

"This weekend home in the Hamptons belongs to a couple with three grown kids. We scattered pattern around the room — on the frame chair, on the club chair, on the throw pillows on each sofa — so it wouldn't feel so laboured over by a designer. The owners wanted to include all the blue books to coordinate with the palette."



# Break with Tradition

Known for her grand spaces and down-to-earth attitude, New York designer Alexa Hampton shares her decorating secrets.

Produced by SALLY ARMSTRONG | Text by STACY LEE KONG

**WHETHER SHE'S DESIGNING** a weekend getaway in the Hamptons or a tony Manhattan apartment, Alexa Hampton creates rooms that are often formal and classic, and could be intimidating, if not for their designer's almost obsessive commitment to comfort and practicality.

The daughter of design icon Mark Hampton, she initially joined her father's firm as a summer intern in 1984 and quickly drew accolades for her fresh take on traditional design. After her father's death in 1998, she took on the role of president and grew the firm into an international powerhouse. She's also found time to sit on the board of the New York School of Interior Design, receive an honorary PhD from Moore College of Art & Design, write two books and launch several product lines, including fabric and trims for Kravet, mantels for Chesney's, furniture for Hickory Chair and lighting for Visual Comfort. Hampton took time out from her busy schedule to share her best advice with *H&H*.



ABOVE: Designer Alexa Hampton's style is trad with a side of practicality. "I like to be comfortable," she says. "Even though I can be incredibly fancy in terms of the projects I take on, I don't want that to sacrifice comfort or utility. The goal is to be personal without forcing the issue."

Photography courtesy of Decorating in Detail by Alexa Hampton, Random House 2013 (portrait and interiors)/ OPPOSITE: Photography by Valerie Wilcox (fabrics palette)

## PATTERN PLAY

LAYERING PATTERN ON PATTERN IS ONE OF HAMPTON'S SIGNATURE MOVES. HERE'S HOW SHE DOES IT.

"I don't have a formula for using several different patterns in one room. You have the elements and you have to play with them a bit. It's like being a cook and tasting while you're cooking. We make a colour Xerox of each fabric we're using in a room and cut out the shape of the chair or the sofa or whatever, down to little squares for pillows, and glue everything to the furniture plan so we can see how it's distributing. Say your room is pink and green, sometimes you'll realize half of the room is pink and half of the room is green and you need to disperse it better. Hopefully, you're aware of it in your head, but seeing it on the plan helps.

In this living room (opposite), we had two white sofas, a chair with a pattern and a chair with a check. When we got it on the plan, we realized the room felt sort of lopsided, so we decided to have two different kinds of pillows on each sofa. That way they match, but they aren't totally identical."



## Q+A

**GET THE LOOK** Clockwise from top left: *Linen Canvas*, Robert Allen; *Jessica Lane in Bluebell*, Robert Allen; *Rullah carpet*, Y&Co; *Antibes Batik in Denim* by Ralph Lauren Home, Kravet; *Twill Works in Bluebell*, Robert Allen; *Fairlea in Spa* by Alexa Hampton Collection for Kravet; *Madras* by Raoul Textiles, Y&Co.

**HOUSE & HOME: What are your design influences?**

**ALEXA HAMPTON:** Obviously, my father is an influence, but I'm a student of design, so I'm also influenced by other designers. And by what I see around me, whether I'm riding in a taxi, travelling on holiday, in a museum or on Pinterest.

**H&H: How do those influences show up in your work?**

**AH:** My first line of tape trims was inspired by cornices I saw on buildings from the back of a taxi. My lighting line was the result of lying in a bathtub while pregnant, looking up at the ceiling and wondering why all flush-mount fixtures look like boobs. I've got a practical sensibility so if I have an idea for something that solves a problem or fills a need, I take advantage of the fact I work in this industry and get someone to sign me up.

**H&H: What's been inspiring you recently?**

**AH:** Pinterest came into my life in a big way this year, and I'm loving it.

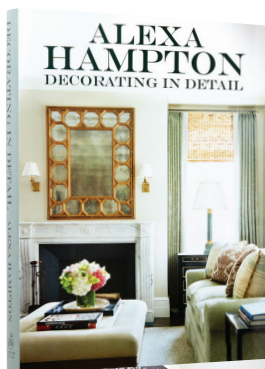
I have friends who worry about the health of my family given I must be on Pinterest all the time! But my biggest inspiration in the past few months has been the shower of design books that have come out. I love *Decoration* by Stephen Sills and François Halard's book, *François Halard*.

