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MIX MASTER

*For globe-trotting fabric impresario John Robshaw,
his Connecticut country house is
yet another opportunity to layer his signature patterns and colors with abandon*

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So strongly does a stripped-down, finely wrought New England aesthetic blow through Connecticut's Litchfield Hills, tucked in the northwest corner of the state along the border of Massachusetts, that only those with truly fearless taste seem able to stand up to it—to decorate in counterpoint. Only the bold manage to reference the grace of the area's centuries-old winding roads and well-preserved late-Colonial architecture while also going blithely off the rails.

Exhibit No. 1: the early-19th-century cottage on eight acres owned by textile designer John Robshaw. Instead of outfitting the weekend place he shares with his girlfriend, photographer Rachel Schwarz, in American and English antiques and gently worn fine carpets, as is the custom in these parts, Robshaw—a brawny six-foot-two charmer with a Byronesque tousle of hair and an aw-shucks grin—has turned his 2,000-square-foot residence into an explosion of color and pattern that perfectly reflects his lush, worldly sensibility and peripatetic existence. “I enjoy that kind of collage in which things don’t quite make sense,” he says.

Robshaw’s personal history is writ large in the small house. He began as a painter and assistant to Julian Schnabel, traveling to India in the 1990s—a pivotal experience—to create indigo-washed textiles and block prints that he used as canvases. He soon realized that his destiny was the fabric itself, and over the past 16 years, he has built a vast empire, creating bedding,

fabrics, and accessories that he sells on his own website, as well as exclusive collections for retailers such as Bloomingdale’s and Saks Fifth Avenue. He is credited with helping to spark the current vogue for brightly hued interiors that use Asian and tribal geometrics in wholly contemporary ways. These days, he collaborates with artisans throughout the subcontinent and the world, from Zimbabwe to Laos.

As might be expected, his palette is beyond daring. The kitchen, for example, has midnight-blue cabinets and paneling painted in bright pinkish-orange. Such shades highlight the historic structure’s classic American bones while flipping the idiom on its head. A guest bedroom is painted chartreuse; an original mantel is now lavender.

Robshaw also has an audacious way with proportion. He’s the sort who can hang a gallery wall without needing to lay it out on the floor first, driving in nails while he swigs from a mug of

OPPOSITE: The side entry of textile designer John Robshaw’s 19th-century cottage in Sharon, Connecticut, which he renovated and designed with the help of decorator Sara Bengur and architect Colby Wong. The custom sofa is covered in one of Robshaw’s striped linens, the stools are from India, and the Egyptian mosque light is from Sheherazade; the parrot’s name is Turkey Bird He Bites Me. **ABOVE:** A Richard Wrightman table in the dining area is surrounded by Indian cane chairs, the striped dhurries are by Robshaw, and the armchair in the background and its fabric are by Robshaw for Duralee; the vintage pendant light is from India, the pine floor is original, and the walls are painted in Violet Mist by Benjamin Moore. For details, see Resources.





The living room sofa and its fabric are by John Robshaw for Duralee; the armchair, custom banquettes, and bone-inlay side table are all Robshaw designs, the cocktail table is from India, the table lamps are by Christopher Spitzmiller, and the dhurrie is a custom design; an Elliott Puckette artwork sits on the mantel, which is painted in Yukon Sky by Benjamin Moore, and the large painting of a perfume bottle is by Doug Wada. For details, see Resources.



Robshaw in the garden pavilion on his eight-acre property; a vintage flea-market chaise is topped with pillows covered in antique batik textiles.



In a corner of the kitchen, an Indian chair and a table from Privet House; the walls are hung with Dutch plates purchased in Sri Lanka and turbans that Robshaw had made in India as gifts for friends.



The kitchen's settee is by Richard Wrightman, the sink fittings are by Newport Brass, the ceiling lights are by Restoration Hardware, the countertops are marble, and the custom dhurrie is by John Robshaw; the walls are painted in Rose Quartz and the cabinetry in Starry Night, both by Benjamin Moore.

On the patio, the dining table is by Daniel Oates, the chairs are vintage, and the Indonesian benches are from Michael Trapp. For details, see Resources.





masala chai. While the rooms have low ceilings typical of the era, he doesn't follow the dictum of downsizing furniture to fit the constraints of the space. Instead he goes big, employing huge carved sculptures and architectural details. Two Sri Lankan temple panels flank the doorway to the living room, and a five-foot antique Durga stands near the dining table, which, like many of the home's larger pieces, was made in India to his specifications and delivered, precariously, up the property's winding road.

But it is Robshaw's unbridled hand with pattern that most astounds. There are more than a half dozen of his stripes in the living room alone, of various colorways, widths, and materials. On a dining room wall there are three layers of textiles, including a mat made by a Filipina artisan from abaca fiber. And as for the rules about balancing vivid furniture with less colorful art (or vice versa), Robshaw would never conscience such a thing. Above a bench covered in a pink-and-purple textile is a large Doug Wada painting of a lime-green perfume bottle. "Left to my own devices, I am definitely extreme," he admits.

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He does occasionally feel the need to protect himself from his wildest impulses. To that end, he called in a friend, decorator Sara Bengur, with whom he has collaborated for years, including on his Manhattan apartment (ELLE DECOR, December 2012), to bring him down to earth. "She reminds me that you have to have some negative space," he says. "You can't just endlessly layer." Bengur convinced him to leave the narrow stairwell unadorned, save for a large pendant by Harry Allen, also an old friend. Viewed from the top of the stairs, the shapely cut of the light against neutral walls makes the pattern overload in the rest of the space seem even more dramatic and purposeful. The side entryway has white walls, the better to focus the eye on the showstopper: a custom-made coral settee with a back carved in a whimsical Byzantine shape and cushions in his violet-and-rose stripe.

In such an exotic setting, it is easy to forget that Turkey Bird He Bites Me, Schwarz's parrot, an incessant chatterbox who's settled for the moment on a swath of indigo fabric draped—beautifully, of course—atop an open cage, is not, in fact, a species native to Connecticut. "He fits in here," says Robshaw. "You close your eyes, and you think you're in a tropical forest." ■



In the master bedroom, the bedding is by John Robshaw Textiles, the side table was found at a flea market in Millerton, New York, the lamps are by Christopher Spitzmiller, and the chest is an antique Tibetan trunk; the curtains are of a block-printed linen by Robshaw, the dhurrie is a custom design, and the walls are painted in Sweet Butter by Benjamin Moore. **OPPOSITE, FROM TOP:** The guest room's headboard, bedding, and curtain fabrics are all by Robshaw, and the walls are painted in Dark Lime by Benjamin Moore. The sink cabinet in the upstairs bath is from Syria, the shower curtain and rug are by Robshaw, the sconce is by Schoolhouse Electric & Supply Co., and the 19th-century Spanish encaustic floor tiles are from Michael Trapp. For details, see Resources.

