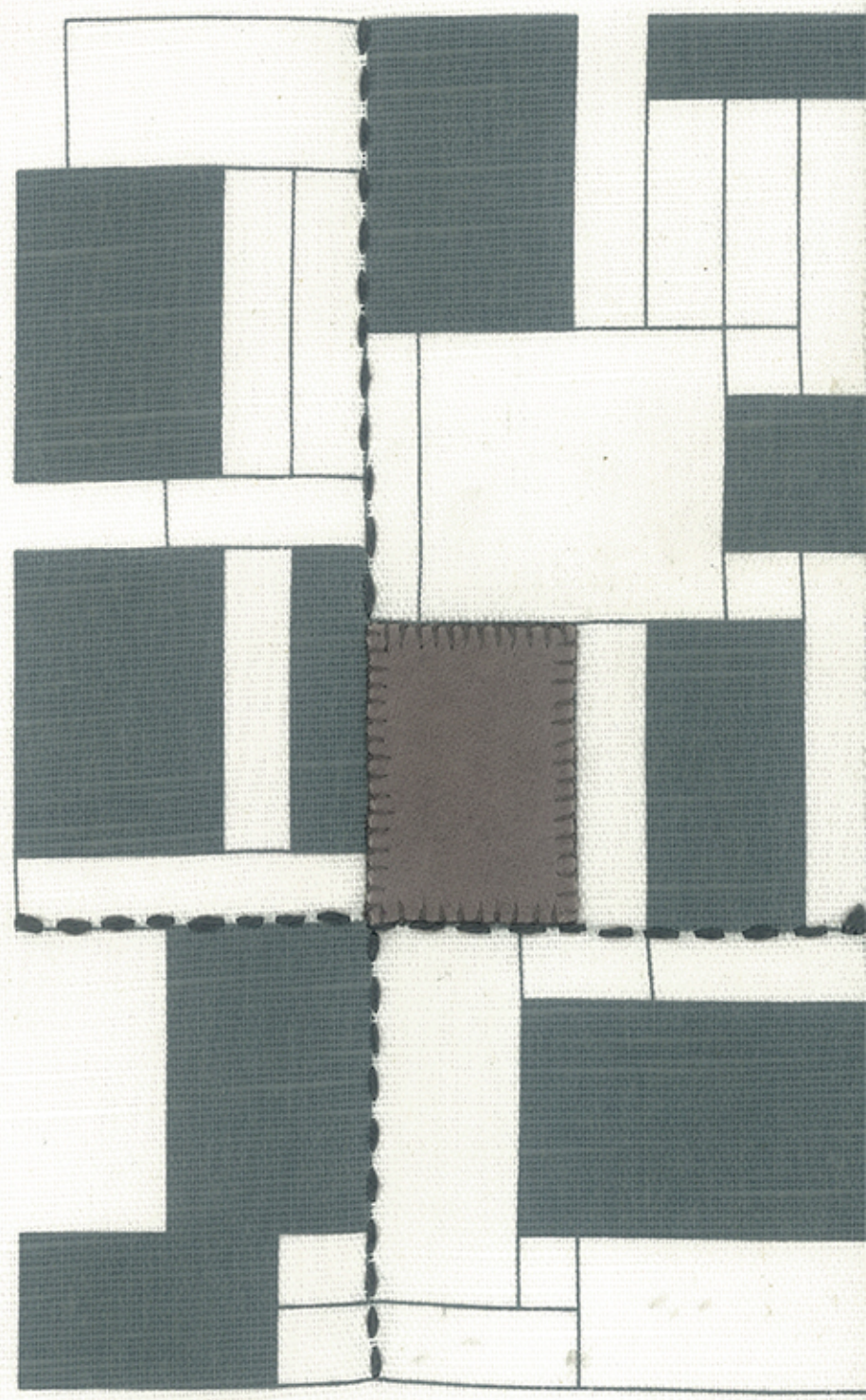


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THE BLUE ROOM

It was Ambassador Kenneth I Juster's memories of Karen Lukas's traditional Rajasthani murals at Roosevelt House that led to their eventual restoration at his New Delhi residence

WRITER SUNIL SETHI • PHOTOGRAPHER ASHISH SAHI



Kenneth I Juster, American ambassador to India, seated in the dining room at Roosevelt House in New Delhi. New York-based American artist Karen Lukas designed the traditional murals on the walls of this room.





The story of the recently restored Rajasthan-inspired murals in Roosevelt House, the American ambassador's residence in New Delhi, is a remarkable lost-and-found saga that links two envoys who occupied the imposing building completed by the modernist architect Edward Durell Stone in 1962.

It was Ambassador Frank G Wisner and his France-born wife Christine who decided they wanted to leave their visual imprint during their tenure in India—from 1994 to 1997. Deeply affected by the exquisite frescoes she saw, especially a blue-and-white room in Jaipur's City Palace, Christine was inspired to redecorate the large but slightly chilly formal dining room in that style. The couple set to work on the ambitious scheme in a systematic way. Through the well-known cultural anthropologist and India expert Stephen P Huyler, Christine established contact with the accomplished Manhattan-based decorative artist Karen Lukas; as it happened, Lukas had travelled in India and thrilled to the idea. Frank exerted his influence to persuade the US multinational, the General Electric Company, to fund the project.

As Lukas—whose engagement with India has since deepened to establish a non-profit (folkartsrajasthan.org) to assist traditional musicians in Jaisalmer—remembers it, designing and executing the murals in 1995 was an exacting but often exuberant exercise that took nearly three months to complete. "I created elaborate stencils of stylized flowering trees for the floor-to-ceiling panels and used a dry-brush paint technique. We stuck to Christine's idea of a pale-blue-and-white palette. After hours on the scaffold, she and I would sometimes lie on the floor to consider the progress. It was a wonderful assignment."

But a strange and inexplicable quirk of fate intervened. Between then and now, the murals disappeared; it is not clear what happened but, at some point, the dining room was walled in from the singular, free-flowing space of the main reception room and the artworks were painted over.

Enter Kenneth I Juster, appointed ambassador by the Trump administration in late 2017. A Harvard man, the son and grandson of architects, and with a prominent career in law, business and government service, he remembered the murals well from earlier visits to New Delhi. He was overcome by surprise—to put it mildly—that they were gone when he came to live in Roosevelt House. A man of consummate judgement and taste, he was determined to bring them back. But the restoration process proved complex.

Tracking down Lukas through Wisner, he was disappointed to learn that she had discarded the original stencils. "I was simply horrified to learn that my artworks were wiped out. But luckily I had kept a box of slides," says Lukas. Taking no chances, the artist located a reputable Brooklyn firm of art restorers, EverGreene, to reproduce them. Each panel was painstakingly hand-painted, photographed and digitally reproduced on canvas to capture nuances of shading. The canvas rolls were shipped out and seamlessly installed on the dining room's 14-foot-high walls under Juster's fastidious eye late last year. "As a lawyer you learn that everything is in the details," he says. In a final flourish, he commissioned the window shades of simple hand-block-printed blue motifs on white cotton to blend with the overall colour scheme.

Fifteen years ago, Frank and Christine Wisner's original commission had cost \$10,000. The restored murals up to the point of installation, cost six times as much. Juster lobbied with several Indo-American business associations to finance the project. Indelible as they now are, Lukas likes to believe that they are also indestructible. But for both diplomats, residents of the same house, they symbolize a cultural bridge of warmth and colour between the two countries. ♦

