

Colonial Homes

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Interior Designer
Matthew Smyth

*uses historic styles and
documentary fabrics to create
fresh new window treatments*



*Photographed by Chris Bartlett
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By Audra Shanley*



Appropriately Draped

While Americans cherish their design heritage and have a deep affinity for early American furnishings, the window treatments of the Colonial period—often just shutters or plain fabric panels, if anything at all—are a little bare for modern tastes.

“We have come to a point where we are more sensitive to fabric and design in window treatments,” says Matthew Smyth, a New York City-based interior designer. “Those early settlers had other things on their mind—like survival.”

Working with recent collections of Brunschwig & Fils fabrics based on historic documents, Smyth created a set of window treatments anchored in traditional English and French designs from the 1700s and 1800s that are well-suited to the fancy and needs of today’s homeowners. Along with supplying designs, Smyth highlights many of the pitfalls to avoid when selecting curtains for a traditional home.

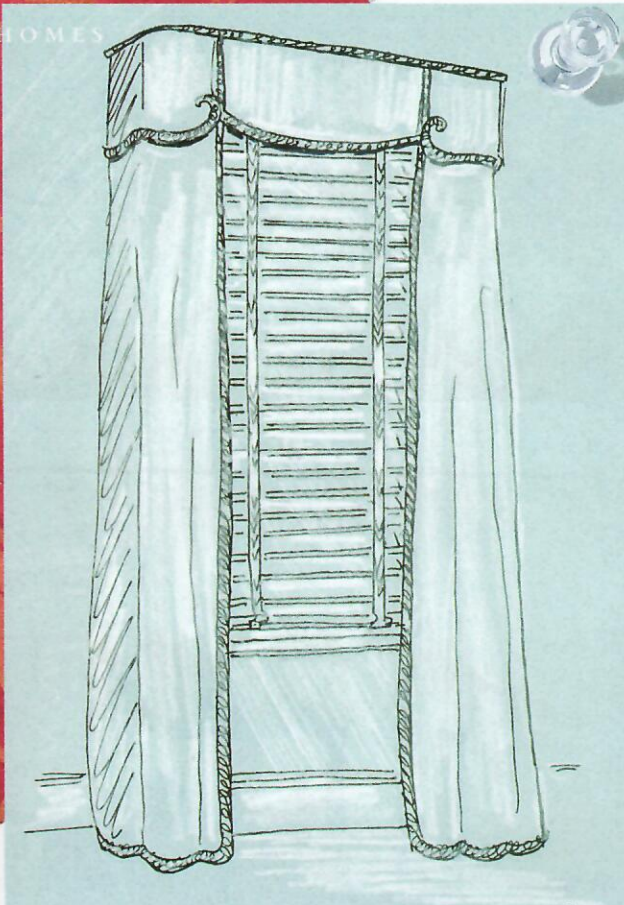




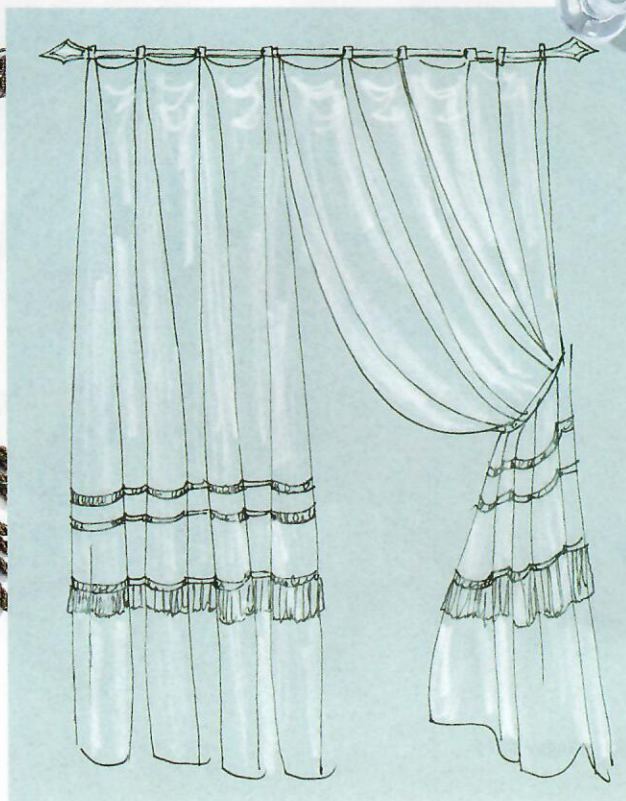
ABOVE, LEFT AND RIGHT: Smyth selected two cotton Brunschwig & Fils prints based on a late 19th-century Indonesian batik for draperies and a canopy for a circa 1860 Colonial West Indian mahogany bed from Michael Connors Inc., New York. A linen sheer, used as both the window curtain and as adjustable panels hanging from the canopy, was chosen for its subtle square pattern, which Smyth sees as a variation on mosquito netting. While giving the room a tropical feel, Smyth was careful to “control the look because it could have been too flowery. I didn’t want to detract from the fluid lines of the bed.” To unite the pieces, a Brunschwig silk “Sourire de Soie” trim was used for canopy pulls, curtain tiebacks, and sheer trim. Interiors by Royale, a New York custom drapery and furniture workroom, created all of the treatments from Smyth’s designs.



Dealing with a seven-and-one-half-foot ceiling, Smyth created these draperies as “an exercise in visual play” that results in a “Jane Austen” look. Inspired by a painting of a 1780s Neoclassical room with curtains, Smyth paired the design with a red and beige “Dancing Ladies Toile” fabric based on a 1792 block-printed English cotton document at the Winterthur Museum. A “Menuiserie Wood Mold” fringe completes the look. Adapting ideas from artwork depicting windows in the 1780s that used shutters for privacy and high tiebacks to allow in maximum light, Smyth designed a fabric-covered screen and tiebacks to enhance the unbroken line of the draperies. “Everything done here was to bring the eye up,” says Smyth. Without the aid of a chair for scale, the window treatment fools the eye—the ceiling appears much taller than its actual height.



