

HouseBeautiful

How Manhattan's "Dr. Barbie" Designed Her Park Avenue Apartment

It's the ultimate pad for the high-profile NYC dermatologist and her two daughters.

By Kathleen Renda
Aug 28, 2017

A high-profile Manhattan dermatologist and her two young daughters find their kindred spirit in designer Sara Story, who transforms their Park Avenue apartment into a glam and gorgeous — but still inviting — urban oasis.

Kathleen Renda: These colors! My inner princess is swooning.

Sara Story: I couldn't *not* do flirty lilacs, purples, and periwinkles for this client. She's a vivacious, cosmopolitan dermatologist named Gervaise Gerstner — her Park Avenue practice is just a few blocks away — who's a single mom to two girls, ages 12 and 14. I wanted to create interiors that reflected her elegant and approachable style. She purchased this 4,000-square-foot apartment shortly after it had been renovated, but she felt the decor needed feminizing. She told me that her top priority was to soften it up. Along with the luxe hues, we made it feel more sumptuous with posh lacquered walls, light-up mirrored tables, and lush mohair chairs — and that was just in the family room.

Gervaise Gerstner: Left to my own devices, I probably would have decorated my home with a lot more pink. I'm very girly. I am from the South and I have long blond hair. I can't change who I am — some of my patients jokingly call me Dr. Barbie! But Sara kept my impulses in check. She told me to keep the pink in my wardrobe and out of my apartment. I listened. This is the third project we've worked on together — she designed my office and previous apartment. She's so talented. I don't think twice when she makes a suggestion.



HouseBeautiful

BJÖRN WALLANDER

What was the jumping-off point for the palette?

SS: A super-vibrant abstract of a stiletto by Ellen Berkenblit. It's a very dramatic 76-by-92-inch piece that Gervaise bought before buying this place, and she wanted it on the living room's largest wall.

GG: To me, the artwork symbolizes female empowerment. Also, I'm known for my high heels. I wear them constantly — I think they're more comfortable than flats. I keep a dozen pairs stashed under my desk at work.

SS: The whimsy in the painting helped establish the tone of the apartment: sophisticated without any stiffness, so there's nothing off-limits or overly precious. Like the living room, which has the feel of a Parisian salon. The apartment came with two deep sofas; we added back cushions in a nubby fabric. There's a stool covered in fuzzy sheepskin that's easy to move around for extra seating. The room's completely open to the adjoining dining area, with its upholstered chairs and a trio of mirrors reflecting all of the action. In both spaces, the layout and choice of comfortable furniture is deliberate: It's all designed to be conducive to conversation, since she loves to entertain, and it's relaxed enough for the kids to enjoy hanging out here.



BJÖRN WALLANDER

A study tends to be serious, yet this one is anything but.

SS: It's definitely not your grandfather's study! Painting the existing paneling a deep custom gray instantly created a sexy, smoldering ambience. I reinforced that mood with a streamlined mohair sofa, white-leather side chairs and a patchwork fur rug. The three-tiered Italian-marble coffee table adds gravitas, which you need in a room dominated by a six-foot-tall Hunt Slonem oil painting of bunny rabbits.

GG: I have been obsessed with Hunt Slonem's work for a long time. I'm originally from Georgia, and I like that he has a strong connection to the South. And — I'm almost embarrassed to admit this — I had a porcelain bunny collection growing up. Back then, I was on the debutante circuit, and people would give me porcelain rabbits as gifts. Then my daughters decided to keep a pair of rabbits, Sunny and Honey, as pets. So when I came across this artwork, it all clicked into place. I was determined: *I've got to get those bunnies!*



BJÖRN WALLANDER

How much input did the girls have in designing their bedrooms?

SS: Grace and Olivia gave me inspiration images — the teen equivalent of Power-Point presentations. They knew the colors they wanted, the textures and the patterns. Olivia asked for contemporary black-and-white, while Grace requested a wallpapered ceiling. I like when my clients know what they like!

GG: Sara would send them proposals and options and they would pick their favorites. I didn't have a vote, and nothing was run by me, but I wasn't worried about their choices. I trust them. We've been a close-knit unit since their dad passed away about five years ago.

Any plans to work together on project number four?

SS: Start to finish, this apartment was completed in six fast months, in part because we have a great working relationship. I know Gervaise is looking at real estate in California, so...

GG: I'm plotting to buy a winter getaway home in Los Angeles, and of course, I want Sara right there. I know my strengths and weaknesses. While I can make a face pretty, I can't make a room do *anything*. That's all her.