

## The Enduring Legacy of French Interior Designer Henri Samuel

Opulence is just the beginning of this design star's legacy.



BY DAVID NETTO — MAR 15, 2018



I first became aware of the work of French designer Henri Samuel in the mid-1980s, in what might be called his robber baron phase. At that heady time in American social history there were a few decorators from England and Europe working in New York for very visible clients: Geoffrey Bennison had just performed miracles for Guy and Marie-Hélène de Rothschild on East 66th Street, and Henri Samuel and his project for Susan and John Gutfreund at 834 Fifth Avenue were the talk of the town.

Before then the apotheosis of Reagan-era classical style had been basically



Georgian. Afterward a gap was bridged, and it was said that Samuel's work didn't just evoke the past, it was as good as anything in that past. Samuel delivered to the New World something that was thought to be no longer possible: the authentic opulence of another continent and another time.



The Gutfreund apartment on Fifth Avenue, currently on the market for \$120 million.

MICK HALE

Later I learned the missing pieces of the Samuel story. This happened, as it often does, in the form of an auction catalog. The Christie's Monaco sale after his death in 1996 contained many avant-garde works of contemporary "art furniture," as well as pictures of his Paris apartment that were positively bohemian—luxurious, yes, but very artistic. You must remember that this was before that apartment was

well known, and images were not just waiting for you on the internet. One had to research, save magazines, connect dots. It was a revelation how Samuel had lived at home, with contemporary art and zany furniture, and it was hard to square this with his work for the second Gilded Age.

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Jacques Grange, who worked for Samuel early in his career and wrote the foreword, described to me an office environment that was very formal and hierarchical. But, he added with great respect, “that is where I learned what quality is.”

Excerpted here are passages that explore Samuel’s influence on younger designers today; his collaborations with such artists as Balthus, Philippe Hiquily, and Guy de Rougemont; and his work for American plutocrats like the Gutfreunds (on Fifth Avenue) and Jerry Perenchio (in the house made famous by the title sequence of *The Beverly Hillbillies*). If you like what you see (and have had a good year), both properties are, coincidentally and for the first time in decades, now for sale. But start with the book.

An excerpt from *Henri Samuel: Master of the French Interior* by Emily Evans Eerdmans

Emily Evans Eerdmans’s new Rizzoli book, *Henri Samuel: Master of the French Interior* (\$75), is a long time coming. Samuel’s reputation has been growing steadily, and it’s amazing there has been no book until now. Which Samuel will you like best? There is one for every era. He worked in many styles, but what he stood for consistently was quality.



**H**enri Samuel mixed the contemporary with the classical to thrilling effect. Throughout his career the decorator proclaimed there was no “Samuel style” but that each project evolved from the client’s taste. “I remember seeing images in the 1990s, in a Christie’s auction catalog, of Henri Samuel’s iconoclastic Paris apartment,” says Delphine Krakoff of Pamplemousse Design in New York City.

Like Samuel she often pairs a classically articulated room with experimental pieces, so that it looks as if it has been furnished over time. “It was filled with artwork and furniture by Balthus, Atlan, César, and Hiquily, combined with cutting-edge contemporary as well as neoclassical design. I was taken by his unexpected and fearless commitment to a unique vision, his understanding of history and of design and architecture, without being constrained by it. History is just a point of departure in his design process.”



Samuel filled his Paris home with a mixture of traditional and modern touches, such as an Arthur Aeschbacher carpet.  
PARIS/LES ARTS DÉCORATIFS/JEAN-MARIE DEL MORAL

In 1970, after 25 years as head of the design firm Alavoine, Samuel began a new chapter in his career: Henri Samuel, *décorateur*. He opened his own firm, prompted not by ambition or a desire to have his name at the forefront but because Alavoine had finally closed its doors. At 66 the designer was internationally acclaimed as a master of French decoration, and kings of both countries and industry clamored for his time. Samuel set up shop on the ground floor of his apartment building at 83 Quai d’Orsay and maintained a small staff to oversee all projects.