**H&H: Do you have any advice for someone trying to develop their own personal style?**

**AH:** I think part of the problem is pressuring yourself to find "your" aesthetic because it might change depending on whether you have a house in Surrey versus an apartment in Vegas. So, first consider your physical space. And when you're looking at an image and you think, "I really love that," ask yourself what it is that is appealing to you. Is it the colour? An item? The atmosphere?

**H&H: In your book, you say successful rooms depend on variation, not coordination. How do you avoid crossing the line into "too much" territory?**

**AH:** "Too much" is a personal threshold. But if the room isn't singing, it might match too well. And it's very easy to bore yourself to



Hampton's second book, *Decorating in Detail* (Random House, 2013), gives a room-by-room look at the design process behind eight recent projects across the U.S.



## DESIGNER PROFILE

“This is an apartment in New York owned by a young couple. We picked up the blue-grey veins of the countertop with the banquette, the chair cushions and the glassware. But all the blue made us yearn for something else, so that’s how the red trim came in. Having a contrast band is a cute way to go.”



“This is a room with a lot of hard surfaces — there’s tile and marble and appliances and steel and hardware. I went with fabric on the light fixture to soften up the space. The husband doesn’t feel alienated, but it isn’t all duded out.”



death with your room. Like a lot of people, my instinct is to make things match, and I have to course correct.

**H&H:** *Is there a sofa silhouette that works in most spaces?*

**AH:** The Bridgewater sofa and the Lawson Arm sofa are both workhorses. The Bridgewater has a saddle arm that curves to the side — some people call it an English arm — so it cups your neck as you lie down. The Lawson Arm is more rectangular, so it’s very sleek.

**H&H:** *How do you figure out the size of a chandelier for a room?*

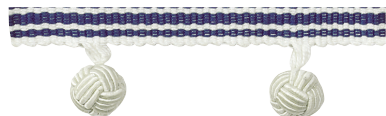
**AH:** You take the width of the room in feet, double it and then convert it to inches. So, if your room is 15 feet wide, start off looking for a chandelier with a 30-inch diameter. And then you can go bigger; don’t go smaller.

**H&H:** *How do you approach displaying collectibles?*

**AH:** With great enthusiasm. I love it. If you think of a tabletop or bookshelf as a vignette, you can address every single space in the house with some level of rigour. But you do have to have a fetishistic love of doing it. You could look at it like, “This is a pile of nonsense,” but if it makes you feel happy, it’s not. I’m okay with the notion that happy is to be sought after. And I’ve got no beef with pretty, either.

## FINISHING TOUCHES

TRY THESE PRETTY EMBELLISHMENTS TO ELEVATE ANY SPACE.



Edge curtains with a tailored pom-pom trim for a bit of fun. *Mallow Knot Fringe TLB85012 by GP&J Baker, Lee Jofa.*



Pump up the volume on a patterned pillow with a frame of short fringe. *Bullion Brush Fringe in Ice, Robert Allen.*



Finish a neutral sofa with a skirt of bright red trim and piping. *Coeur Bullion in Ruby T8012106-99 by Brunswick & Fils, Lee Jofa.*

**H&H:** *Any favourite paint colours?*

**AH:** I love the historical colours of Benjamin Moore. Middlebury Brown (HC-68) is my favourite brown. Alexandria Beige (HC-77) is the coolest grey-brown-taupe that goes with everything. And who doesn’t love Farrow & Ball? The names of their colours are so whackadoodle, ridiculous things like Elephant Tusk or Smell of Dirt. I love that they don’t court that J.Crew romance. I love a lot of the Donald Kaufman colours, too — my bedroom is DKC16.

Middlebury Brown (HC-68), Benjamin Moore.

DKC16, Donald Kaufman.



"When you have little odd spaces, it's sometimes more unifying to do something like this than to figure out what to paint and what to turn into ceiling. So this is a funny, counterintuitive moment where, if you make everything wild, it calms the room down."

"The window in this nook is standard-sized, so we had a roman blind made that is perfectly incorporated into the wall upholstery. It almost disappears."

"The walls are upholstered, and I had bolsters made in the same fabric. I added seat cushions, pillows and a chair in different upholstery, but it's actually a very calm space for all of its ingredients."

GAME, SET, MATCH

MATCHING WALLPAPER AND FABRICS IS AN EASIER WAY TO GET THE BOLD LOOK OF THIS UPHOLSTERED NOOK.



Large-scale blooms flood a space with happy colour. *Peonies fabric and wallpaper by Christopher Farr, Y&Co.*



The intricate pattern on this duo gives a room exotic flair. *Medallion fabric and wallpaper by Home Couture, Quadrille.*



Play with different orientations for a dynamic look. *Aga Reverse fabric and wallpaper by China Seas, Quadrille.*