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The FRENCH WAY with DESIGN

PHILLIPS



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MOVING FORWARD WHILE LOOKING BACK, the French are creating a new look in décor. Within apartments in Paris, châteaux in the Loire Valley and bastides in Provence are found instantly recognizable signatures of national identity: finely crafted wood pieces, splendid mirrors and grand-mère's lovingly cared for linens. But in this age of merging sensibilities, European mid-century modern furnishings—both vintage and new—also adorn settings.

Amidst abstract works of art hovering on walls, painted furniture mingles easily with budget-friendly finds from assorted cultures, such as wool rugs and hand-embroidered linens from India, and pottery, artisan-made pillows, throws and vintage textiles from remote markets in Morocco.

With a mix of passion and panache, taste and resourcefulness sitting behind most every imposing door, Betty Lou Phillips, ASID, takes a close look at the French ever-so-chic way with design.

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DEMYSTIFYING FRENCH STYLE

DURING THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY, France astonished the world with her masterful artisanship, setting standards of excellence that tastemakers worldwide openly admire and by which they judge Fine French Furnishings and most everything else. Along posh Paris streets lined with luxury boutiques and high-end antiques, and in secondhand shops throughout the provinces, it is both well known and accepted that the French *still* are famously hard to please, three centuries later.

Indeed, they expect a level of workmanship that, more often than not, only money can buy. Faced with the task of returning an aging manor to splendor it has not seen for years, the conventional wisdom is that some things are better left undone rather than done poorly or given a quick fix. This is why many of the more than one hundred *châteaux* built centuries ago in the Loire Valley remain in serious disrepair, leaving some with leaking mansard roofs, falling stone, rotting window frames, crumbling plaster walls, buckling wooden floors and unreliable heating, languishing unoccupied after passing from one generation to the next.

From the statement-making Bars de Montpellier reclaimed stone flooring that originally embellished a seventeenth-century *bastide* (two-story country house), to the stone surround openings (two unseen), to the eighteenth-century furnishings, there is no shortage of panache in a *hall d'entrée*. The hand-painted panels adorning the ceiling are from the same era but transported from Sicily by Chateau Domingue, Houston, the premier stateside source for European architectural antiques. Sterling roses add an unexpected note of color to the otherwise monochromatic aesthetic.



ABOVE: Might this dwelling take inspiration from internationally famous writer and illustrator Ludwig Bemelmans, who wrote, "In an old house in Paris that was covered with vines lived twelve little girls in two straight lines . . . the smallest one was Madeline." **FACING:** Minimalist room? Yes, but dramatic—as space limitations did not justify scrimping on style. Nineteenth-century amenities—stone walls, patterned flooring, door and hardware—are noteworthy backdrops for a powder room sink with a *petit silhouette*.

To the French, quality is paramount. Wood pieces with deep carving, tongue-and-groove joints (rooted in medieval Europe) and the patina of age are coveted. Durable, kiln-dried hardwood frames (made from oak, elm, hickory, ash or maple) and eight-way hand-tied construction are the foundations of well-crafted sofas and chairs, with legs being a continuation of the frame and joints doweled with thick wooden pins rather than simply screwed into the frame. Softwood frames (pine, cedar, Douglas fir and plywood) are less sturdy, while joints screwed and then glued tend to squeak and split over time. No matter how well made the frame or beautiful the design, comfort is key, implying an innerspring core with tempered steel springs, preferably brass-plated, and webbing secured eight ways (in all directions) to the frame.

To be sure, happiness can be prohibitively expensive. Yet to the Gallic way of thinking, settling for second best can equate to a pricey lesson when that affordable alternative begets short-lived joy. (Or, worse, needs replacing in a few years.) Therefore, offering no apologies for their relentless search for quality or appetite for elegance, furnishings are the best one can manage, testifying to one's impeccable taste.





ABOVE: Merging form and function brings a touch of charm to the room, while the tonal palette increases the sense of space. **RIGHT:** Grand or petite, salons boast thoughtfully curated accessories as bold (reproduction *étrusque* head from Musée du Louvre boutique) or understated (baskets that keep magazines within easy reach) as one's look demands. By French standards, the best scale for tables that back up to roomy 84- to 96-inch sofas requires leaving no more than 10 inches exposed on a side.



FLUENT FRENCH

FACING: Anchoring a well-equipped kitchen is a dual-fueled Lacanche commercial range, forged in the Burgundy village of the same name—an area known for its fine food and wine. Giving the space a contemporary bent, the hood spreads over the sink. Walls are Farrow & Ball No. 241, Skimming Stone. Steel doors open to lush plants in large terra-cotta pots. **ABOVE:** Texture warms a generous island that meets multiple demands. Most French households have ample stock of vintage linen torchons (tea towels) with embroidered stripes that elevate the utilitarian. Highly collectable are those with red stripes, which isn't to suggest they are for daily use. With problematic stains being far from charming, in French minds, less showy kitchen towels are fashionable. (The best place to look for those with red stripes: the Porte de Vanves flea market, Paris.)

OVERLEAF: At a table set for a family breakfast, the focus is the view: a private vineyard, a field of lavender and the rocky cliffs of the Luberon. With age difficult to capture using straight paint, somewhat more labor-intensive glazing enriches the character of cabinetry by Cuisine Fabre, Robion, France.



WHAT'S AU COURANT?



PREVIOUS OVERLEAF: Enivorable weather on Florida's Gulf Coast prompts leisurely breakfasts, if not alfresco lunches on the veranda of a beach house. Place mats are by Deborah Rhodes, blue bowls from Barneys New York.

FACING: With a list of ingredients hand-painted on seat cushions, a salad—the ideal light lunch—can become a reality following a quick trip to the grocery or farmers market. In England, only seven dairies are certified to produce Stilton, the king of cheeses. **ABOVE:** When Louis XIV's taste for luxury put a drain on France's assets, the king decreed that the public send all silver and gold to the treasury to be melted to pay war debts. Replacing plates with ceramic pieces boosted interest in the country's humble faience (tin-glazed earthenware) industry, where layering and design go hand in hand. Bespoke dinnerware—each plate unique—by Parisian artist Marie Therman is from Bergdorf Goodman, NYC. Flatware made in Portugal, available through Dahlgren Duck, Dallas. **BELOW:** The French bulldog, with its sweet personality, is the dog of the moment in France, surpassing the Jack Russell in popularity. Dogs have long had a special place in French hearts. Being the accessory of choice, they accompany their owners to cafes, museums, movies, markets and just about everywhere else. An ocean away, we can be equally obsessive about our pets. Indeed, Jackson's comfort is always foremost in mind.