



JULIE HILLMAN'S TAILOR SHARP

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hen we speak, Julie Hillman is elegantly perched in a cane and teak Pierre Jeanneret chair, one in a set of four arranged around her desk. Behind her are stacks of small wicker crates containing her reservoir of material samples. The baskets are artfully placed on shelves, surrounded by various design books and found objects, that reach up towards the heights of the 15-foot-tall ceilings of her newly completed study within her Upper East Side townhouse. In the background, just out of frame, is a large black and white photograph: “*Allegories of Beauty*” by Sam Samore. There is also a sense of a distinct approachability, an obvious, at least to this fellow Chicagoan, signifier of Julie’s Midwestern roots. It can be described as a pervasive, genuine concern for others that persists despite Julie not living in the Windy City for decades. When I apologize for my cold, she quickly consoles me: “*Oh, you poor thing,*” with a warmth that feels genuine rather than diminishing and quickly cuts through any nerves.

Nestled in the capacious studio, a place for her to research, read, and relax, Julie is never far from work. Her office is just around the corner, at times prompting her to direct her 10-person team to the studio for various samples or reference books. It’s the sort of Manhattanite mentality that has likely helped her grow; since 2002 Julie has been running her namesake firm, crafting a succession of refined, luxurious interiors in Manhattan and throughout the Hamptons for the other cosmopolitans in her orbit.

As we speak, the arrival at her particular aesthetic eye begins to feel almost inevitable starting with her glamorous lineage: her grandfather and uncle co-founded two legendary jazz clubs, while her father was Playboy’s first staff photographer. Her father passed away suddenly when Julie was three. “*My mother always says it’s a shame I never really got to know my father, uncle, and grandfather because I am one of them,*” Julie says.







Her artistic osmosis officially began soon after as her mother, Susan Hillman, slowly decorated the empty home, pulling from her own worldly, star-studded impressions. The library was inspired by Hugh Hefner's Playboy Mansion in Chicago "She saw that sofa in his living room, fell in love with it, and ordered the exact same one in the same striking red," says Julie. The dining room ceiling was lacquered with a sultry red hue matching the *Opium* by YSL Eau de Parfum bottle cap, while the ceiling beams were painted to replicate the Hôtel de Lauzun in Paris. Despite the overt Francophile influences, Julie insists that it was an eclectic, edgy, interesting home, complete with a portrait of her mother by LeRoy Neiman.

After studying Fine Arts in Boston, Julie set off for New York. Like many a young adult before and since, she arrived to the city with aspirations of a career in high fashion (names like ALAÏA and Calvin Klein still come easily to her) and completed additional studies at Parsons School of Design before embarking on a career in womenswear. Julie took a step back from her decade-long career at Liz Claiborne after the birth of her second child. Ever the creative and not one to sit still, she found her way to interior design after completing her family's house in the Hamptons. Julie describes a certain ease in creating the home that was distinct from her experience in fashion.

The rigor of her formal fashion training combined with an unconventional and creative family history has led to an intuitive yet grounded approach to interiors: "There are no preconceived rules. I only have feelings," says Julie. And her urbanite, can't-sit-still personality was exactly what was needed to launch a design firm: "When I first started I used graph paper and I would literally cut out the shapes, each square was a foot, and lay it out to scale," says Julie. "When you learn things generically, you start with the bare basics of space and you can move things so easily."

However, the late nights spent sketching, sewing, and pinning are apparent in how she differentiates her ethos. "A piece of furniture is very similar to a body. I've always had a great sense of proportion in dressing, but drawing it in fashion expanded upon that. I was thinking about the use of fabric and color, and how they made you feel because I was thinking about them on the body. The draping of fabric is important in fashion and interiors," says Julie. "Today, I'll do drapes out of things that nobody would think to do drapes out of if they didn't work in fashion."

