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# Magnificent Obsession

IMPERIAL RUSSIA IS RECALLED IN HOUSTON'S RIVER OAKS

Architecture by Ike Kligerman Barkley  
Interior Design by Michael J. Siller Interiors  
Text by Jeffrey Simpson  
Photography by Scott Frances

OPPOSITE ABOVE: Interior designer Michael J. Siller and his partner, Larry Hokanson, collaborated with the architectural firm of Ike Kligerman Barkley to create a Russian Neoclassical-style residence in Houston.  
OPPOSITE BELOW: The entrance hall. Walker Zanger marble floor.

BELOW: The living room highlights the designers' collection of Imperial Russian and Louis XVI-style furnishings. The portraits depict Nicholas II and Alexandra, Russia's last czar and czarina. Scalamandré red damask. Michael Taylor black-lacquered tea and cocktail tables.







During a fit of insomnia on a business trip fifteen years ago, rug designer Larry Hokanson began reading *Nicholas and Alexandra*, Robert K. Massie's epic history of the last czar and czarina of Russia. By the time he was finished, he was a confirmed Russian enthusiast. Therefore it wasn't surprising that, when Hokanson and his partner, interior designer Michael J. Siller, decided to build the house they had talked

about for years in their hometown of Houston, it turned out to be a storehouse of Imperial Russian culture. Hokanson and Siller's love for Russian antiques meant that their first trip to St. Petersburg took on the nature of a pilgrimage, and they were helped in their quest by the professional guides they found, Tanya and Nicky Yermolayev, whom Hokanson describes as "Park Avenue tour guides to Russia." Tanya Yermolayev had

worked at the Hermitage Museum during the Soviet years, and she had stayed in contact with many of her former colleagues there. As Hokanson and Siller became more and more dazzled by the furniture and interiors of the Hermitage and the adjacent Winter Palace, she offered to introduce them to people who could facilitate the making of reproductions by the restoration department of the palaces. They knew that they were about to

realize the love of a lifetime. Upon returning to New York, Hokanson and Siller immediately made an appointment with their architects, the firm of Ike Kligerman Barkley. When John Ike, with whom Hokanson had worked for years designing rugs for mutual clients, saw the pair walk in carrying books about Russian art and architecture, he remarked, "Let's see what unaffordable ideas Michael has come up with."

Hokanson and Siller had known all along that they wanted a formal house on their moderate-size lot in Houston's tony River Oaks—a house of sufficient presence to incorporate architectural elements, interior details and furniture similar to those they had seen in the Hermitage and the Winter Palace. Says Hokanson of Ike and his colleagues, "They can take a relatively small house and make it grand."

Of the house's placement,

LEFT: "We wanted to capture the mood of a reception room in the private apartments of an Imperial Russian residence," Siller says of the living room. "The color red, our favorite, makes people feel alive." Christopher Norman floor lamps. Hokanson carpets throughout.

BELOW: Inspired by their visits to the palaces of St. Petersburg, Siller and Hokanson filled the dining room with 19th-century-Russian-style pieces. The dining chairs and the doors are replicas of those in the Winter Palace. The portrait is of the young Czarévitch Alexis.



Ike says, "The idea of putting a house lengthwise on a lot, so that the end of the house serves as the façade turned toward the street, was a customary device of late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century urban Neoclassicism, whether it was used in American cities such as Charleston, South Carolina, or in London or St. Petersburg. This type of house would allow more interior space and height than a conventional one on that lot."

Ike showed his clients a book of interior elevations by James and Robert Adam, Britain's best-known eighteenth-century Neoclassical architects. The Adam book contained a piano nobile—

the main floor of a grand house that is located on the second level—that provided a sweep through the house, broken only by open arches.

The partners returned to Russia to meet with a curator in the restoration department of the Hermitage. "We had been advised," says Siller, "to bring blueprints, fabric samples and paint colors—anything pertaining to the house—as well as a list of the type of pieces that we wanted reproduced." They spent an entire day with the curator and her interpreter. The curator told them that she would let them know the next day whether the restoration department would agree to undertake the job.

The restoration department did agree, as a onetime arrangement, to reproduce examples of the furniture Siller and Hokanson wanted, so the two, guided by the curator, embarked on a daylong trip through the palaces. "The museum would only build exact replicas, using woods and techniques that had been used for the originals," explains Siller. "If the curator thought that a piece we were interested in would not serve for the purpose we were proposing, she would simply say *nyet*, and we would move on." In the basement of the palace, furniture was piled everywhere. Siller pointed in one direction and asked what he was looking at. "The









OPPOSITE: The library's bookshelves, lined with Christopher Norman velvet, hold Imperial Russian memorabilia that includes a pair of coronation cups and a handwritten note from Nicholas II as well as porcelain from the czars' palaces and yachts. Colefax & Fowler drapery fabric.

sled of Peter the Great," replied the curator.

"No, no, the white-and-gold chairs underneath," said Siller. The curator gave him a beaming smile and said that, yes, those would be correct for a dining room.

Ultimately the Americans

decided to commission reproductions of three console tables—one made for Nicholas I in 1840—three chandeliers, twelve dining chairs from a set made for Alexander I in 1820 and two sets of wood-and-gilt doors.

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ABOVE: "These pieces were chosen first for passion, then for palette," says Siller, who blended a circa 1860 English desk and Louis XVI-style fauteuils in the master bedroom. The mirror is 19th-century Spanish. Schumacher drapery and chair fabric. Scalamandré velvet on pouf.