In addition to Madame Chaminade, his secretary, and Jacqueline Lallemand, his



accountant, there were Jacques Cayron and a Monsieur Hanché, who were his design associates. There was also a full-time draftsman. When Samuel moved to 118 Rue Faubourg Saint-Honoré, around 1976, the staff worked out of a small office in his apartment, where a minuscule stairway led up to a drawing studio.

“Pierre, a tiny man who drew incredibly in the style of Louis XV, Louis XVI, and Empire, drafted the plans for everyone,” recalled the architect Christian Magot-Cuvrû, who began working with Samuel in the early 1980s. The work was intense, but the office was run with civility.

Every day Samuel would have lunch at Maxim’s or Le Relais at the Plaza Athénée, often dining with friends such as the Duchess of Windsor. “Tea-time at Monsieur Samuel’s was very important. Around 4:30 p.m. his majordomo would come to serve us tea, and it was during this moment of pleasant relaxation when we spoke of everything and nothing for 30 minutes,” Magot-Cuvrû remembers.



The novelist Louise de Vilmorin's Salon Bleu, at her family's château in Verrières-le-Buisson, France.  
CONNAISSANCE DES ARTS/AKG-IMAGES

Working with such a prominent clientele called for absolute discretion. David Linker, a master *ébéniste*, recalls that at the famous Cour de Varenne furniture restoration workshop—where he worked exclusively on Samuel projects—one had to be invited to purchase the important 18th-century items that passed through the

workshop, and it was understood that should the buyer want to resell, he would do it through the Cour de Varenne. In this way important, often royal, pieces could be tracked and their restoration never compromised. When Linker or his colleagues helped deliver a piece to a residence, they were never told the owner's identity.

Samuel patronized the same artisans repeatedly, so that they essentially became an extension of his team and knew his preferences intimately. He was very specific about color and was always on site to supervise the mixing of colors, which could take hours before he was satisfied. Laurence du Plessix, who worked in Samuel's office from 1984 to '87, remembers Samuel's dissatisfaction with a carpet that was too bright; the decorator added dust to make it more subdued. If a molding wasn't exactly what he wanted, Samuel would have it remade, even at his own expense.

**T**hanks to his having restored the Rothschilds' famed Château de Ferrières in the 1950s, and having worked at Versailles, Samuel was firmly established as a master of the historical interior, as well as one of the most adept interpreters of *le goût Rothschild*, which is what drew clients including Sisley founders Hubert and Isabelle d'Ornano, Valentino Garavani, and other major Parisian magnate-collectors to hire him, even as he started to be very much in demand in the United States.



The dining room at Valentino Garavani's Château de Wideville, outside Paris, decorated by Samuel.  
COLLECTION OF EMILY EVANS EERDMANS



In postwar America the “Louis Louis” look became de rigueur among a certain high society set. By 1962 the fashion for French design was so pronounced that decorator Billy Baldwin dubbed it FFF (“Fine French Furniture”). This craze brought a branch of Maxim’s to Chicago in December 1963; the opening included a Dior fashion show. To faithfully reproduce the restaurant’s Belle Epoque interiors, the owners sought out Henri Samuel.

Samuel was working steadily in the U.S. by the 1960s. Jayne Wrightsman, one of New York’s most distinguished proponents of FFF, began working with Samuel following the retirement of her longtime decorator, Stéphane Boudin of Jansen. Samuel’s later collaboration on the Wrightsman Galleries at the Metropolitan Museum of Art secured his position as one of the world’s most eminent interior designers, and his relationship with Wrightsman would lead, years later, to one of his most notable projects: the Gutfreund residence.



The grand salon at the Palm Beach home of philanthropists and collectors Charles and Jayne Wrightsman.

FELICIANO

The 1980s in New York were a heady time of maximalist extravagance stoked by the roar of Wall Street. When Salomon Brothers CEO John Gutfreund and his wife Susan moved to 834 Fifth Avenue in 1987, the residence’s Henri Samuel interiors made a splash. *Women’s Wear Daily* reported, “It’s the talk of New York, and one of those lucky few who have sneaked a peek at Susan and John Gutfreund’s apartment says it is the ‘most lavish and beautifully opulent’ home in the city, a place that truly has the atmosphere of a house and not just a flat.”

