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MASTERFUL DESIGN

BY ANGUS WILKIE



One of a pair of 18th-century Italian Bolognese commodes stands next to the grand piano. The carved-giltwood chair is 18th-century Italian from Lucca.

THE WHITE-GLOVED PIONEERS OF MODERN INTERIOR design—Elsie de Wolfe, Syrie Maugham, and Eleanor Brown to name a few—espoused pared-down and up-to-date no-nonsense decorating. Respect for symmetry and an emphasis on architectural grammar went hand in hand with a muted color palette and the crisp elegance of neoclassicism.

Manhattan decorator Marcy Masterson captures the atavistic poise of that white-gloved urbanity to a tee. A sophisticated connoisseur of the decorative arts, Masterson decorates with clarity

and quality. Hers may not be a household name; however, a flurry of recent projects could just tilt the balance in her favor.

Her eponymous firm, established in 1997, is currently juggling projects in New York City, Amsterdam, and the south of France. Each venture is characterized by a distinctive look—elegant French and Italian neoclassical, unfussy Nantucket American, chic English country house—and groomed with an eye for the finer points of antique furniture. In this regard, she has the steadfast presence of an ancient oak. “When it comes to furniture, I



In the polished marble-and-limestone entry hall, a sculptural pair of early-19th-century Italian walnut chairs with carved klismos backs flank the doorway to the library. The oil on canvas is by Dubuffet.

can be stubborn and passionate," Masterson says. "Convincing my clients to wait for the right piece is where the problem lies."

Buffalo born and bred, Masterson arrived in New York City in the early 1980s, took classes at the venerable Parsons School of Design, and graduated with a degree in interior design from FIT. Her first job was with Carol Douglass, followed by a short stint at McMillen, and a year with the internationally acclaimed Valerian Rybar. The last offered tremendous exposure; however, decorating with a dictionary in hand was daunting. "It was an intense year of upholstery estimates lost in translation," she confides.

Her breakthrough came in 1986. Masterson joined Jed Johnson & Associates, and worked there as a senior designer for nearly a decade. "Jed allowed freedom and trust," she remembers. "He was enormously talented, intellectual, and had a strong knowledge of history. He often started a project with two or three sentences of direction, no more. As the only woman in a bevy of males, I had to find an edge."

Under his tutelage, Masterson blossomed and felt continually challenged. Learning on the job through osmosis, she forged a lasting appreciation for 18th- and 19th-century objects and furni-

ture. "Jed established a point of departure and constantly pushed me to get out there and discover more, or else be experimental and design. Essentially, I was asked to file a dream and make it happen in wood, metal, marble, whatever it took."

A trailblazer on a mission, Masterson regularly combed the English countryside, Belgium, France, and Northern Italy, driving herself hundreds of miles a day in search of rare finds. Her commitment garnered the respect of international furniture dealers, and to this day, the inaugural dates of London's Grosvenor House and Olympia, TEFAF Maastricht, and the Fine Art and Antiques Dealers Fair and Pier shows in New York City are embedded in her calendar. Now, as her own boss, she is less pressured, which allows her daring spirit to come alive on occasion. "I have been known to take a break for a Rolling Stones concert now and then," she says.

Masterson's fierce determination, stamina, and smart taste are fast paving the way to recognition. Clients hire her for a design lead, and she prides herself on developing close business relations. "Marcy never pushes, nor does her ego interfere with her decorating," says Joy Toboroff, a satisfied customer with whom Masterson has collaborated repeatedly. "She is neither secretive



In the library, The Owl of Wisdom, a contemporary bronze doré lamp by Rupert Hobbs, stands sentinel on an impressive 19th-century French mahogany and amboyna desk. The 19th-century English painted and giltwood clock, in the form of Hercules supporting a globe, is from the London dealer Jeremy Ltd.

nor protective of her sources, and has a great sense of color adventure if one is open to ideas. I adore the glazed raffia paper she invented for my powder room—I just knew to trust her instincts.”

In response, Masterson says, “Joy has a sense of St. Tropez in her. The office in her apartment was like the black hole of Calcutta, so I painted the walls a sunset yellow and tore the old brocade off a Louis XVI bergère and reupholstered it with a fiery orange kidskin.” Other unconventional touches included upholstering the Biedermeier dining chairs with black pony hide and, rather than flinching at a meager \$6,000 art budget,

hanging a series of Fornasetti Adam and Eve plates on the wall above a pair of iron console tables in the living room.

