

# AVENUE



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*Fashion designer  
Rachel Roy*

## RACHEL ROYALTY FASHION'S NEW QUEEN OF DESIGN

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# EDUCATED DESIGN

Influenced by technical expertise in the fields of art and architecture, interior designer **Eric Cohler**'s creations exhibit originality and precision

by JOY Y. WANG

**I**t's not uncommon for interior designer Eric Cohler to come across surprising discoveries behind the walls of some of New York's most chic residences. Once, while working with a client, Cohler discovered three layers of wallpaper hidden behind sheetrock walls. Dating from the 1920s, 1890s and 1869, the different types of paper told stories of previous residents' personal tastes and the interior trends of each era. Thrilled by the discovery, and respectful of its historic value for future generations, Cohler left a section of the wallpaper intact.

The designer basks in the pleasant surprises that go hand-in-hand with his profession and compares revelations like this one to pentimento, reused canvases that have paintings underneath paintings. In referencing pentimento, Cohler reveals that the term is also an apt comparison for his own personality. Not just a designer with a keen eye for color and texture, Cohler possesses expertise on a wealth of subjects relating to design, fine art, architecture and literature, and to speak with him at length is to reveal each layer of his knowledge one piece at a time.

Cohler's pursuit of a career in design included a bit of academic acrobatics. He earned an undergraduate

degree in English literature from Hobart College and followed that with a historic preservation degree from the Columbia School of Architecture. In addition, Cohler also has a design certificate from the Harvard Graduate School of Design.

Still, it's difficult to pinpoint the exact moment when Cohler began his long history in the field of design. "It was probably when I started playing with blocks at the age of two," he says, laughing. Then again, his destiny might have been decided when, as a 10-year-old, Cohler was so inspired by interior designs on *I Love Lucy* that he rearranged his parents' furniture.

"As a child, I carried graph paper with me everywhere I went and was constantly drawing houses and apartment plans that I created in my imagination," he says. "To this day, I am able to recreate the actual floor plan of any structure I've been in."

Each generation of Cohler's family has its own unique experiences with design, and his childhood provided fertile ground for burgeoning artistic inclinations. His great-grandmother attended the Chicago World's Fair in 1933, where she commissioned architect George Keck, creator of the fair's "house of tomorrow," to build her dream home. Keck proposed building her the structure from

**Left:** A gentleman's bedroom designed by Eric Cohler, with art from Spasiernan Gallery and carpet by Beauvais.



**Left:** A guest bedroom in Palm Beach. The console is by Eric Cohler for Cleverys, the architectural model is by Mecox Gardens, the carpet is by Beauvais, and the chair is by Amy Perlin Antiques.

the expo, but she declined—insisting that she wanted the “house of the day after tomorrow.” The ensuing home, in Lake Forest, Illinois, was built in the revolutionary Bauhaus style. The innovative modern glass structure was fitting for Cohler’s great-grandparents, as his great-grandfather assisted young artists and architects who fled Germany during World War II, thus promoting the Bauhaus movement in America.

With a family history that is so deeply rooted in the arts, it’s no wonder that design permeates every aspect of Cohler’s life. “I can’t think of Eric involved in anything else,” says New York

Design Center President and CEO Jim Druckman. “He works 25-hour days, and his life is all about design and making life better through design.”

While Cohler cites famed designers Billy Baldwin, David Hicks, Elsie de Wolfe and Frances Elkins as important influences, he also credits his paternal grandmother and godmother for shaping his aesthetic sensibilities. “Their styles were reductionist but layered,” he says. “Mixing world-class art with a simplicity and sparseness of line is as timeless today as it was 30 years ago.”

The willingness to pair unexpected elements is apparent in Cohler’s own work. “He’s not afraid to use a lot of different styles and materials within a traditional framework,” says Tom Condon, the sales manager of Beauvais Carpets. “For instance, he’ll bring in an unusual carpet to freshen up his work.”

