



DESIGN STYLES

# SOMETHING OLD, SOMETHING NEW: HOW ANTIQUES AMP UP CONTEMPORARY SPACES

by Cara Greenberg | September 19, 2016

Antiques add drama — and more than a little gravitas — to contemporary interiors. Top talents reveal how they pull off the balancing act.



In the Manhattan apartment of a professional harpist, [Alexandra Loew](#) paired the sculptured silhouette of the classical stringed instrument with the similarly fluid lines of 1970s Ribbon chairs by Swedish designer [Jan Ekselius](#), purchased from [Sam Kaufman Gallery](#). The contemporary photo is by [Matthew Pillsbury](#) (photo by Justin Bernhaut). Top: [Huniford Design Studio](#) created this study in New York's Hamptons area, countering an antique partner's desk with a pair of vintage smoked-Lucite [Eero Saarinen](#) tulip chairs (photo by Robyn Lea, photo by Paolo Pettrignani).

Call it the X factor: the unexpected juxtaposition of decorative elements that lifts a contemporary interior out of the ordinary and makes people sit up and take notice. Often, it's the insertion of one or more well-chosen antiques, thoughtfully deployed against the clean lines of contemporary furnishings, that makes the whole setting pop. "Antiques are the element of surprise in a contemporary space," says Los Angeles— and New York—based interior designer [Alexandra Loew](#).

"Antiques are a great foil to chic-but-clinical newness," is how James "Ford" Huniford, of [Huniford Design Studio](#) in New York's Greenwich Village, puts it. "They can keep a contemporary interior from looking like a sterile showroom."

It wasn't until the last few decades of the 20th century that mixing styles and periods became acceptable, and then de rigueur. Prior to that, people lived with whatever was, for them, modern in its truest sense — "of the moment," whether the moment was [Louis XIV](#), Colonial or high Victorian. The early 20th century saw revivals of classical styles, the birth of the modernist movement and the swoops and amoeboid shapes of the immediate postwar years. By the 1960s, when the typical contemporary room was white and spare, with furnishings predicated on the right angle, some design mavericks began bringing in [Tiffany lamps](#) and [bentwood rockers](#) to leaven the mix.

Today, with websites making global shopping possible, the whole of decorative-arts history is fair game for those seeking to create interesting interiors, which can incorporate every style and period from antiquity to the present day. But a delicate balancing act is required. Many top designers selectively use antiques in otherwise contemporary settings to add drama and enliven their schemes. Below, a few particularly successful examples of such a strategy.



"I don't like fully contemporary interiors. I prefer to mix styles and periods to create a timeless elegance in an engaging atmosphere," says [Achille Salvagni](#). He accomplishes that in his Rome apartment, where a family portrait from 1830 and a 1920s plaster bust contrast with the clean lines of the kitchen. Photo by Paolo Pettrignani







A Beidermeier chest, ca. 1870, is a standout in Salvagni's eclectic living room, which also features a Paolo Buffa card table and chairs, 1962, and the Salvagni-designed Vittoria chair, from a limited edition of 40 pieces, which is upholstered in Dedar velvet with lacquered wood structure and brass details. Photo by Paolo Pettrigiani