There is a crisp tailoring to her work with a studied sense of proportion honed during her fashion years. She speaks of her interiors, no matter how indulgent they may appear, with a corresponding pragmatism; every room should have a specific feel and function. While Julie's portfolio almost exclusively embodies neutral palettes, the strong lines and clean millwork are enlivened with tactile layers of material—the sort of striated marble you dream about, sectionals upholstered in rich brown furs, cashmere pillows, Chesterfield ottomans in jewel-hued velvet, and irreverent light fixtures that often add a playful nod to otherwise polished rooms.

When speaking of her own work, Julie eschews neat categorization, preferring to sidestep claims to a signature: "I want every client's home to be unique to them," Julie says. "I don't want people to walk in and say 'Oh, Julie Hillman did that.' That, to me, is not a compliment. That means I've created something like many others I've created."



Her desire to distance herself from replication dovetails with her appeal to potential collaborations. On the type of client she prefers working with Julie says “I want them to be interested and interesting.” In her case, this person is often also an avid art collector. While she embraces timelessness elsewhere in her rooms, her philosophy is inverted when it comes to art: “Art collectors are always changing. I don’t even ask what pieces are going in a space because they just should be designed to receive art,” Julie says.



Despite the healthy budgets and eclectic interests of her clients, her aim is to design interiors that, once complete, remain static, rather than a rotating door for whatever the piece de rigueur may happen to be. A conundrum anyone familiar with the artist-client relationship can attest to, there is a careful, and at times constrictive, balance between your vision and

that of your benefactor. Sometimes key pieces are repurchased, seating is swapped, and, perhaps, a signature style inevitably begins to emerge. While Julie sidesteps hallmarks, her spaces do have their own leitmotifs—large furniture (made possible by enviably large New York apartments), subtly textured walls, and conspicuously curated bookshelves rhythmically dotted with small yet valuable artifacts. It’s carefully layered, culled together with an underlying refined aesthetic.

Julie speaks deftly and excitedly on the world of collectible design, finding ease in stringing together sentences in which she rifles through references to pristine early Austrian pieces, West African sculpture, Americana furniture, and contemporary artists like the pragmatic, craft-driven furniture of British

designer Max Lamb as well as the American abstract sculptor Misha Kahn. However despite the range of her own knowledge, the spaces she designs often feature hard-to-miss names, recognizable to anyone with an unstudied eye but an artistically-inclined algorithm: one particularly packed town home on her website includes an oversize Keith Haring, a Jean-Michel Basquiat beside a marble mantel, Judy Garland as rendered by Andy Warhol, and a trio of Francois-Xavier Lalanne sheep sculptures.

Whether or not she has a signature, her philosophy, judging by her firm’s burgeoning portfolio, appears to be paying off. The week after our interview, she’ll be flying to Paris to celebrate the launch of her new line of table settings and lamps designed in collaboration with Ginori 1735 as part of Design Miami.Paris.

One of her most recently completed projects is the studio and media room within her personal home. The space is flooded with a major New York City luxury—light—by way of a trio of nearly ceiling-height windows, illuminating the parquet flooring. The reference room, as she interchangeably calls the studio, has many of the markers found in her client work, albeit with a more feminine, lived-in feel: a Federalist-era marble fireplace, a mix of upholstered seating you want to (carefully) sink into, and a series of shelves curated with Julie’s collection of design books, material samples, and appropriately-scaled art objects.

Of course, sometimes the most valuable pieces are those closest to the heart. One would imagine the study to be a true collector’s trove, however, when prompted, the item she first draws attention to is a photograph taken by her father. It’s a comparatively discrete, black-and-white image that gently leans about halfway up her desk, a prototype she insisted on buying directly off the gallery floor in Chicago years ago and has used in her offices ever since.

Before we wrap up our conversation, we come back to the topic of cities. I share my upcoming move to Los Angeles. It turns out Julie’s daughter and I will be living in the same neighborhood. When Julie tells me I half expect her to orchestrate a coffee break from her Upper East Side abode because, well, that’s just what Midwesterners do.