Masterson prefers to mastermind as many details as possible. Creating the proper skeleton and its detail is painstaking work, and Masterson invariably approaches the task diligently. “The first phase of every project deals with architecture; if you do not get that element right, nothing holds together,” she says, crediting her affinity for bricks, mortar, and structural bones to being raised in Buffalo, a city where architectural grandeur is well established.



In the living room, the mélange of late-18th- and early-19th-century English, French, and Continental furniture is characterized by crisply carved giltwood and fine marquetry inlay.



A corner detail in the living room displays a silk-skirted games table surrounded by four French carved mahogany Directoire chairs, formerly in the collection of Pamela Harriman.

She recently completed a magnificent Park Avenue renovation for a young family with a notable art collection, including works by Picasso, Dubuffet, de Kooning, Giacometti, Calder, and Judd. On this project, she teamed up with architect Boris Baranovich, and met with him for six hours every Tuesday for a year and a half. Carlton Hobbs, a highbrow London furniture dealer soon to open for business in New York City, supplied many choice works of art. "I was privileged to visit Marcy's completed project on Park Avenue, and was struck by the way she had combined

the most impeccable objects and art in a strict architectural setting, and yet had imbued the apartment with a strong sense of warmth and individuality," he says.

A neutral palette that rises like a loaf of toasted whole-wheat bread sets the stage throughout the impressive duplex. Along one living room wall, a nod to symmetry is impeccably established by a pair of 18th-century Italian Bolognese neoclassical marquetry commodes. The honey-like hues of their geometric veneer are soothing to the eye. A more daring juxtaposition—two contemporary bronze lamps of fertility goddesses by Rupert Hobbs and a collection of African tribal art mounted on contemporary stands—sits atop the chests. Masterson describes the wooden artifacts as "great bang for the buck." A muted 19th-century Turkish Ghiordes carpet acquired from Doris Leslie Blau subtly underpins the eclectic furnishings. Masterson believes in grounding a space at the outset, so the carpet is typically the first work of art she advises a client to consider.

Throughout its 15 rooms, the apartment's style and palette are streamlined with similar precision and sensitivity. A fine pair of 18th-century English mahogany celestial and terrestrial globes from the London dealer Hotspur build a focal point to the library. In the dining room, Masterson eschewed the formality of a conventional three-pedestal arrangement, fashioning a more intimate feeling with a pair of bookcases and the unexpected choice of two distinct seating arrangements. The space is anchored by twin rectangular mahogany surfaces—one a library table, the other for dining—while a matched set of 16 dining chairs upholstered in blood-orange horsehair unifies the whole.

Furniture characterized by strong silhouette, tailored proportion, and richly figured grain is the mainstay of each room. The sleekness of the hard stuff—painted curtain poles with bronze doré finials, gilt-bronze wall sconces, polished-metal coffee tables, a lacquered ebonized piano, and a Belgian black and Botticino marble-and-limestone floor in the gallery—is well balanced by the plush nature of the soft stuff—silk-velvet cushions, antique textiles, the delicate weave of an Agra carpet, and the camel-colored tufts of a worn leather Irish Chesterfield. On one



Eclectic furnishings in the family room include a 1920s Italian Art Deco Macassar ebony floral-upholstered armchair, an Adnet-inspired black-lacquer and Belgian black stone lamp table, an African carved-wood tabouret stool, and lamps by Tommi Parzinger.

arm of the sofa, a throw made from an old Fendi fur is an unexpected conceit. "My client wanted something luxurious she could curl up in, naked if necessary, and that is exactly what she got."

Masterson clearly advocates a daring eye as an antidote to stuffy formality. Nothing about her design sense is pastiche or impatient, and she avoids the pitfalls of kitsch with a modish knack for quirky touches. To this end, she has trimmed a beaded and bejeweled Indian sari sourced in Jackson Heights, Queens, into a dazzling headboard for a metal frame bed (the client is now contemplating belly-dancing lessons), and constructed an outdoor dining table from cement and colorful antique Portuguese tiles. Masterson also recruited the talented lighting entrepreneur

Bob Russell, a sculptor with Calder-like inventiveness, who makes glittering chandeliers and light fixtures from sparkling faceted crystals held in place with twisted wire armatures. Their ingenuity sparkles with the same classically modern sensibility as the designer's signature rooms.

With characteristic insouciance, Masterson transcends the implication of being an avatar of chic. Having tossed her kid gloves into the decorating ring, she is serene about the future. "I really am a very patient person," she says calmly. ♦

Angus Wilkie is co-owner of Cove Landing, an antiques shop at 72nd Street and Lexington Avenue.