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# How the Design Firm Roman and Williams Is Making New York Feel Old Again

By [Hannah Goldfield](#)



*Roman and Williams has been instrumental in popularizing the aesthetic that's given us a proliferation of exposed-brick walls, "repurposed" wood, and Edison bulbs.*

Photograph by Adrian Gaut / Roman and Williams

Robin Standefer and Stephen Alesch met on a movie set in Los Angeles in the early nineteen-nineties. She was a

production designer from the Upper West Side, an avid reader of *The World of Interiors* who had studied art history at *CUNY*, apprenticed with Robert Mapplethorpe, and got her start in the film business sourcing paintings for a Martin Scorsese set. He was an art director who grew up in the Hollywood Hills and worked for architecture firms until he realized that his skill for drawing structures and interiors could be useful in movie production. They fell in love, and became partners professionally, too, collaborating on the sets for “The Pallbearer,” “Addicted to Love,” “Practical Magic,” and “Zoolander.” In 2001, while shooting Danny Devito’s “Duplex,” a film about a couple who buys an exquisite nineteenth-century Brooklyn brownstone with a problematic tenant, the actor Ben Stiller was so taken with the furnishings that Standefer and Alesch had commissioned for the set, inspired by a recent trip they’d taken to India—elaborate moldings and lustrous parquet floors, intricate stained glass and peacock-adorned tiles, mint-condition mid-century furniture and antique light fixtures—that he and his real-life wife asked them to design their real-life home, in Los Angeles. Thrilled at the possibility of applying their obsessiveness to something that wouldn’t get broken down at the end of a shoot, Standefer and Alesch doubled Stiller’s small nineteen-twenties Spanish Colonial in size before outfitting it like the sanctuary of a well-travelled, free-spirited grande dame, full of built-in bookshelves and blue velvet couches, carefully sourced oriental rugs and leather dining chairs with nailhead trim, and an old glass apothecary case to hold towels in the floor-to-ceiling white-tiled bathroom.

The couple went on to design homes for Kate Hudson and Gwyneth Paltrow, among others, and, in 2002, they opened an interior-design and architecture firm called Roman and Williams, after their grandfathers. In 2005, they got married.

By 2009, they had moved to New York and become a go-to for big-name hotels and restaurants, including the Ace Hotel in Manhattan's Garment District (men's-boarding-house chic) and its April Bloomfield restaurant, the Breslin (sexed-up hunting lodge), and the Standard Highline (nineteen-seventies dystopian dream world) and its iconic penthouse night club, the Boom Boom Room (Old Hollywood glitz). If you've ever been tempted to excavate the reason that it came to be that so many of the places where you go out to eat or for drinks make you feel like you've walked into a period film, even if you can't quite place what period, Roman and Williams is a good place to start. As Rodman Primack, the director of Design Miami, put it, "They've been responsible for helping usher in this much warmer vision of urban life. It's always about warm metals, like brass and copper, this kind of yellow cast of light, which is different than what was happening before, which was a much cooler sensibility." It would not be far-fetched to say that Standefer and Alesch have been instrumental in popularizing, if not conceiving, the aesthetic that's given us, since the mid-aughts, an unrelenting proliferation of exposed-brick walls, communal tables built from "repurposed" wood (and lined with classroom chairs from the nineteen-fifties), and industrial-looking, Art Deco sconces lit with Edison bulbs.

In 2012, on the occasion of Roman and Williams's tenth anniversary—by which point the firm had graduated to corporate headquarters, designing a cafeteria for Facebook, in Menlo Park, and offices for HuffPost Live and WeWork, in New York—a *New York Times* profile described them as trading in "rugged Americana lifted from a make-believe past" and creating "a world in which the newer the space, the older it looks." Standefer and Alesch, both now in their fifties, bristle at the idea that what they do is anti-modern or inauthentic. While they acknowledge that they may have

helped to launch a vague and romantic monoculture, their own work is deeply researched and hyper-specific. They don't imitate beautiful historical objects and techniques but rather incorporate them into modern contexts, finding a place for an antique Banque de France desk in a weekend home, or commissioning custom-carved wooden screens directly from an artisan in Morocco, or hiring a family of Irish masons to hand-lay the brick façade of a condominium building in Manhattan.