Recently, Cohler renovated and redecorated his mother’s Park Avenue apartment, which also houses her impressive collection of American folk art. Having grown up surrounded by high-quality art and design-minded family members, Cohler has curatorial training and serves as an art advisor to many of his clients—a service and expertise few designers offer. His knowledge of contemporary art provides depth to his designs and serves as just another layer of his complex personality. He is a fan of Loretta Lux’s photographs of children, as well as the work of Marilyn Minter, a photographer recently featured in the

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Whitney Biennial. Drawn to artists who died before becoming famous, Cohler also favors abstract painter and sculptor José de Rivera, whose work is more price-friendly and accessible. On the other hand, Cohler also makes the point that, with the right contacts, it's still possible to find great pieces by well-known artists such as Roy Lichtenstein lurking in the closets of New York galleries.

Cohler's work is also decidedly influenced by his background in architecture. "Because he was trained as an architectural historian, he can make something warm, comforting and inviting, yet almost pristine at the same time," says Druckman. "He uses a lot of techniques that come out of the architectural discipline." For example, Druckman points out that Cohler hung paintings against the large windows of his own apartment, a technique that exhibits a nuanced understanding of space.

"I use architecture completely as the structure, anatomy and bulwark of my designs," says Cohler. "Everything I do is architecturally based and mixed with art history."

Cohler's understanding of design is further contextualized by his literary influences. His two favorite books are Ayn Rand's *The Fountainhead* and F. Scott Fitzgerald's *This Side of Paradise*, both of which he says have influenced how he perceives design. In particular, Cohler admires the aesthetic convictions of the main character in *The Fountainhead*, a young architect named Howard Roark, who was so dedicated to the purity of his designs that he would rather demolish his own building than let his creation be modified. While Cohler is far less radical in his actions, and flexible enough to cater to different tastes, he is similarly focused and precise.

"His work is totally different, and he can actually visualize exactly what he wants from the very beginning," says Louis Tonna, the president and owner of Cabriole Designs. "Once he's done that, it's just a question of following his vision through, and he's usually spot on."

The combination of Cohler's various interests results in designs that are similarly layered and complex. "His architecture and interior designs are very educated and creative," says Stephen Elrod, the creative director of Lee Jofa, a company with which Cohler has created a fabric collection. "He incorporates the best of the past with a modern eye."

Cohler's daring in the field of design is evidenced by the numerous product lines with which he is involved. He has a lighting collection with Visual Comfort, and, in addition to his fabrics,



**Above:** A private photography collection and staircase in an Upper East Side apartment designed by Cohler. The carpet is by David Hicks through Beauvais, the handrail was bound by Edelman Leather, and the fabric on the wall is by Hixon and Company.



**Clockwise from top left:** *The bedroom corridor of a Fifth Avenue apartment featuring Russian architecture by Cohler. • A Manhattan kitchen by Cohler with Russian Futurist art circa 1912 and an antique American stool circa 1890. The room features Clarence House wallpaper, an antique door by Treillage and construction by Fasaka custom cabinets. • An interior by Cohler with an Anita Huffington sculpture and curtains by Lee Jofa.*

Cohler has also created two furniture collections, debuting this summer and fall.

"I wanted to create real furniture for real people," he says. "I want to make a table that's comfortable to sit at and a sofa that is deep enough to take a nap on."

The project that Cohler is most excited about at the moment perfectly exhibits his unrelenting and deep-ranging passion for design: He is restoring a house in Old Westbury that was designed in 1938 by Edward Durrell Stone, one of his architectural heroes. "It looks almost like my great-grandparents' house," he says. "I feel the house embracing me every time I step into it. It was built for one of the former presidents of the Museum of Modern Art, and artists like Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera used to spend time there."

Much like layers of wallpaper that tell the story of an apartment's previous residents, Cohler's house is a reflection of the man himself: Both possess a history that is as fascinating as it is varied. ♦