

Garbo's at the Door

"When I saw the original pictures of the living room fireplace," Sills says of the apartment, "the niche above it had a Renoir painting of a girl. It was important that another masterpiece go in the same spot. Donna had a bronze of numerals by Jasper Johns that was the perfect solution for a focal point there."

A legendary New York apartment had a new owner. Should the decorator change everything? Or nothing at all? Stephen Sills talks.

BY RACHEL TASHJIAN PHOTOGRAPHS BY NGOC MINH NGO



"I wanted to keep the bones of Garbo's apartment," Sills says. "I didn't touch the architecture."

"I don't usually ask who did someone's apartment," says Donna Rosen, the art collector and philanthropist. "First of all, I can always tell—Mario Buatta, Billy Baldwin. But I think it's gauche to ask." She pauses. "*Gauche*. Wow, I haven't used that word in a long time."

"It's a wonderful word," offers interior designer Stephen Sills. "We should all use it more often."

"But I have asked about two people's apartments," Rosen says. "And Stephen did both of them."

We are sitting in Sills's latest pièce de résistance: Rosen's Sutton Place floor-through, which has extraordinary windows looking out on the East River, currently under a pale gray sky. It's his second project for Rosen, but despite their well-established relationship, this new home was no simple task.

The apartment came with almost unbearably chic provenance: It was once the abode of Greta Garbo. Yes, the home to which she infamously retreated upon her retirement in the early 1940s, which she bathed in pale pink silk and blond wood walls that conjured her fine-boned Swedish chill in architectural form. The sanctuary from which she occasionally emerged to run an errand in her Belgian loafers and quilted coats, and the paparazzi would seek her out with safari animal fervor.

The actress lived in the home for almost four decades. Though she died in 1990, her heirs kept the property in high Garbo style, if not condition, and an owner between Garbo and Rosen left many of the details from Billy Baldwin's decoration of the space intact, including that orangey wood and the Fortuny silk in the bedroom that Baldwin cooked up after Garbo said she wanted the room painted the color of candlelight glowing under a lampshade.

Renovating the home would be enough of a challenge for anyone, but Sills is a fanatical Garbophile. "She knew how to work with silence," he says. When you watch her silent films, you can see her genius. "She's using only her face to convey emotions." He loved her relationship to her fame. "She wanted privacy," he says. "She didn't demand it—she just wanted it."

Rosen says people approached her at parties, horrified that she might "redecorate." (You can picture the disgruntled Page Six item: "GARBO REDECORATES!") But the Fortuny silks were "raggedy," Sills recalls. And that wood: "Imagine that orange pine with Donna's art!"

And Rosen does not want to be...alone. A New Orleans native with an almost peerless art collection—Jasper Johns, Cy Twombly, Marcel Duchamp, Sam Gilliam, and Jacqueline Humphries; more recently she has taken an interest in antique Japanese porcelains—she entertains often, welcoming guests of all ages from the worlds of ➤➤➤

"The scale of the client's artwork fit perfectly with the pine paneling in the room," Sills says. "Several layers of white paint in a strié pattern were applied."

Top: *Danseuse Attachant le Cordon de Son Maillot* (1882-95) by Edgar Degas stands on the table. Right: The client, Donna Rosen, in her living room of treasures, which include porcelain from the Song and Tang dynasties framing the window and a 16th-century Jean Mielte plate on the mantel.





On the other side of the living room, El Anatsui's *Takari in Black* (2007) is flanked by works by Michelle Stuart (left) and Mary Corse. That's an Yves Klein *Table d'Or*, with a quintet of James Turrell's Roden Crater basalt bowls on top.

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"It was difficult to decide what to do with Garbo's bedroom," Sills says. "The walls were covered in a red and gold Fortuny fabric. I spent many a night trying to figure it out. Eventually I was convinced that it needed to be simple. In Billy Baldwin's memoir he said he labored a long time to create Garbo's wishes of red walls with a glow coming through the fabric. I took all the Fortuny out, replacing it with white linen and washing the beautiful paneling that Garbo brought from Sweden." *Usuyuki* (1981) by Jasper Johns hangs over the bed.

art, politics, and media. The home needed to be updated, yes, but it also had to be flexible enough to accommodate groups both intimate and intimately sizable.

"It needed to be Donna's apartment," Sills says. And Rosen trusted him: "You work like an artist. You think, look, talk like an artist."

His first act of graceful modernization was to paint all the orange wood with a pale white glaze. "I wanted the warmth of the wood coming through the white," he says. "And I wanted it to reflect the water." With the trim painted white, the walls are a gorgeous complement to Rosen's art, particularly an El Anatsui that hangs over a sofa and a Jason Moran that hangs beside a grand piano. Two Yves Klein tables anchor the room's pair of seating areas, one gold and one hot pink. "That's really Garbo's color," Sills says of the pink Klein.

Sills paired pieces from the apartment's previous life with new creations. Two ghostly white velvet sofas that shimmer softly in the light are old ("and they are pristine," he says); new is a pair of black obelisk lamps. Jasper Johns's *Merce's Footprint* hangs over the fireplace, and Rosen's husband's extensive book collection frames the hearth (he recently fell ill and no longer lives at home). "I feel like his arms are wrapped around me," Rosen says of having the books so centrally displayed.

Sills mixed in antiques, such as a round dining table that seats eight (and today is strewn with Mardi Gras beads) and a smaller table for dining in the living room. "I don't look for the expensive thing," he says. "I look for the right thing." (Although the right thing, he acknowledges with a smile, is often expensive.)

In the study, leather Abercrombie animals are perched on the floor beneath drawings by Johns. In a second, smaller study, a pale cream linen bouclé daybed is set at an angle so that one can admire the water. Sills replaced the silk on the bedroom walls with white linen.

One Garboism has been kept intact. Rosen glides down the hallway and opens a door with a flourish to reveal a modest staircase. "This was Mr. Schlee's door," she says. George Schlee was a tenant upstairs, with whom Garbo had an ongoing liaison. The door provided a discreet connection between his apartment and hers.

Our world balks at preservation. Clothing is discarded rather than repaired, art is sold as quickly as it is bought, beautiful buildings are razed and replaced with paper-thin piles. But we can also become so attached to the past that we forgo the pleasures



Above: The door that led to the staircase up to Garbo's lover's apartment. "The locks are so amusing—was she locking him in or out? Ultimately it reveals that she had the control," Rosen says. "I could not resist keeping the door instead of turning it into a shallow closet. It's the ghost of Garbo, at least to me!"



of moving forward—intellectually, politically, and spiritually. "I love to change my mind," Rosen says. "I like to be enlightened. It's one of the great moments in life."

By now the sun has almost finished setting, the sky turning a Garbo pink. And even a committed Garbo fan must admit that Sills's pure blues and pale grays merge much more serenely with the calm chill of the water and sky than her original sandy tones. Rosen describes the apartment now as having a "New Orleans sensibility of mistiness and palimpsest."

Rather than being merely a gallery or a retreat, it feels like a home. Being from New Orleans, Rosen believes in ghosts, of course. She has not yet felt the star's presence, but Sills says he dreams about her. "I wanted to make Garbo happy," he says.

Of course, Garbo herself was the queen of knowing when to move on. She would be thrilled that Sills and Rosen did the same. **T&C**

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