“We get accused of being nostalgists, but it's actually the reverse,” Alesch said over steak tartare at Le Coucou, the celebrated Parisian chef Daniel Rose's French restaurant in SoHo, which the couple transformed from a bland Holiday Inn into a lush bistro that manages to feel at once Old World formal and modernly cozy, with taper candles and green velvet chairs from 1925 drawing contrast to the rustic wooden floors and whitewashed brick columns. “We don't put history on a pedestal, we don't have it behind a velvet rope. We feel it's not even history!” “It's on the continuum,” Standefer said. The couple themselves seem plucked from some indefinite era. Alesch is a barrel-chested sandy blond, with the kind of moustache and goatee rarely seen outside seventeenth-century portraiture, and almost always dressed in shades of indigo. Standefer is sharp and small with a rapid-clip, old-school New York accent; a thick, dark curtain of flower-child hair; and a penchant for black. Alesch told me about a conversation they'd had while working on a hotel: “We had some bricks on the table, and the architect held up a brick and said, ‘Really? You want to use this fake brick?’ And we were like, ‘It's a brick!’ They used the words ‘Disney effect,’ and I don't want to be mad about it, but to me it was really a low point in understanding. To call a brick fake was really bizarre.”

In 2016, the firm's proposal to redesign the Metropolitan Museum of Art's British galleries was accepted over big-name competitors and museum veterans including Diller Scofidio + Renfro (*MOMA*, the Broad) and Herzog & de Meuron (the de Young, in San Francisco). What they wanted to figure out, Standefer explained, is "how do you express the narrative without doing a very staid and corny vignette? Let's do a tea service—how do you tell the story of that ritual without making it so prescribed and typical?" One of the galleries' old exhibits displayed a couple of dozen teapots, Alesch said, which were laid out chronologically. "But, in the storeroom, there are hundreds," he said. "Probably a thousand," Standefer added: soft-paste porcelain ones painted with floral designs or pastoral scenes; hobbit-y earthenware ones with knobby spouts; a silver-plated "Bachelor" model from 1815; a black-and-white one from the seventeen-sixties with a surprisingly modern pattern.

"They really responded to the objects," Luke Syson, the curator of the Met's European Sculpture and Decorative Arts collection, told me. "And we're talking about things that aren't necessarily all super fashionable at the moment. But they really saw the point of each one, in terms of design and materials, and their embrace of that was terribly indicative of their whole approach to the project and an understanding of what their priorities were." Alesch and Standefer had a "moment of togetherness" with Syson and Ellenor Alcorn, the curator directly overseeing the renovation, when discussing how the Met is "not a museum of history" but "a museum of art," Alesch recalled. This revelation led them to wonder whether the teapots couldn't be arranged, Standefer said, "maybe not in chronological order but by color, or shape," using a method they call "massing." As a result, one of the new galleries will feature an enormous semicircular glass case in the center of the room, filled with dozens of

teapots and walls painted ombré blue, as a subtle reference to the ocean and the shipping trade that first brought tea to England.

“What they’ve done already in restaurants and hotels is so much about creating places that people want to be in,” Syson said. “They’re social spaces, they’re spaces which are playful and serious and unusual. Above all, they understand how to balance the grand and the intimate, the high and the low, and really make places interesting and familiar and unusual all at the same time, which is quite an art.” Structurally, they were more limited: no exposed brick, for example, because of dust issues, and because it’s “too Brooklyn, too of the moment,” Alesch said. But they did manage to “reveal some muscular arches and some of the bones” of the museum, he said. “Just enough to show a little leg, you know?”

