes our work unique: we can do things that are unique, and not mass produced.”

William Sofield, the Princeton-educated designer of Tom Ford’s sleek emporia, likes to say that he has “resuscitated every trade that’s about to die.”

He ticked them off: eggshell marquetry in an apartment on Fifth Avenue. Elaborate decorative painting, like the silver leaf on the bronze elevator doors in the Soho Grand, painted by the artist Nancy Lorenz after the elevators had been installed, “which meant she was painting at the same time the doors were opening and closing.” In a new building he designed on East 79th Street for the Brodsky Organization, bricks are being hand-laid, old-school-style, by New York City masons; the door hardware comes from P. E. Guerin, a foundry in the West Village; limestone relief sculptures designed by Mr. Sofield on a clay model in his dining room are being made by an Indiana sculptor from Indiana limestone. While marshaling the efforts of what might be hundreds of artisans into a single project, some decorators find they are behaving more like C.E.O.’s pitching their shareholders. Brian McCarthy, a Parish-Hadley alumnus with impeccable art-history credentials (he is the only decorator since Elsie de Wolfe who has been allowed to alter the interiors of the Frick Collection), said lately that he’s more engaged in conversations about an interior’s investment potential than in conversations about how the space will feel.

“Because of what happened in the art market,” he said, “everyone wants to know, ‘Is it a good investment?’ ”

Not that this isn’t a valid question, he said, detailing a long back-and-forth with a client about a Lucite pedestal for an armillary versus a cast-bronze one (the Lucite option, less costly, won), which this reporter half-listened to while frantically Googling the word “armillary.”

Mr. McCarthy, whose knowledge of European antiques is formidable and fascinating, can defend an interior in precise detail: why a chocolate-brown lacquer ceiling reinvigorates the architecture of a room, how the shape of that armillary required a very particular volume beneath it, why the carpet must be sisal and the Venetian plaster tone-on-tone, why the depth of the sofa should be exactly this number of inches, and so forth.

Yet price has entered the calculus of that narrative in a new way. No longer is the price a simple matter of a client’s budget. It now includes an anticipation that the investment will accrue value down the road.

"It comes up all the time," said Darren Henault, another conjurer of luxurious interiors. "People say, 'What am I going to get out of it, what's my return?'" To that end, Mr. Henault promises to price a job based on the investment potential of a property.

"If a couple just purchased an apartment for \$1,000 a square foot, and they plan on staying there for 5 or 10 years, maybe they can sell it for \$1,500 a square foot," he said. "That's a budget. It doesn't come from nowhere, it comes from the market. Then you back into it. For \$500 a square foot, you can't get gold fixtures or hand-painted Gracie wallpaper, but you can do O.K." "I'm not a discount shop, I'm not here so you can get the cheapest price," he said. "I'm here to spend your money well."

It is true that the money for decorating is still big, said Scott Salvator, who counts 11,000 vendors connected to his 20-year-old firm. With a renovation, the cost can be equal to half the purchase price of a property, he added: "But it's spread out over time, over years, and the lion's share goes to the vendors. What decorator lives like Givenchy or Valentino? If you look at the hours put into a lampshade, you could be working at Burger King."

Mr. Henault has created a software program to track a project's expenses down to the last penny and fixture, which can be updated on a secure server by each client. At the start of a project, he said: "We itemize everything that's going to be in a room, and put them on a spreadsheet. We give each item a high number and a low number" — ranging from, as he puts it, "cheap and cheerful to European antiques" — "then we start looking at things with the client, visiting the showrooms, and it's the client's responsibility to stay on budget. It's absurdly simple. Business 101."

But it's a necessary tool, he said, in a business freighted with assumptions that the work of a decorator is somehow illegitimate.

"Why is my time any less valuable than anyone else's?" Mr. Henault said. "Because I'm choosing wallpaper? Well, if you think choosing wallpaper is insignificant, then *you* go do it. Why is the way I run my business any different than the way a lawyer or hedge fund manager runs theirs?"

Like many of his peers, Mr. Henault bills hourly for his services: meetings with clients, phone calls, shopping for objects. Then he charges a percentage markup on the things he buys.

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Like the president's new rug, which was made in Grand Rapids, Mich. Or the hand-painted wallpaper, made by artists at the Elizabeth Dow Studio in Sag Harbor, N.Y. Or a pair of lamps made by Christopher Spitzmiller, a Manhattan ceramist. (American labor, as both political parties like to point out, does not come cheap. Yet no one wants to pay that bill.)

"Everyone wants their home to reflect themselves, but how do you do that in a time of globalization?" said Daniella Ohad Smith, a design historian. "How do you create your own taste, if everyone has access to the same goods? Also, not everyone has an aesthetic sense, but everyone wants a beautiful home."

A stunning book published recently by Rizzoli, "Be Your Own Decorator" by Susanna Salk, is filled with the glossy projects of high-end designers like Celerie Kemble, Miles Redd, Katie Ridder and others. Ms. Salk's intention is to draw inspiration from the pros. But page after page, its perfect vignettes unintentionally make the point that civilians like you and I may be incapable of replicating a skilled decorator's work, in the same way that the pages of Domino magazine used to elicit a sort of panicked malaise in some readers.

"The ability to walk into an empty room and see it finished in their heads — that is a gift that most people do not have," Mr. Drucker said. "I certainly don't. It's a crazy, God-given special gift. Yet decorators have been targets of ridicule forever."

Mr. Sofield, for his part, eschews the word "decorating" entirely.

"I don't like it, I think it's pejorative," he said. "I prefer to use words like movable" — to refer to interior design — "and stationary," for architecture.

And for the record, Mr. Sofield is of the opinion that decorating (er, the movable stuff) gives a better return than art.

"No matter what," he said, "at least you can sit on it or eat off it."