ABOVE: To create an elegant window covering on a grand scale, Smyth chose a valance, straight side curtains, and walnut-colored wood blinds. To “take the hard edges off” the highly vertical design, Smyth selected a soft, flowing Brunschwig pattern called “Empress Moired Damask.” The fabric is adapted from the silk damask of a man’s cape. It is constructed with a cotton warp and a linen weft that give it a crisp hand, ideal for draperies. The gold accent in most of the seven colorways of this fabric, including the red shown, along with the scale of the treatment selected by Smyth, combine for a particularly dramatic result. **BELOW:** Inspired by a simple, Neoclassical design featuring fabric fastened to a pole with rings, Smyth creates a dramatically simple treatment, which, if made with a heavyweight fabric, requires no shade or blinds for privacy. The designer chose a traditional Italian-style fabric, “Raphael Damask,” for the panels and adorned them with two rows of metallic tape trim and a row of three-and-one-quarter-inch fringed trim. The large poppy flower with scrolling leaf pattern of this fabric has been popular in a number of versions as upholstery, wall coverings, and bed hangings since the early 17th century, according to Judy Straeten, archivist for Brunschwig. Its hammered appearance results from the pulling of groups of threads, a technique that gives an added textural dimension.





Homeowners with their hearts set on installing a specific window treatment without considering proportion and suitability make the most serious mistakes.

Factoring in the size and shape of the window, along with the furnishings and style of a room are paramount to a successful selection. Consider Smyth's test of whether or not a drapery treatment is appropriate: Are all eyes immediately drawn to the windows as visitors enter a room? If so, the window treatment needs rethinking. Designers consider the silhouette of the treatment against the background of the room, knowing that it should not be isolated. "The curtains are just one part of the recipe for a room," says Smyth, who reports seeing many too small or large valances where room size and furniture have not been considered.

Another common mistake is using the same treatments throughout an entire house, which "takes the punch out. Variety is key," as he sees it.

