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An indoor/outdoor rug by Surya.

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ELLE DECOR **Style**



May

The master bedroom of a Scarsdale, New York, home designed by Val Nikitin, page 184.



In the second-floor living room of a Scarsdale, New York, house designed by Val Nikitin, the 19th-century English settee and chairs are upholstered in an Osborne & Little fabric, the cocktail and side tables are 19th-century Chinese, and the vintage lamps are by Orrefors; the mid-century brass pendant was designed by Tom Greene, the walls are covered in a vintage fabric from the clients' collection, and the flat-weave rug is Swedish. For details, see Resources.

MAKING the CONNECTION

*For longtime clients, architect
and designer
Val Nikitin outfits a neoclassical
Westchester home with an unexpected mix of eras,
cultures, and colors*

TEXT by CELIA BARBOUR
PHOTOGRAPHY by JAMES MERRELL
PRODUCED by
ROBERT RUFINO

A young man arrives in America speaking virtually no English. In his possession are one suitcase, one book, and the name of a single contact. No, this is not a scene from Ellis Island circa 1903, but from JFK nearly a century later. The man, Val Nikitin, moved here from his native Ukraine to ply his trade as an architect.

Fast-forward 20 years. Today, as principal of his own design firm, he has just completed work on a suite of rooms upstairs in a 9,000-square-foot house on an estate in Scarsdale, New York. He had previously designed the poolhouse, terrace, and formal garden on the property, not to mention the clients' beach house, as well as a number of other projects, both large and small, for other clients in the U.S. and abroad. The keys to his success are things no customs official could have spotted in his luggage: a rigorous foundation in the history and principles of architecture, and extensive training in drawing and painting. As Nikitin quickly discovered, these skills had the power to overcome language barriers: "If I couldn't explain something, I'd take a piece of paper and pencil and do a quick sketch, and it expressed my idea."

These abilities soon landed him employment at the prominent interior design firm Sills Huniford, where he deepened his education: "It was all new to me—this attention to detail and knowledge of materials, fabrics, furniture periods, antiques," says Nikitin. "I learned on the job."

All the same, he still approaches each new project, first and foremost, as an architect. "I begin with the proportions, the light, the function," he says. With the Scarsdale project, these parameters provided him with a clear sense of direction. The house, built in 1904, is a brick Colonial with a neoclassical interior, not unlike some of the historic architecture Nikitin had immersed himself in as a student.

"I immediately saw that the house has great potential, because of the existing bones," he says.

His first impulse was to reduce visual noise that might detract from the structure's underlying beauty. Where once strong colors had prevailed, Nikitin introduced a serene palette—muted grays in the gallery, taupe and ice blue in the master bedroom—which alternate with the brighter hues preferred by the wife. And he pared back furnishings to allow the house's precise Palladian details to have more presence in the rooms. "He is an editor," agrees the client, who, with his wife, directed Nikitin to work primarily with what they already owned—rearranging rather than replacing.

Yet Nikitin never allowed reverence for the rigorous neoclassicism to straitjacket his creativity. Throughout, he deftly balanced respect for tradition with clever—even witty—defiance of it. For example, he paid homage to the style's obsession with symmetry by placing matching chairs before a pair of windows, yet those chairs are marble garden seats that now live indoors, in the master bedroom. "Because there is a lot of fabric in this room—fabric on the wall, fabric on the bed, carpet on the floor—this presence of stone brings a completely different quality," says Nikitin. The chairs, which are pierced, appear at once substantial and airy.

And in front of a Palladian window in the upstairs living room, a playful drama has been staged: Slim-legged furniture sits demurely beneath a wall of ornate, gilded corbels and brackets supporting a collection of 18th- and 19th-century porcelain vases and urns, their



In the breakfast area, the 19th-century table and early-20th-century chairs are English, the 19th-century chest is French, and the light fixture is American; the sculpture is by Helen Sinclair; the shades are of a Bergamo fabric, and the vintage rug is Swedish. **FACING PAGE, FROM TOP:** A 19th-century English chair and table, and a French footstool from the same era, in the guest bedroom. Sculptures by Lilly Henry in the upstairs gallery, which is painted in a custom color by Benjamin Moore; the chair and side table are 19th-century English, the painting on the right is by Efraim Fima, and the carpet is by Beauvais. For details, see Resources.





In the master bedroom, the headboard and bench are upholstered in a Pindler fabric, and the 19th-century bergère is covered in a silk by Stark; the walls are sheathed in a fabric from the clients' collection, the mirror is early-20th-century American, the landscape paintings are 19th century, and the stool was designed by Otto Schulz. For details, see Resources.



blue echoed in a luscious pair of crystal lamps on side tables below.

Indeed, the entire suite of rooms feels at once tranquil and fresh—precisely what the clients had hoped for. Art collectors for several decades, they understand the benefit of changing things up. “When you keep objects in the same place for a long time, your eye starts to pass over them,” says the husband. “You see things better when you move them.”

Nikitin presents a novel perspective at every turn. A pair of modern bronze sculptures, originally intended for outdoors, now stands at one end of an upstairs gallery; another bronze figure strides before the breakfast area’s window. All breathe new life into their settings, introducing vitality into spaces that could have been staid. “One bonus of having an architectural background is that we think about the whole surroundings, not just the vignette,” says Nikitin.

The project took two years, and the process wasn’t always easy. “Val would take something out, and we’d put it back,” says the client. Yet such struggles, aired openly, can result in greater trust—which, in this case, is exactly what happened. These days, designer and client often meet for lunch—to discuss future projects. ■

ABOVE: The master bedroom’s vintage light fixture is in the style of Paavo Tynell, the table is by Warren Platner, the marble chair is from India, the mantel is original to the house, and the wall sculpture over it is by an unknown artist; the carpet is by Stark. **LEFT:** In the wife’s bath, the light fixtures are Scandinavian, the shower tile is by Porcelanosa, and the shower and sink fittings are by Lefroy Brooks; the chair is covered in an Old World Weavers fabric, which was also used for the Roman shade. For details, see Resources.