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Get great looks by breaking the right rules



When you're remodeling the great room or refreshing the look of the master bedroom, it's the perfect time to ask: Are decorating guidelines ever meant to be broken?

"Break all the rules, but gently," recommends New York designer Matthew Mattiello. "Run wallpaper stripes horizontally on three walls and decorate the fourth wall with polka dots. Dress a room in gray — fabrics, floor and wall — and cover one chair or sofa in buttercup."

Certain fabric or wallpaper pattern themes seem destined for a particular room, like shells for bathrooms, fruits for kitchens or sweet florals for a girl's room. However, that doesn't mean the creativity stops there. For instance, when Montclair, N.J. interior designer Patti Elliot thinks of shells, she considers a "Beach cottage — from kitchen to guest room," not baths alone.

"Today's homes use a sense of scenery throughout, not exclusively in hallways and dining rooms as they did before."

Speaking of scenics, there are versatile patterns that seem to be at home in almost every room, as diverse as baths and sunrooms, according to Pam Maffei-Toolan, design director of the Waverly Lifestyle Group. One is the family of toiles — named for toiles de Jouy, translated "cloth from Jouy," an eighteenth century French town known for its period pastoral textile sketches. "Whether you use toiles on walls, as slipcovers, on draperies or everywhere, the storytelling fabrics and wallpapers lend an aura of coziness, even to new homes built with double vaulted ceilings," she says. Waverly offers pastoral toiles like "Country Life": rustic farmyard-inspired patterns like "Mayenne" and even contemporary style pen-and-ink renderings like tropical "Paradise Island."

"I like to make a great visual impression by using reverse psychology," says interior designer Laura Stoll of Barron & Stoll in Evanston, Ill. "The unexpected can be charming. I might select a formal pattern for a mud room or laundry room — spaces that you do not have to take seriously. Fun, upbeat surroundings may help take a bit of the dread out of the work associated with the room," she notes, referring to hours of laundry duty.

Both Stoll and Mattiello recommend dressing a small room entirely in the same pattern — don't forget the ceiling — and selecting an oversized floral, especially for a tiny powder room.

"You'll feel as though you're in a bouquet of flowers," says Mattiello about the impression a large-scale motif, like "Bramasole" from the Bella Tuscany collection, would make. Normally, you might consider it for a large room with 13-foot ceilings.

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