As inspiration for his designs, Smyth pored over books containing paintings and prints of elegant European draperies in rooms from the 18th and 19th cen-



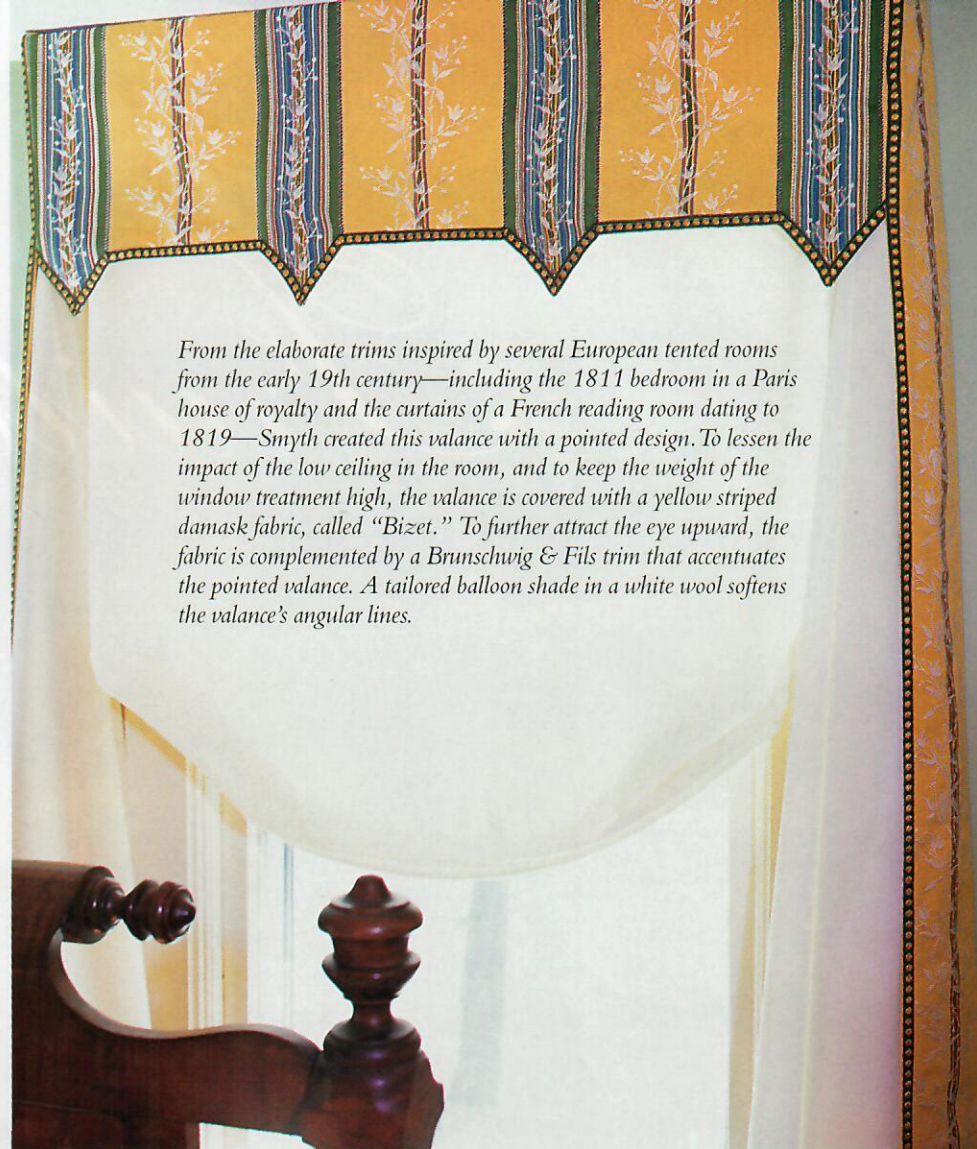
turies. Some of the simpler period designs were probably used in the fine homes in this country. He combined these historic designs with what is considered the trend in window treatments today, a lightened, looser look.

"Traditional window treatments have a heavy image, but it doesn't have to be that way," Smyth says. His designs have a lightheartedness because fabrics are chosen for compatibility to the drapery style.

