

# A Twist on Tradition

BARRIE BENSON CONJURES A FRESH TAKE ON TRADITIONAL  
FOR A VIBRANT YOUNG FAMILY IN CONNECTICUT.

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In the sunroom, bare windows and muntins painted black give a sharp, modern edge to a mix of antique and vintage furniture; the tole lantern accentuates the indoor-outdoor vibe.



Benson warmed up the travertine floors with a seagrass rug in a simple geometric pattern that served as a natural canvas for a mix-and-match combination of textiles. Get the look with Parker sisal, *pattersonflynnmartin.com*. The antique trestle table adds a sense of history: “You need something old in every room or it will start to feel like a showroom.” Opposite, from left: A hammock shakes up expectations with a bit of whimsy; the house was built in the 1920s.



“Traditional” is one of those decorating words that comes with baggage. Not only is it often shorthand for the kind of trappings that can literally feel heavy—antique brown furniture and velvets dripping tassels and fringe—it can also be a byword for interiors that feel expected. Few people hear “traditional” and think they’ll be surprised. Or inspired. Or charmed.

Well surprise, surprise, today’s your lucky day. Because when clients came to Barrie Benson to decorate this proper 1920s Georgian pile in proper Greenwich, Connecticut, the Charlotte-based designer took the trad trappings we’re talking about—read: antique brown furniture and velvets dripping tassels and fringe—and made them seem light as air.

“The wife is drawn to a traditional New England style,” says Benson. “But her family is young, she collects contemporary art, and she didn’t want the interiors to feel too heavy or too cloying. The challenge was to make this old setting youthful and sophisticated.”

Benson channeled an old-world approach that synced well with her clients. The family had spent 10 years in London around that seductive English aesthetic, where interiors bear a boatload of eclectic influences—centuries-spanning antiques, textiles that run the gamut from Indian paisleys to blowsy florals—and appear fabulously tossed off.

Cue the furniture, a mix of hand-me-downs, vintage pieces and custom upholstery that fit right in. “Even if they have warts, I want heirlooms and family pieces with meaning in a house,” says Benson. In the kitchen, a contemporary white-lacquer table sidles up to classic Josef Hoffmann armchairs; new wicker in the sunroom mingles with an antique trestle table and a cerulean-blue sofa edged in jute trim. Once the boundary-blurring furniture plan was set, Benson dropped in fabrics with an eye to an eclectic, been-here-forever vibe. “None of them have a sheen and most of them are a little imperfect, with a nod to history,” she says. Bring on the paisley and arabesque motifs reminiscent of 18th-century



Benson made upholstered walls in the living room feel less stuffy by using an unfussy linen and backing it in paper. "I wanted the soft pink of fabric but not the big puffiness you can get with upholstered walls. I love that you don't have a clue it's fabric until you get up close." The trim outlining the millwork hides imperfections and echoes the work by Clare Rojas above the fireplace.







In the dining room, Benson chose a graphic abstract mural wallpaper in misty green- and grey-blues, “for a hit of glamour.” Opposite: For the bar, she riffed on English clubs like 5 Hertford Street, the boho-chic London boîte designed by former fashion designer Rifat Ozbek, which the client cited as inspiration.

indiennes, hazy ikat stripes and small-scale prints that walk the line between charming and refined. “Faded colors and finishes make it all feel casual and livable.”

Of course, the corollary to making something look livable is the requisite that you can actually live in it. With children aged 8, 10 and 15, the furnishings had to cosset like a cotton ball but endure like cast iron. “The little boy is really rough-and-tumble,” says Benson. “I have a 15- and an 18-year-old and I knew those sofas in the living room were going to just get trashed if they weren’t tough as nails. For most of the living spaces I used performance fabrics and patterns with big repeats that hide stains.”

On paper, the living room is the kind of formal space you’d imagine in a house of this provenance, with sofas in a mossy green velvet, fabric-covered walls and straight-laced dentil moldings. In practice, however, it is another animal entirely. There is an exhilaratingly graphic work by Clare Rojas hanging above the fireplace, armchairs covered in a large-scale botanical begging you to snuggle in them and burgundy trim on the upholstered

walls emphasizing the millwork like an exclamation point.

“It makes the room graphic and ‘talks’ to the art,” Benson says.

Nowhere does Benson’s balancing act perform as well as it does in the sunroom, a light-filled space overlooking the garden that might be the most popular place in the house. Black painted muntins on otherwise bare windows punctuate traditional elements like a tufted rolled-arm sofa in a crisp ticking stripe and cane-sided cocktail tables. Indian-inspired fabrics loosen the mood, as does a hammock suspended in a window nook—a tongue-in-cheek touch that’s also a serious perch for chilling. “Designers are constantly trying to imagine what kind of respite a room is going to be for somebody: for reading a book, having lunch, as an escape hatch for the kids to get away from their parents and maybe do some homework,” Benson says. “With this room, when you sit in there with all those windows, you can feel like you’re outside no matter the time of year.” With her creative touches and inspired vision, a buttoned-up house feels newly relevant again. Traditional never looked so good.





Indian fabrics on shades, cushions and pillows soften a kitchen with a large island and lots of marble. Opposite: A games table in a dining area near the family room anchors a pass-through space and acts as an overflow spot for entertaining.



Clockwise from this page: The kids' bedrooms are dominated by soothing neutral shades, with occasional colorful accents for interest. Swing-arm lamps are perfect for bedtime reading. A variety of textiles punctuate the wife's mostly neutral dressing room.





Walls and a headboard upholstered in a vertical stripe in the main bedroom don't line up, for a purposely imperfect effect; oxblood-colored bedside lamps and a paisley used for the curtains make the scheme less feminine.





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