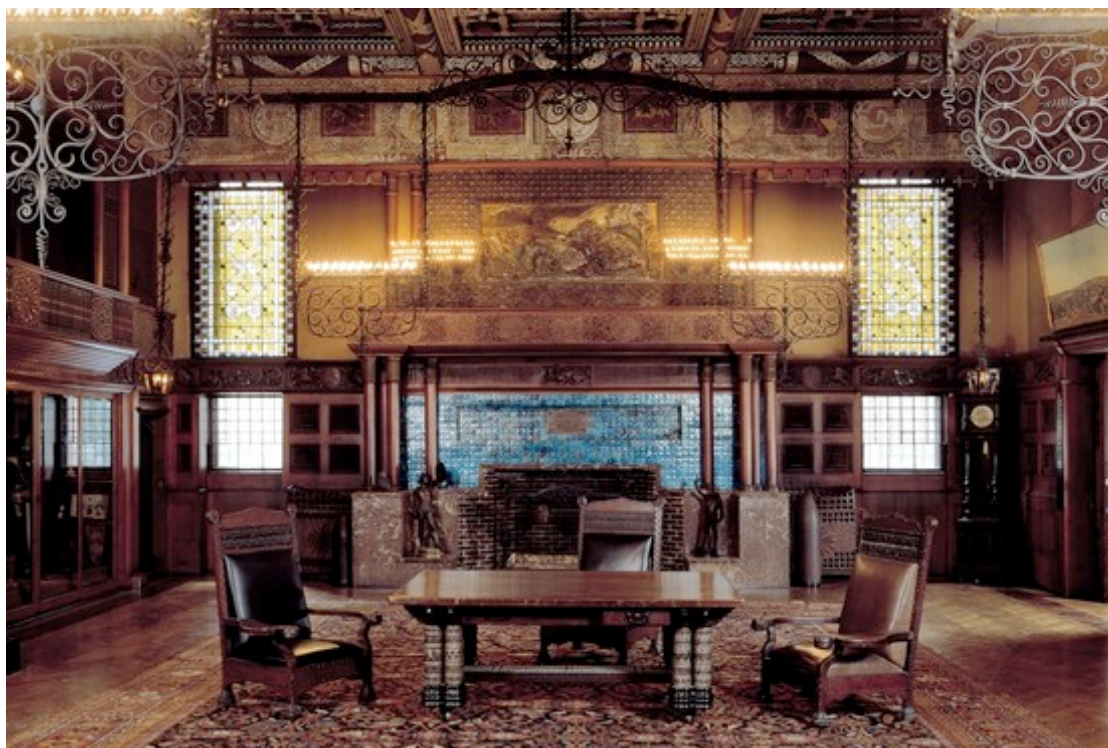


MY FAVORITE ROOM | DECEMBER 24, 2011

## Terms of Adornment

*Decorator Elissa Cullman is head-over-heels for the top-to-bottom embellishments in the Park Avenue Armory's Veterans Room*

By [JEN RENZI](#)



When  
Elissa  
Cullman

John M. Hall

The Park Avenue Armory's landmarked Veterans Room

launched her Manhattan-based design firm 27 years ago, she set out to swim against the tide. "Eighties excess ruled the day—it was all about pattern-on-pattern, people marbleizing every doorframe," she said. "Our mission was to create spaces that were much more restrained." It turns out that, in her hands, restrained does not preclude lavish enhancement. While a calm, classic undercurrent unifies Cullman & Kravis's portfolio of patrician urban and country homes, the designer deploys bejeweled curtains, decorative screens and inlaid furnishings like a stealth maximalist. "We've never been about less is more," she said. "People are afraid of ornament, but there are so many alternatives to defaulting to the

white box. If you can garnish it, why not? Adorn, adorn!"

That is also the philosophy behind one of her favorite sources of inspiration: the Park Avenue Armory's landmarked Veterans Room. Built in 1880, it is a prime example of the American Aesthetic Movement and one of only two surviving interiors by Louis Comfort Tiffany's Associated Artists cooperative. (The other is the adjacent library.) The room showcases elaborate architectural woodwork by Stanford White, an exotic painted frieze by Francis D. Millet and George H. Yewell, silvery stencil-work by Samuel Colman and embroideries by Candace Wheeler. The creative collaboration made for a very rich and totalizing décor. "It's so layered, it's like a visual smorgasbord," said Ms. Cullman. "Every time I visit, I see details I've never noticed before."

