



Under a lacquered ceiling in the living room, a pair of André Sornay armchairs flank a Louis XVI fireplace designer Alyssa Kapito sourced in London.

# How to Furnish a Dream House? Leave Space for Things Found at Auction

While outfitting a family apartment, vintage-watch dealer Andrew Shear discovered a new passion in the equally addictive market for collectible furniture.

*By Sarah Medford | Photography by Stephen Kent Johnson*

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The first serious watch that Andrew Shear coveted was a Rolex Submariner. “I remember seeing an old one in some shop and just thought how amazing and cool it was,” he says. “What it represented, the history, the look of it.”

That he’d only been a swimmer for a couple of years (he was 8 at the time, living with his parents on Manhattan’s Upper West Side) and had no need for a diving watch with a graduated rotatable bezel and luminescent display to improve undersea visibility didn’t faze him.



Designer and client came across a painting in burlap "in the manner of Mark Rothko," in Kapito's words, at Patrick Parrish gallery in New York.

At 18, he finally bought a vintage Rolex. Now 37 and a dealer specializing in such timepieces, Shear could hit the pool any day of the week with an armload of Submariners, no two alike. He estimates that more than half of his clients these days are active collectors “constantly thinking about the next watch.”

He has good news for them: Unlike certain asset classes—art, cars, furniture—“vintage watches are truly very liquid,” he says. And solid, if recent market reports are any indication. Over the past three years, the value of a vintage Rolex or Patek Philippe has risen steadily at a rate well outpacing inflation. “I have some money in the stock market,” Shear says. “I often ask myself why.”

“I still enjoy it,” he says of his own personal collection. “It’s very much about the hunt.”



In the living room, a French '50s club chair and Royère iron table meet a parchment-covered coffee table of Kapito's design near a Jean Dubuffet drawing.

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Shear and his wife, Miranda Hammer, a dietitian, felt that way about real estate, too. They'd always kept an eye on the housing market, so when an apartment became available in an Upper West Side prewar building they'd long admired, they pounced. They closed on the place in 2020, and the family of five moved in last winter.

Despite a steady creep of black SUVs outside the front door, the rooms inside their new home—high ceilings, herringbone floors and walls finished in a milky palette of off-whites—might have come together almost a century ago, when classicism toughened into modernism and clutter was finally swept out on the ebb tide of 19<sup>th</sup>-century taste. This look, austere and deliberate but not drained of feeling, has become a signature of Alyssa Kapito, the couple's Manhattan-based designer. A student of Renaissance art and a former member of the auction trade, Kapito takes a highly formal, research-driven approach toward decoration, a big reason that Shear, in particular, sought her out. It's an old-world



Walls painted in a parchment finish and a straw marquetry cabinet give the dining room a distinctly 1930s feel. The dining chairs are Danish, by Ole Wanscher, and the chandelier is a Jean Royère design bought at auction.

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“Some designers walk into a space and it’s fully designed in their head when they walk out 10 minutes later, because they use the same things over and over again,” says Kapito, 36. “That wasn’t the plan here. From the get-go, we were leaving spaces for things that we were going to find at auction.”

**“It’s comforting knowing I could resell a piece if need be, [but] I don’t think much about appreciation, as that would turn me into a furniture dealer, which isn’t what I’m after.”**

— Andrew Shear

The strategy was familiar to Shear, whose father had been a dealer and collector of American antiques, from 19th-century folk art to machine-age lighting and objects. Being a dealer’s son kept him on his toes. “One day the couch could be missing,” he says, “or the next day a room would be turned into storage, with stacks of banana crates everywhere. The latter is probably why I’m such a minimalist.”





Two vintage finds—a Swedish brass ceiling light and a Maison Leleu low table—distinguish a newly designed library paneled in rift oak.

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Accordingly, the couple didn't plan on bringing much to the new apartment: a few paintings and drawings, some vintage Jean Prouvé dining chairs, a palm-size bronze frog by the Swiss-French designer Diego Giacometti, an auction find of Shear's.

But before they could pinpoint what would arrive, the couple agreed on what had to go. One word: *flagstone*. The apartment floors were awash in the stuff, a sea of it rolling from the front foyer all the way to the back bedrooms, which were among the very few defined spaces in a classic seven that had inexplicably been converted into a loft-like space in the 1980s. The result, according to John B. Murray, their Manhattan architect, was a unicorn—a prewar apartment “devoid of any articulation or purpose.” Murray geared his restoration to suit a young family, positioning bedrooms for three children under the age of 6 to either side of their parents' room and adding a cigar-box-style library on the far side of the foyer.



Kapito designed a bed with integrated side tables and a headboard for the main bedroom.

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Delays relating to Covid-19 gave Kapito ample time to shop. Though international travel was out of the question, she pinged dealers relentlessly to check on inventory. European auction catalogs began piling up on Shear's desk.

When a suite of three Jean Royère Créneaux nesting tables in gilt iron with glass tops came up for sale at Christie's in New York, Shear and Kapito both jumped. The tables were in excellent condition; the seller was an established New York collector who'd bought them in Paris almost two decades before. Shear did some research and established a ceiling bid, which he later blew past. He admits that, even for a professional who regularly buys and sells at auction, furniture sales can be like gut punches for him.



A glass ceiling pendant by Max Ingrand for Fontana Arte lights a blue bar.

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“Maybe it’s a little harder when you’re buying things for your home,” he suggests. “I mean, often it is thrilling. But it’s hard to buy. If you miss out, you feel bad. But overpaying is not a great feeling either.”

If bidding at auction was at times nerve-racking for him, navigating a barely functioning transatlantic supply chain almost broke his interior designer. Weeks after buying a pair of 1940s André Sornay armchairs from a dealer in Paris, Kapito got word that the crate in question had been air-shipped. Air-shipped—and then vanished.



For the practical family kitchen, Kapito designed a simple dining table to accompany vintage Jean Prouvé chairs and an amber pendant light by Poul Henningsen from Dienst & Dotter gallery in New York.

“It was an *event*,” Kapito says, the pitch of her voice inching upward. “The shipper must have thought there was a dead body in the box, because I kept shrieking, ‘You have to find these things!’”

When the furniture was finally installed last winter—including the Sornay chairs, finally tracked down after a few frantic days of searching—Shear reveled in seeing the pieces he’d bought settle, with Kapito’s help, into just the right places: a Royère side chair at a drop-down desk; a Wolfgang Laubersheimer steel bookcase in a living room corner.



To tie a girls' bedroom into the apartment's midcentury theme, Kapito designed camelback beds in the spirit of Jean Royère; a Croisillon chair by the designer is at left.



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A blank wall in the primary bedroom looks slightly forgotten, an empty plate at the dinner party. “They’re planning to put something there,” says Kapito, nodding at the space, “but they’re not rushing things.” In her view, savoring the process is part of being a collector, and blank spaces invite possibility. No doubt they’re also good for business. “We’re done with the apartment and we’re both still looking,” she says.



A Jean Royère side chair with original cowhide upholstery sits at a drop-down desk designed for the living room by architect John B. Murray.

For his part, Shear now considers himself a furniture collector. “It’s comforting knowing I could resell a piece if need be,” he says, while noting that there are a few he’ll never part with—like his Giacometti frog.

“I don’t think much about appreciation, as that would turn me into a furniture dealer, which isn’t what I’m after,” he says. “And then it ends up being a numbers game, and that doesn’t seem to ever work out. I just want things I really enjoy living with.”