Make History

Since when did Colonial mean drab, dreary, and dull?

With bold colors and 1940s funk, designer Steven Gambrel puts the revolution back into Revolutionary

For nearly two years I've been renovating an 18th-century house for myself on eastern Long Island. In the midst of all the sawdust I've been having revolutionary thoughts—in more ways than one.

I grew up in Virginia, where center-hall Colonial-style houses prevail, primly dressed in drab gray-greens and brown-blues. There couldn't be a more wrongheaded palette. Enlightened researchers at the Founding Fathers’ houses have proved our ancestors’ passion for eye-popping colors like absinthe-green, ruby-red, and cobalt blue that gave a kick to the stoic architecture of the time. So have eccentric wallpapers like Pagodas, a late-1700s pattern of hot-pink Chinese temples on a dove-gray ground, now reproduced by a young company in upstate New York called Adelphi Paper Hangings. Sure, it’s old-fashioned, but imagine it as the backdrop for tailored white sofas, steel tables, and masses of pink peonies. With “antiques” like these to get you going, why must the word Colonial conjure a weak-tea world of brown reproduction furniture and off-white plaster walls? Thomas Jefferson would not be amused.

I say it’s time to refresh history. Remember that reproduction cherry Philadelphia highboy you passed up at the Salvation Army as too square for your happening life? Well, why not grab it and give it a glow? Specifically, Moor-Glo 836 by Benjamin Moore, a blue paint so true even the most aristocratic Yankee would approve. And if the brasses have lost...
their luster, then silver-plate them in honor of Mr. Revere. Now that’s what I call revolutionary! Be brave, be bold, be brash. After all, it’s just paint. Mrs. Blandings, in the 1948 Cary Grant–Myrna Loy comedy, Mr. Blandings Builds His Dream House, had the right idea. Even in this classic black-and-white film, she was clear when she told her handyman that the walls of her Connecticut Colonial Revival had to be a daring shade of apple-green, “somewhere between a healthy Winesap and an unripened Jonathan.” Austrian designer Josef Frank picked the same sassy color in the 1920s for a traditional fall-front desk he designed. When it came time to paint the walls of the card room at my Colonial house, I didn’t hesitate. My choice was to give them a major hit of geranium-pink. It’s not a shade for the faint of heart, but it’s so much better than beige.

Patriotic eagles are overdone perhaps, but they’re hardly cliché. Hip-hopping Tommy Hilfiger owns a couple of grand eagle-base consoles that he bought at Sotheby’s Windsor sale a few years back (as for me, I celebrate the eagle with a giant white ceramic bird I found in a thrift shop). Yes, they’re gilded to the max, but consider how they’d look if he treated them the way Jacqueline Kennedy and her decorator Stephane Boudin did the White House versions. The brown-wood eagle consoles in the State Dining Room got a fresh coat of chalk-white paint, which not only brought them out of their historicist gloom but also fitted them more precisely with the room’s newly painted boiseries. I suggest the same course of action for the eagle sconce and gilded bracket on your dining room walls—spray them gloss white or brush on a layer of gesso. Just do something to give them a new lease on life.

Got a Queen Anne side table in your front hall? Then show off those curvaceous legs by slapping on a coat of cadmium yellow. Four-poster getting you down? Dress it with handmade hippie tie-dye curtains, as designer Richard Keith Langham did for a recent showhouse on Long Island. And while the traditional pineapple is an iconic way to welcome friends and broadcast your hospitality, look for the motif in accessories from the 1940s, a decade when bigger was better. Not long ago I picked up a midcentury French bronze table lamp with a pineapple base. Convention dictated a shiny black shade, but I crowned it with one the color of fresh melon. Unexpected and a bit irreverent, that kind of touch brings history out of the past and into today. **Steven Gambrel**