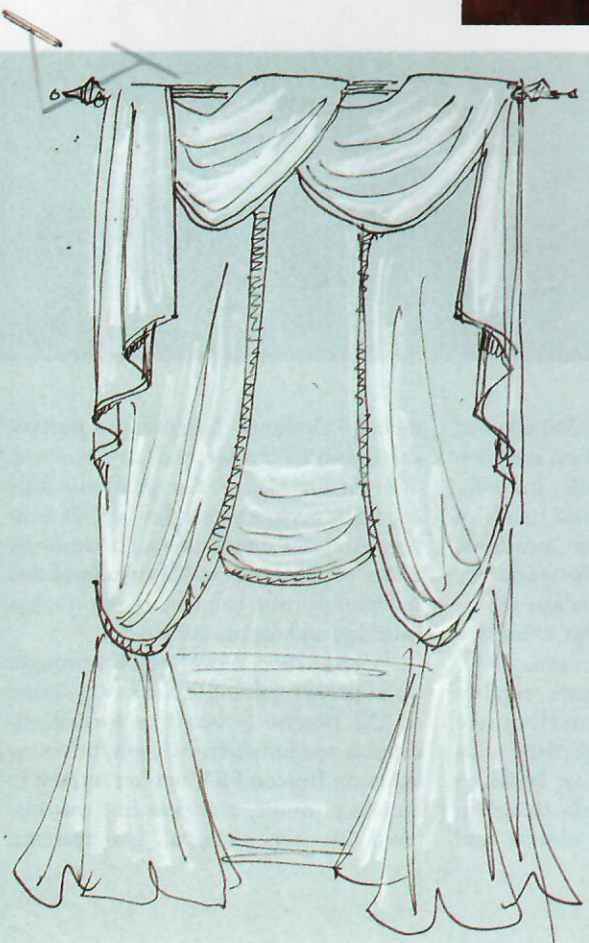
Smyth parallels his use of trims and braids to the details on couture dressing—the close-up view has a beauty to match the overall design.

Research is an excellent start when selecting a window treatment and Smyth recommends using museum homes as a springboard for ideas. "The more you look, the more it helps," he says.

When new furniture and an ever-increasing collection change the look of a room, homeowners may need to reconsider window treatments. "Ask yourself what has happened to the room in the last five years. One way to refresh a room, yet not change all the colors, is to introduce a new window treatment," notes Smyth. ☐



From the elaborate trims inspired by several European tented rooms from the early 19th century—including the 1811 bedroom in a Paris house of royalty and the curtains of a French reading room dating to 1819—Smyth created this valance with a pointed design. To lessen the impact of the low ceiling in the room, and to keep the weight of the window treatment high, the valance is covered with a yellow striped damask fabric, called "Bizet." To further attract the eye upward, the fabric is complemented by a Brunswick & Fils trim that accentuates the pointed valance. A tailored balloon shade in a white wool softens the valance's angular lines.



OPPOSITE ABOVE AND BELOW LEFT: Many homes present "problem windows" for creating window treatments. It is just such a window—complicated by its wide width and colored glass inset—that Smyth sees as a challenge. Beginning with the belief that simple is better, he selected a Regency-style swag and jabot to allow in plenty of light and not detract from the glass design. Smyth was influenced by the minimal window treatments in several late 18th- and early 19th-century English houses. At that time these lighter looks were an innovation against the heavy, gloomy draperies then popular. "Chinoiserie a l'Americaine Toile," a pattern taken from a late 18th-century copperplate engraving at Mount Vernon, keeps the treatment light and whimsical. For a seasonal change, a narrow cream and black striped fabric is added beneath the swag and jabot to create a weightier look.

LEFT: A beige and tarragon "Matera" fabric, which is part of Brunswick's "Venezia" collection inspired by the gardens, Byzantine mosaics, Romanesque façades, and ornate friezes of the Italian city, was selected for the flowing style of a swag and jabot paired with tiebacks. Says the designer, "I was aiming for a classic window treatment with a crisp, fresh fabric to provide an updated look." A sheer balloon shade was added both for lightness and to prevent the treatment from looking overly solemn and studied.

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