Susan had been introduced to Samuel by Wrightsman and soon became a cherished client and pupil of the decorator. Samuel even guided the Gutfreunds in their choice of domicile. He counseled against an Italianate townhouse in favor of the 20-room apartment on the seventh and eighth floors of 834 Fifth, which was designed in 1929 by Rosario Candela. He particularly approved of the large windows, which offered spectacular views, even to seated guests, of Central Park.

Antiques purchased during the Gutfreunds' travels in Europe inspired the decoration of the winter garden room, which was flooded by too much natural light to be the library, as originally planned. Gilt trelliswork paneling made of resin gave the room both order and fantasy.

With the assistance of architect Thierry Despont, Samuel knocked out walls to create a 50-foot-long living room, laid the floors with parquet de Versailles, and uncovered windows in the stairway to let more light in. Susan remembered, "Henri would sit and stand in the room, observing the color from all angles, in the bright morning light as well as in the afternoon. He studied it by lamplight... He always came himself, never sending an assistant. He was like a couturier, always fine-tuning details."

The dining room was furnished with a suite of 18th-century white and Wedgwood-blue Adam-style furniture from Jayne Wrightsman. The curtain design was also 18th-century, the pink under-curtain fabric having been a gift to Susan from Karl Lagerfeld. "Henri gave you the perfect base, like a couture dress that was sheer perfection whether you added jewels or not," says Susan, who is now an interior designer in her own right.

After visiting the Gutfreunds' apartment, entertainment mogul Jerry Perenchio decided Samuel was the ideal person to restore the property he had just acquired in Los Angeles. The house's exterior was famous for its use on the 1960s television show *The Beverly Hillbillies*. Designed by architect Sumner Spaulding for Lynn Atkinson, who was the engineer of Boulder Dam and who loved the Louis XV style, the limestone-clad reinforced concrete residence, which featured a 150-foot-tall indoor waterfall and a pipe organ, had taken five years to build. When the house was finished in 1938, Atkinson's wife Berenice took one look and asked, "Who



would ever live in a house like this?” The house sat empty until it was sold in 1947 to Arnold Kirkeby, whose family sold the house to Perenchio in '86. Over time Perenchio added three contiguous lots to the estate, which now amounts to 10 acres.

Perenchio agreed to Samuel's demand that everything, even the slope of the roof, had to be redone in order to achieve a “proper representation of an 18th-century château.” Over the next five years the house was gutted, rebuilt, and decorated. Before the south façade was rebuilt, a crew of 26 painted a full-size trompe-l'oeil version of the elevation for the Perenchios to approve. To find limestone that matched the original, Samuel and the Perenchios flew by helicopter from quarry to quarry in France and then hired a local couple to live on site to ensure that it was cut properly.



Philippe Hiquily chairs and table commissioned by Samuel for the Paris apartment of a Swiss client.

The entrance hall was transformed with a new staircase and a floor of limestone and black marble. The front and interior wooden doors were replaced with glass ones, so that what had been a dark space became a light-filled, welcoming one. The domed plaster ceiling of the Morning Room proved to be one of the most ambitious architectural features. Made in France in one piece, the ceiling was too large to fit through the eight door of a 747—so it was cut into sections for transport and reassembled on site.

In November 1991 the Perenchios finally moved in. “It was a wonderful adventure and one of the greatest learning experiences of our lives,” Jerry said, “as this extraordinary artist taught us and guided us for five years in the realization of our dream.”

Henri Samuel's name is almost unknown to younger generations of American designers. Brian J. McCarthy, who opened his New York office after years of working for the esteemed Parish-Hadley, is one exception. "There's an order and structure to classical French rooms, and while Henri would bring that order to them, there would be something that would shake it and break it, and make it youthful," he says. "There's something so smart about the way he decorated; it's beyond timeless. If you recreated one of Henri's rooms, it would look as fresh today as it did then. To me that speaks volumes about how great he was. He was a genius, pure and simple."

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