Many of those details have sparked ideas for her own projects. "There's an abundance of practical take-aways," she said, pointing out a carved wall medallion that could be translated into a great throw pillow. Antique wallpaper rolls used for column capitals trumpet the benefits of repurposing. And a pair of weaponry-inspired chandeliers—they once spewed flames like a dragon—plead an over-the-top case for uplighting ceilings. But though the room itself is a veritable Gesamtkunstwerk, she cautioned that it's not for domestic consumption: "Decorating every inch of an interior wouldn't be appropriate for a contemporary residential lifestyle. You need to edit. If you have too much going on in a room, you lose the magic and your eye becomes anaesthetized. White space is critical to a room's success." And perhaps requires an even more deft hand than does top-to-bottom embellishment. *For guided tours of the Park Avenue Armory, which is being restored by architects Herzog & de Meuron, visit [armoryonpark.org](http://armoryonpark.org).*

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Collier Webb's Odeon plafonnier

### *Go long on lighting*

"Those dramatic wrought-iron fixtures are very original and unexpected; typically, you find a circular chandelier in a rectangular room. The long, attenuated design creates a sculptural effect. I love using linear fixtures over a library or dining-room table, or in a long hallway. Great lighting is one of those affordable luxuries—a flattering scheme depends on the proper placement and mix of sources, which is achievable on any budget." Ms. Cullman likes Collier Webb's Odeon plafonnier, [collierwebb.com](http://collierwebb.com).

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F. Martin Ramin for The Wall Street Journal

Bella Donna H450 from Beauvais Carpets and fabrics from the Cullman & Kravis collection for

### *Attempt allover pattern wisely*

"Every surface is covered in a different pattern, from Tibetan knots and Celtic symbols to Asian and Middle Eastern motifs. You almost don't know where to look. If you want an allover pattern in your home, though, I tell clients to relegate it to the floor or to upholstery; you can't get away with silver arabesques all over a ceiling like this unless it's really, really high. I've often used patterned carpets directly inspired by woodwork from this room, and millwork details even sparked some of the fabrics in our own line." One favorite is Bella Donna H450 from Beauvais Carpets, [beauvaiscarpets.com](http://beauvaiscarpets.com). The



F. Martin Ramin for The Wall Street Journal  
King Richard's nails for upholstery and walls

### *Use nailheads like jewelry*

"The windows here originally had chain-mail curtains—so cool! And the bases of the huge columns [not visible in photo] are wrapped in linked chain embellished with big studs. The more accessible, take-this-home-with-you version of that treatment is to accent with nailheads, a decorative element that you can even DIY; anyone who's studded their jeans can do it. They catch the light so fabulously. I use them to dress up pillows, table skirts, leather wall panels—even glued directly onto walls." She like King Richard's nails for upholstery and walls, [kingrichardco.com](http://kingrichardco.com).

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F. Martin Ramin for The Wall Street Journal  
Gracie wallpaper's Handmade Mid-Century Metallics collection

### *Lighten wood with metal*

"Stanford White created extraordinary architectural detailing, from the coffered to the panels. Although this space is heavy on the woodwork, the abundance of metallic touches keep it from looking too dark. It's important to temper wood finishes with reflective elements like brass hardware, glass, mirrors, or gold leaf. Try a ceiling washed in silver paint, for instance, or a curtain with a jeweled accent. I even sprayed my son's kitchen cabinets in silver automotive paint, which looks really cool and cost nothing! Wallpaper is a great vehicle for shimmer, too. Gracie just came out with these mod new patterns I've been wanting to use."

Gracie wallpaper's Handmade Mid-Century Metallics collection, [graciestudio.com](http://graciestudio.com).

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F. Martin Ramin for The Wall Street Journal  
Ceramic Firebox tile by Ruth Frances Greenberg

### *Frame a fireplace with tile*

"That mantelpiece just pops. It's covered in Tiffany tiles, a combination of translucent and opaque glass imprinted with a random dot pattern. That wonderful turquoise really glows against the natural wood finishes. Tile makes a very user-friendly fireplace surround, and is a great way to inject a little color and twinkle into a room." Ms. Cullman likes handmade ceramic Firebox tile by Ruth Frances Greenberg, [rfgtile.com](http://rfgtile.com).

## *Show restraint with stained glass*

"The abstract design of the stained-glass windows, rendered in semi-precious jewel tones, is so modern—certainly not your typical Tiffany glass. Most stained glass is in such fruity colors, but this room proves that subtler hues are very effective. We're currently working with architect Tom Kligerman to design windows in white, cream, pale blue and gray for the entry hall of a Hamptons beach house; they're kind of an homage to McKim, Mead & White."

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Elissa Cullman

Nick Johnson

### *BIO IN BRIEF: Elissa Cullman*

**Her résumé:** Prior to cofounding the New York firm Cullman & Kravis in 1984, the designer worked in the fine arts. After attending graduate school for Asian Studies at Columbia, she worked on exhibitions at the Japan House Gallery and was a guest curator at the Museum of American Folk Art. Her work reflects that background: her unfussy interiors—suffused with a serene, Far Eastern vibe—commingle antiques with bold contemporary art.

**Her clients:** Ms. Cullman has lent her bespoke touch to projects ranging from a '40s-inspired pied-à-terre in the Plaza to a hillside retreat in Maui. She counts business execs, antiques collectors and major entertainment figures among her clientele—many of whom tap her to decorate both their first and second (and third...) homes.

**Her goods:** Cullman & Kravis designs a line of linens and wools for Holland & Sherry. In 2008, Ms. Cullman published "Decorating Master Class: The Cullman & Kravis Way" (with colleague Tracey Pruzan), a bible for anyone seeking the inside scoop about how interiors come together. She is working on her next book, for

Monacelli, to be released in 2013. [cullmankravis.com](http://cullmankravis.com)

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