

Wall Murals

"Have fun!" was a signature sign-off of lauded interior designer Suzanne Rheinstein, who passed away in March, leaving a legacy of lessons that can be gleaned from her projects and books. Although hand-painted murals like these trellised walls are an indulgence, a room that has the optimism of spring all year long is pure joy. Many wallpaper brands make panels that replicate painted scenics; install one and dream on. Nothing is as transporting as walking into your own idyll.



Lessons FROM A LEGEND

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She was a designer with definite flair who always welcomed fun. In remembering *Suzanne Rheinstein*, we share 10 hallmarks of her work. Her thinking was one of a kind, yet the rooms she touched were relatable and, above all, livable.

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ou look at the rooms of celebrated interior designer Suzanne Rheinstein and, it's true, you see beautiful, beguiling spaces and ways of putting together furniture and belongings that are studied and elegant. But you also see rooms designed for joyful living. They're heartily welcoming and unquestionably uncommon—a zesty color that enlivens a serene seating area, a pairing of things antiqued and fresh.

In a career that spanned decades, Rheinstein, *right*, decorated some of the finest homes in America, creating rooms that weren't just for looking at but for truly living in.

When the Los Angeles designer passed away this spring at 77, she left a legacy of inspirational decorating. She's often cited as working in the vein of the iconic Parish-Hadley design firm but with a Southern spin—she was born in New Orleans and raised in Jackson, MS. (If you'd had the pleasure to snack on the warm cheese straws and candied bacon she served at parties, you might have hazarded a guess.) But it's the joie de vivre and accessibility of her work that will be remembered. Her three books, including the recent *A Welcoming Elegance*, offer a master class in fancy livability.



The designer's Southern-bred insistence on comfort, community, and levity is a hallmark of her work. She moved chairs and cocktail tables like chess pieces to ensure that a chat among friends, a night alone, or a roof-raising bash would be equally comfortable. Her legendary parties would include a full meal on china and an invitation to sit anywhere. As Los Angeles decorator and longtime friend Joe Lucas recalls, "It could be on an 18th-century gilt fauteuil or on the floor"—a prospect made possible by the huge linen "lap-kins" she doled out for eating on laps. "We'd joke it was like putting an 8x10 rug on your knees," Lucas says.

This wink of humor could be a pleasing balance to a room of pedigreed objects. So could her deft moves of countering lofty decor achievements with comfortable living and roadside finds. She meant it when she said, "Coming upon a fine old rattan chair is as exciting as finding a rare painted and gilded 18th-century Milanese console." That idea and others should be replicated. There's no greater tribute to a creative spirit than channeling their ingenuity or heeding lessons from rooms they've touched, including this collection of some of Rheinstein's projects over the years.

COURTESY OF A WELCOMING ELEGANCE, ROOMS FOR LIVING, AND AT HOME BY SUZANNE RHEINSTEIN; PUBLISHED BY RIZZOLI BOOKS; PHOTOGRAPHY BY PIETER ESTERSOHN; PORTRAIT BY DREW BLACKWELL.



### Reversed Fabric

Rheinstein wasn't known for tricks, gimmicks, or hacks—but creativity, yes. Ingenuity even. When upholstering furniture (or cladding walls here), she often used the back side of the cloth, finding it less loud and unintentionally artful. (She even created her own collection for Lee Jofa mimicking this effect.) For this to work, the fabric must be hand-printed, not machine-printed, so the ink bleeds through. The broader lesson: Find and use unintentional beauty where you can.

## Combining Eras, Origins

Few of us have a strictly cohesive collection of furnishings; we're not all French Provincial or all midcentury modern. Our homes are typically an accumulation of items picked up along the way. Not to worry—vive la différence is Rheinstein's ethos.

Partnering an antique dresser with modern art, *this photo*, or an industrial cabinet with traditional rattan chairs, *opposite*, gives a room energy. What Rheinstein would argue for is the edit. Keep the pieces with integrity and the ones you feel passionate about; weed out the rest. And, she would add, be attentive to how things are put together. Silver serveware spread over surfaces might feel cluttered, but displaying them together behind the cabinet's glass doors makes a statement.



"CURATION IS AS IMPORTANT AS CHOICE. HOW THINGS ARE PUT TOGETHER IS CRUCIAL."  
—SUZANNE RHEINSTEIN



## Allover Pattern

The idea feels downright maximalist: Repeat the same pattern on the walls, window treatments, and furniture upholstery. It may sound like too much of a good thing, but all you have to do is look to a Rheinwein-designed room to see how a sea of similarity actually calms a space and feels cohesive, serene, and truly restful—a blanket of softness pulled right up to your eyes. The idea behind using allover pattern is simple: The less information there is for the eye to read, the less work the mind has to do. Sink in and relax.



## Painted Floors

A signature of Boston-by-way-of-Britain decorating, painted floors always brighten a room. They're an economical update compared to refinishing or replacing flooring, and they can be deeply cheerful. For Rheinwein, floors were another plane of architecture to direct and entice the eye. She often turned her attention to them to connect two disparate rooms, such as a pantry with a kitchen. Her general rule for painted floors: Stick to pale colors and keep geometric patterns simple.



"LET DETAILS REVEAL THEMSELVES OVER TIME. NOT EVERY ROOM, OBJECT, COLOR, OR FABRIC NEEDS TO SHOUT 'WOW.'"

—SUZANNE RHEINWEIN



### Traditional with the Unexpected

Refined interiors risk being stiff. Rheinstein's rooms aren't. Why? It's the touch of the unexpected—casual with formal or a bit of quirk in something traditional. In this lacquered sitting room, she picked a dashing apple green and carried the color onto the ceiling. In others, a simple sisal rug might undercut the formality of antique furnishings without losing their gravitas.



## Versatile Banquettes

Banquettes fulfill many needs in decorating. They give meaning to a nothing space (such as the two, *above*, that hug the wall and provide additional seating and style). With no arms to impede, the pieces can fit where sofas can't, adding a lap of comfort and a trim profile. Placed back-to-back, they create an unexpectedly elegant seating arrangement.



## Slipcovers on Antiques

In the days before AC, furniture in fine houses would get dressed for summer in breathable cotton slipcovers. "Summer dress" also had the effect of freshening serious furniture. What could be more Rheinstein than outfitting a neoclassical settee in a jaunty stripe? It's an invitation to sit.

## Symmetry

To bring a sense of order and tranquility to a room, Rheinstein relied on balancing: pairs of sofas and lamps facing each other or a vignette of two items flanking a third. She loved to employ this classical move but never failed to find something to skew it slightly—a vase of tall branches placed off-center, *above*, for example.

## Antiqued Mirrors

Points of light transform a room. Not just windows, candles, and lamps but materials that "amplify and beautify light," as Rheinstein put it. She included gilt, lacquer, and bronze as favorites—and mirrors, especially when aged. Let go of the idea of a mirror just showing reflections. Antiqued versions with gentle discoloration (desilverizing)—natural or applied—add an expanse of light, and the mottled appearance lends a sense of mystery. ■