With the Met galleries, which are scheduled to open in 2018, Standefer and Alesch see themselves as having entered a “democratic” phase of their career, bringing their sensibility to the masses. (“We’re constantly looking for new categories,” Standefer said, going on to fantasize about whether they could put their own spin on an airport—perhaps by adding bicycles and little hop-on trains, “like at a berry farm,” Alesch said.) Their first retail store, Roman and Williams Guild, which opens later this week, is also, according to Standefer, “democratic,” in the sense that “a customer will walk in thinking, ‘O.K., I’m gonna understand how to make my place look like this without really hiring a decorator or designer.’” Unusually knowledgeable sales associates will guide customers through densely layered “vignettes,” composed of one-of-a-kind “found” objects (Standefer thinks the word “vintage” has become meaningless) of the sort that they might acquire for private clients—American Colonial salt-glazed pots, French sculpture from the nineteen-twenties, nineteenth-century

Indian textiles—as well as contemporary items, some produced exclusively for the Guild by carefully vetted artisans, such as a line of red lacquer dinnerware made in Japan. The Guild will also debut Roman and Williams’s first official collection of furniture, which they describe as “primitive modern,” and which includes a fifty-thousand-dollar, fourteen-foot, “Nakashima meets Brancusi,” live-edge wooden “ceremonial” bed, whose exceptionally wide, low platform is designed for resting glasses, candles, and books on. Dressed in fur pillows and sheepskin, it looks like part of a bedroom set from a high-concept live-action film about the Flintstones.



*Roman and Williams Guild is housed in the former Arnold Constable Dry Goods Emporium, casually known as Marble House.*

Photograph by Adrian Gaut / Roman and Williams

The idea behind the Guild is to activate the buyer's senses. Touching is encouraged, as is "getting on the floor, literally," Standefer said, to shuffle through fabric samples. To even get to the furnishings, you have to make your way through a luxurious French café—called La Mercerie, and run by Marie-Aude Rose, who is married to Daniel Rose—serving coffee, freshly baked pastries, and light meals from an inviting open kitchen. Most of the café's furniture and accoutrements—Danish ceramics, Swedish linens, French forks—will be for sale, and customers will be welcome to roam freely throughout the store with their cappuccino and canelés or glass of wine. Arrangements by the florist Emily Thompson, which have a meandering, unbridled look to them, will be placed throughout the space, and Thompson, whose clients include Björk and the Frick, will also have a small shop inside.

The twelve-thousand-square-foot space, on the corner of Mercer and Howard, in SoHo, not far from Le Coucou, last housed a Citibank, but the building was erected in 1857, as Manhattan's first department store, Arnold Constable Dry Goods Emporium, which was known casually as Marble House and specialized in textiles. On a warm, sunny November day, it was still a construction site, bustling with workers revealing its very good bones: soaring ceilings, huge windows, vast expanses of creamy white marble. Standefer and Alesch's contractor, whom they'd recently hired to build a pop-up shop they designed for Gwyneth Paltrow's company, Goop, looked relaxed in a suit and loafers with no socks, leaning against a motorcycle out front. After a tour of the site, including a room on the lower level that will be devoted entirely to bowls, Standefer and Alesch stood outside, too, discussing the exterior paint color: a deep, dark, historical blue that they had to clear with the city's Landmarks Preservation Commission.

The couple contemplated how often New York's mom-and-pops have been supplanted by banks and Duane Reades; here they were supplanting a Citibank in what had once been a neighborhood of struggling artists with a mom-and-pop of sorts. The fact that only a Citibank exec or a movie star could afford to shop there seemed not to occur to them. "It is a taking back," Alesch said. "I'm a pretty optimistic person, maybe to a fault, but I just really believe in rejuvenation, and the human spirit. All the kind of dark thoughts about how retail is dead, or cities are dead—sure, they take these dips, but things always come back. Everything's in cycles."

"There are still creative people peppered all through these neighborhoods, and there always will be," he went on, gesturing at a nearby building. "There's somebody painting a watercolor up there right now. Within seventy-five feet of us, there are probably twelve people doing some odd creative thing for the future." I tried to picture it, gazing up at a sun-dappled window, but could only imagine their friend Paltrow, whose Roman and Williams-designed loft was somewhere nearby, and who was doing an interview in a high-end lighting boutique across the street. Standefer had already left to say hello.