

DESIGN & DECORATING

LOVE STORY

Bordering on Genius

Exuberant fabric patterns with built-in decorative edging are a brilliant way to go wild without going off the rails

BY COURTNEY BARNES

I WASN'T THE ONLY one to fall for the armchairs. A pair of upholstered, mid-18th-century library chairs, they were being auctioned off by Christie's last April—part of the contents of a Malibu, Calif., villa that had been decorated a decade earlier by the interior designer Michael S. Smith. Bidding for the chairs escalated to \$56,250, a sum roughly equal to the base sticker price of two 2014 Mini Coopers and more than double the pre-sale estimate. Pulitzer Prize-winning publisher Katharine Graham had once owned the mahogany chairs, so presumably that provenance added to their allure. But, for me, the attraction was the fabric's pattern: a lush, indigo-and-wine-colored Indian print that evoked a paradisiacal garden. I should mention that this pattern incorporated its own border, an exotic look typical of traditional Indian and Turkish design that's a breed

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apart from the cloying wallpaper borders seen in '80s sitcom kitchens. My passion for border fabrics goes back to a smocked dress I wore to kindergarten. It was made of a yellow-and-green Indian-inspired floral fabric with a border around the hem and the puffed sleeves. At the time, I didn't grasp its global chicness; it just served as my go-to dress whenever I played garden designer. Throughout elementary school, my eye gravitated to similar textiles: a patterned sarong that someone's mom wore to the pool; a bordered block-printed napkin that covered biscuits on a friend's dinner table. Later, in art history classes, I encountered more sophisti-

cated examples, like 17th-century Mughal hangings where dense red floral borders surrounded undulating tree-of-life designs. My curious obsession could sneak up on me anywhere. Riveted to a 13-inch TV screen playing the 1991 film "Rush," a grim tale in which Jennifer Jason Leigh and Jason Patric play drug-addicted undercover cops, I couldn't help noticing the border-printed pillow in Mr. Patric's character's apartment. So when I first zoomed in on the library chairs in Christie's digital auction catalog, I was fascinated. When Mr. Smith acquired the seats, they were upholstered in predictable yellow damask. The garden-of-delights pattern he chose instead—a digital reprint of an antique cloth in his collection—gave the stately antiques a laid-back bohemian flair while still highlighting their masculine lines. "The charming decoration within the print has a sense of the handmade. It has more humanity [than the damask]," Mr. Smith said. "The border adds another level of detail, reiterating the hand-carving on the chairs, not detracting from them." In the months since the auction, I've been wondering what my never-waning crush on complex border fabrics is really about. I delved into my stacks of textile history books, revisiting the theory that traditional Indian and Turkish design often uses frames, along with symmetry, to bring order to a profusion of ornament, a view Mr. Smith said he shares. Was I looking for everything in one print? Intricacy and harmony at the same time? I decided to consult designers of contemporary border fabrics to find out why they're drawn to the look. New York-based painter and textile designer Lulu de Kwiatkowski, whose punchy Lulu DK fabrics are a favorite of Vogue's, said she's inspired by the edging on the jewel-toned saris she sees when traveling through India. "Borders seem to complete several of my designs," she said, "adding a sense of dimension and making florals more graphic." Ms. de Kwiatkowski, who also collects and sells



FENCE ME IN An intricate but orderly border fabric chosen by designer Michael S. Smith transformed the two antique library chairs in this Malibu, Calif., villa.

antique bordered Indian silks, favors pure, Matisse-like colors. Her approach to fabrics, rooms and fashion is to juxtapose moderate doses of rich pattern with clean lines and crisp whites. London-based textile designer Aleta Bartel-Orton, whose fans include photographer Cindy Sherman, creates upholstery fabrics informed by historic Mughal decorative arts, where everything from architecture to floor cloths features borders. "There really are no technical restrictions to incorporating borders within the printing process. It's a fun part of designing," she said. "The challenge lies in opening people's minds to how

much more visual interest coordinating borders—with their contrasting scales—can actually bring to a room." The ne plus ultra of 20th-century border-filled rooms is likely the oft-blogged, India-meets-Morocco-meets-England fantasy created by the late decorator Renzo Mongiardino in the '60s for Lee Radziwill's London home. The walls, upholstery, cushions, curtains and lampshades of this drawing room were all enveloped with Age of Aquarius bordered cotton florals. As much as I admire that full-throttle interior, I tend to follow Ms. de Kwiatkowski's lead when it comes to décor, and balance complex bordered prints with simpler ele-

ments (an approach necessitated by budget as much as aesthetics). Recently, I purchased several yards of a printed-in-America linen design called Pom from boutique-textile house Zak + Fox, an up-and-coming New York company. Pom, which reminds me of a field of pomegranates enclosed within a vine-covered fence, was loosely based on an old Central Asian rug, said founder Zak Profera, and was developed to offer clients flexibility: "You're essentially purchasing one print with a bonus, and you can take it or leave it. I ran the border down both sides so you could easily turn a panel into a curtain with instant decorative trim. Or, if you decided to cut the border off and run it around the edge of a cushion, you'd have an entirely new detail that plays off the main motif." I've asked my ever-patient upholsterer to cover a small, quirky chair with Pom, positioning the vine-motif border around just two areas: the rounded seat and back. Anything more seemed like the décor equivalent of an over-accessorized dress. My chair in no way resembles Mr. Smith's pair; it's low and armless and certainly not a rare Georgian antique. But fingers crossed, when it comes home from the workroom, it, too, will look infused with an exotic spirit, as if it spent a winter holiday globe trekking.

Ms. Barnes writes about textiles and décor on her blog *Style Court*.

Four Fabrics With Frames

Cover furniture, create coordinating pillows or fashion finished-looking drapes with contemporary border textiles like these



Peter Dunham Textiles Samarkand Fabric in Blue/Red, \$160 per yard, Hollywood at Home, 310-273-6200



Moondance Light Blue Fabric, \$112 per yard, Lulu DK, 212-223-4234



Indian Deco Floral Fabric in Indigo, \$95 per yard, parlortextiles.com



Pom Fabric in Byzantine, \$130 per yard, Zak + Fox, 310-880-2616

FLOWER SCHOOL

EMBRACEABLE HUES

In a public display of affection for Gustav Klimt's work, floral designer Lindsey Taylor riffs on 'The Kiss'

AFTER THE HOLIDAYS, as the gray days of New York's winter settle in, I have two favorite ways to escape. The first is to surf

