

DESIGN & DECORATING

MY FAVORITE ROOM

Grand Central Relaxation

Decorator **Todd Alexander Romano** finds inspiration in the comfortable and livable opulence of David Hicks' Britwell country house

BY MIEKE TEN HAVE

TEXAS-BORN AND Manhattan-based interior designer Todd Alexander Romano, may be best-known for his signature lacquered walls, but the sophisticated polish he brings to interiors belies his loquacious and cozy Southern charm. No matter if there's a Giacometti against the wall or a mantle full of rare Japanese pottery, Mr. Romano's projects never fail to include warm lighting, sink-into-it upholstery and a well-placed cocktail table. "I don't care how beautiful a room is," he said. "If it doesn't function, it is a failure."

Little wonder, then, that for inspiration, he turns to David Hicks, the designer who, in the 1960s and '70s, was most responsible for reimagining fussy, traditional English style as something colorful, trendy and eminently livable. Mr. Hicks dispensed with unapproachable stateli-

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P. MARTIN HARRINGTON/WALL STREET JOURNAL; THIS WALLPAPER

...of a more inviting furniture; he despised chintz, opting instead for simpler geometric patterns. He is also credited with coining the now-ubiquitous term "tablescapes": Given a spare surface, he created dense vignettes that redefined the art of the display, often grouping sentimental trinkets with expensive objets d'art that were unified by a single color scheme.

His talent for marrying the highly decorative with the subdued and modern found its apotheosis in Britwell, the 18th-century Oxfordshire country house that Mr. Hicks purchased in 1960. His design for its drawing room, in particular, illustrates how to make a grand space feel accessible. An ornate 1760s chimney-piece with intricate moldings is offset by a nubby oatmeal fabric on the walls, while a tonal, sculptured carpet that sensually mixes high and low pile invites the idea of walking about the space in bare feet. "[It] just epitomizes everything I love in a really beautifully designed room," Mr. Romano said.

He particularly admires the way that Mr. Hicks, despite being known for risky aesthetic choices, decorated this room in soothingly subtle, plush fabrics. "I am so tired of these mid-century houses where you see the Warhol on the wall but no comfortable place to sit down and talk on the phone; it's as though no one actually lives there," Mr. Romano said. "There is a throwaway simplicity [in this room] that remains impossibly elegant—it feels contemporary today."

Here, Mr. Romano shares a few tips to help you achieve an equally refined yet hospitable space.

Sport a Shiner

Mr. Hicks used many different types of light in this room: lamps, can uplights, natural light and a sleek picture light that shines down on the Bruce Tippet painting above the fireplace. "The light [in the room] works on so many different levels: down from the ceiling, up the walls and horizontally. It creates a warm, dynamic feeling," Mr. Romano said. Illuminate your own art



HIGHLY EVOLVED British design icon David Hicks used the drawing room of his country estate, Britwell, as a laboratory for his decorating ideas, which meant that it changed quite a bit over the years. "It's an occupational hazard," said interior designer Todd Romano.

STYLING: JAVIER MOYA; OBJECTS: MICHELLE WHEELER; WALLS: ANDREW HAYES; FURNITURE: DAVID HICKS



Try a Tablescapes

Britwell's subdued palette served as a backdrop for Mr. Hicks' famed vignettes. Said Mr. Romano: "He masses objects by color"—like the royal blue cloisonné snuff box seen here next to a similarly hued cigarette lighter—"and then he'll throw something weird into the mix. He plays with scale and varies heights and forms." Note how touches of gold and yellow offset the predominantly blue scheme.

Put Your Design Within Reach

This classic floor plan—two large sofas flanking the fireplace, Louis XVI bergères and a pair of Gueridon tables—is symmetrical and balanced, said Mr. Romano: "The chairs and tables are comfortably placed, and there is a surface within arm's reach no matter where you are—to put down a book, drink or cup of tea." Adopt the same surface strategy with Global Views Gueridon Table, \$2,247, shapcode.com



Join the Pile-High Club

A monochrome, high-low textured carpet brings a laid-back elegance to the room. "It doesn't steal the show," said Mr. Romano. "It's plush but offers a restrained, tailored softness [unlike] a sloppy shag carpet." The Rug Company Stupa Silver Rug by Suzanne Sharp, \$150 per square foot, therugcompany.com



Find Your Comfort Zone

Instead of taking a cue from the room's grandiose architecture and choosing compatibly antique (if unwelcoming) seating, Mr. Hicks went for a modern sofa. "While the room is very refined and tailored," said Mr. Romano, "it's plush and comfortable. The sofas and chairs look like you want to just plop down into

place to sit down and talk on the phone; it's as though no one actually lives there," Mr. Romano said. "There is a throwaway simplicity [in this room] that remains impossibly elegant—it feels contemporary today."

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Create a Calm Context

"Most people would think this is a colorful room, but it's really not," said Mr. Romano. "It is a simple backdrop of cream-colored cotton on the walls. It's nice to come home to something more soothing that allows objects and artwork to pop." For a wallcovering that is a little less neutral, but still recessive, try Albero Floreale in Petal Wallcovering, price upon request, Schumacher, 800-523-1200

Assign an Ottoman Double Duty

"I adore the tabouret concept, which you see in this room," said Mr. Romano. "A big ottoman can be so many different things, depending on how it is needed. You can stack it with books or objects for display, as [Mr. Hicks] does here, or use it as a large tray to put hors d'oeuvres on. If you're having a party, you can easily [clear it off] for extra seating." One to try: Denison Mirrored Bench, \$699, heimannmarcus.com



BIO IN BRIEF // TODD ALEXANDER ROMANO

His Résumé: After studying architecture at the University of Texas, Mr. Romano initially worked as a buyer for men's clothing brand Paul Stuart. Upon meeting "the prince of chintz," designer Mario Buatta, he switched gears, and eventually opened his interior firm and showroom in 1999. Today, he stocks antique finds from Parisian flea markets as well as Christopher Spitzmuller lamps in kippap hues. He launched his furniture collection with Schumacher & Co. last November and will introduce new pieces each season.



His Clients: Discretion-valuing heiresses and self-made scions from Mustique to Millbrook, N.Y., turn to him for updated elegance and a hands-on approach. Recent projects include a horse farm in Charlottesville, Va., and a full-floor Park Avenue apartment.

His Look: A contemporary interpretation of WASPY classicism that puts livability first, despite his reputation for bold lacquered walls. He toes the line between muted masculinity and exuberant eclecticism while mixing aesthetic eras: Vibrant artwork from 20th-century color theorists like Josef Albers might be juxtaposed with a set of Directoire chairs. He attributes his penchant for mélange—mixing Op-Art with Louis XVI classicism, for example—to his "schizophrenic tastes."