



Passion Player

MULTITALENTED DESIGNER BRIAN SAWYER SHARES WHAT INSPIRES AND DELIGHTS HIM

As designer and landscape architect Brian Sawyer ambles through New York's West Village with his pug, Alice, he runs into a succession of notables—a famed novelist, a celebrated artist, even an acclaimed ballerina—all friends whom he greets as warmly as he does his barista and barber. In this and other ways, Sawyer proves he hasn't forgotten his Midwestern roots, despite living in Manhattan for three decades. Clients of Sawyer | Berson, the firm he cofounded with John Berson nearly 20 years ago, appreciate his modest charm as well.



Clockwise from far left: A vignette, featuring a bas-relief of Oscar Wilde, in Brian Sawyer's New York apartment. Sawyer, a partner in the New York design firm Sawyer | Berson. A shagreen console handcrafted by Atelier Viollet.



Sawyer and Berson are masters at projects that seamlessly integrate architecture, interior design, and landscaping, delivering distinctive homes that are meticulously researched and thoughtfully executed. As a result, their client roster is impressive, including boldface names such as Jessica and Jerry Seinfeld, Vera Wang, and Julianne Moore. Yet the firm is also known for its civic contributions, such as community gardens for Bette Midler's New York Restoration Project, as well as a kitchen garden and verdant terraces for the headquarters of God's Love We Deliver, which provides meals for the needy. A peek inside Sawyer's apartment makes it plain that he is a man of myriad interests, some of which he shares here.

One of my most treasured pieces is a bas-relief of Oscar Wilde my mother bought for me when we were nosing around antiques stores in Indianapolis about



Clockwise from left: An artwork by Fernando Bengoechea. The 2016 Kips Bay Show House room designed by Sawyer | Berson. The gardens at Villa Cetinale, outside Siena, Italy.



15 years ago. I found it in a corner, broken in half, and she asked if I'd like it for my birthday. It wasn't expensive—but that was a day I'll always remember.

The most inspiring antiques shops are the ones that are out of reach. It's exciting to walk into Galerie J. Kugel on Paris's Left Bank and see things you may only have seen in a museum before.

There is an orchid called Stanhopea that is my favorite. An odd plant with strange-shaped blooms, it has an outstanding, very powerful fragrance. The scent would fill the greenhouse at my parents' home.

One of my most interesting pieces is a woven work by Fernando Bengoechea. He would photograph antiquities in museums, cut the images into strips, and weave them back together. The woven photos are slightly blurry and have this bizarre texture. They become beautiful objects, not just photographs.

I simply can't resist shiny things, glittering stones, gold, and silver. At New York's Winter Antiques Show, I snapped up a sterling-silver-and-agate box at Angus Wilkie's Cove Landing booth. I'm such a magpie.

OPPOSITE PAGE, FROM LEFT: JOSHUA MCHUGH; CHRISTOPHER CHURCHILL; COURTESY OF ATELIER VIOLLET; FERNANDO BENGOCHEA; COURTESY OF VILLA CETINALE; PHILIP ENNIS



Nothing stops me from visiting a garden I'm determined to see. On a trip to Siena, Italy, I drove up to Villa Cetinale, the gardens of which I had studied, and just knocked on the door. Lord Lambton leaned out of a second-floor window and cursed me to high heavens. Then his lovely wife came to the front door, and after I explained that I'd loved their garden from afar for many years, she said: "Pay no attention to that man upstairs and go wherever you please."

Some of my best work happens through collaboration. I love going to Agnes Liptak at Fresco Decorative Painting for magical faux finishes. Peter Lane crafts the most incredible ceramics, and Jean-Paul Viollet of Atelier Viollet is a master of old-world craftsmanship—he built an extraordinary parchment room for me.

One of the most exciting projects the firm has done was at the Kips Bay Decorator Show House in New York, in 2016. I loved that room, because it brought together so many of my fascinations: 17th-century Italian art, extravagant terrazzo stonework, and sumptuous materials like silk velvet, cashmere, rich exotic veneers, and, of course, a little parchment.

For a host gift, I love to bring something from Santa Maria Novella. Everything they make feels like such an indulgence. Their Carta d'Armenia are wonderful-smelling sheets of incense paper that you fold into an accordion shape, light, and then let burn slowly to scent a room.

My great dream is to open a flower shop named Van Wyngarden's, after my grandfather. The design would combine an all-white marble counter like in an old flower shop in Paris with what I thought as a kid was the grandest florist in Indianapolis: an all-black glass space that looked like Dorothy Draper on acid. sawyerberson.com

—INTERVIEW BY JACQUELINE TERREBONNE