

Daphné de Saint Sauveur

THE FRENCH TOUCH

Decoration and Design in the Private Homes of France



0044999

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Decoration and Design in the Private Homes of France

*Selected from the pages of *Maison & Jardin**

with 254 illustrations in colour

THAMES AND HUDSON



On the title page:
Country mood, Paris style, by the designer Martine Nourissat.

Translated from the French by Emily Lane

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INTRODUCTION

Another book on interior design? My shelves are already filled with them and overflowing. No doubt yours are too . . . Books on modernizing a Tudor cottage or transforming a loft into an apartment; on how to live in a cave; on reviving Sixties style; on covering your bedroom in fabric and your kitchen in wood; on rehabilitating an African hut, converting a Greek fisherman's cottage or restoring a manor house in Brittany; on redesigning everything from the bathroom to the broom closet . . . There is no end to them. Dozens of such books come out every year, each in its own way treating that apparently inexhaustible subject, interior decoration.

"Once more, with feeling," says the song. So here is my contribution, or I should say ours, since it is based on the work of the *Maison & Jardin* team. Rather like a guidebook, it invites you to wander through the landscape of design in town and countryside. To be precise, it invites you into thirty-five apartments and houses in Paris, the Ile de France, the West, the South-West, and the South, where you will find thirty-five different kinds of French design: simple, as in a farm in Normandy rescued by a painter in love with genuine country life; grandiloquent, as in a perfectly proportioned Parisian apartment; sophisticated, as in another apartment where the crimson curtains suggest the sultry, sinister world of Barbey d'Aurevilly but also the gaiety of a box at a Verdi opera; welcoming, as in a former silk farm in Provence transformed into a vacation house; classical, as in a villa near Toulouse decorated in late 19th-century style; engaging, as in the wing of a chateau in the Bordeaux region which has been altered and revitalized by a new generation of owners. Thirty-five places chosen among many to illustrate a certain kind of taste, what Chateaubriand called "the good sense of genius."

A summer house on the banks of the Marne, redolent of the sweetness of France. It belonged to Victor Laloux, architect of the Gare d'Orsay in Paris at the turn of the century; the designer Gérard Franc has preserved its old-fashioned charm.

Let us be modest in our claims, however: this is of course not a comprehensive survey of every possible sort of French style. There are thousands of fine old houses whose architecture and furnishings survive more or less untouched as witnesses of the past – at Barbentane near Avignon, for instance, Montgeoffroy near Tours, Jussy near Bourges – not to mention the great chateaux, more or less well-known, that figure on tourist itineraries and would need a score of books to do them justice. Interesting, magnificent, and French they may be, but this book is not about them: it is concerned with contemporary trends in interior design.

Personality counts now rather than safe traditional styles; originality rather than mere opulence; imagination rather than convention; and comfort rather than display. Even if they sometimes seem to include references to the past, the homes that you will see were designed to be lived in today; and they are full of ideas that can easily be adapted. Above all, they have been chosen for their charm – that seductive quality, as irresistible as it is intangible, independent of time and passing fashions, that blooms in any home, small or large, in the city or the depths of the country, that has been furnished with love.

What is charm? How can we pin it down? Is it due to a well-thought-out plan? a particular color harmony? a poetic atmosphere? a chair that welcomes you, a painting that enchants you, a “find” that fills you with excitement, a bouquet of flowers that offers itself to you? Is it explained by that love of balance, of the *juste milieu*, for which we French are famous? Or is there something in it of frivolity, for which we are equally well-known? Could it be that a certain logical, acerbic Gallic wit underlies the creation of a successful interior? Hard to say. But what does seem certain is that it depends on a whole host of varied details and that it raises domesticity to the level of art. And surely charm is what characterizes a French interior, just as timeless good taste characterizes the classic English house, cheerful comfort the American, aesthetic rigor the Italian, sumptuous austerity the Spanish, and intelligent functionalism the homes of Scandinavia.

Houses resemble their inhabitants. Discreetly or flamboyantly, they express their aspirations and their behavior – one person’s dreams of nobility, another’s bourgeois common sense, the humor of a third, the grandiose ambition of a fourth. You can learn more about people’s manners and customs from their homes than from any number of social and sociological surveys. In France conversation is, if not

a substitute for sport, at least a favorite pastime. And the place where family and friends gather – the informal *petit salon* or sitting room, the living room, the *grand salon* or drawing room – is the heart of the house. Here you will find the finest pieces of furniture, the best pictures and *objets d'art*, and the softest carpets; here the owner will hang the newest curtains, place the most fashionable sofas, and give most care to the lighting. It is the room most loved by designers and by the mistress of the house, and its decoration sets the tone for everything else. Next comes the dining room, as you would expect in a country where gastronomy is almost a religion. As much care goes into its arrangement as into the preparation of a cordon bleu meal: with its display of dishes on the walls, its candelabra and silverware, its plates and glasses chosen with exquisite care, the table itself a masterpiece of composition, the room feasts the eye before it feasts the palate. And the bedroom? According to our reputation abroad, this ought to be the most important room of all. The canopied beds, pretty printed fabrics, gauzy muslins and delicate furniture should perfectly convey that mood of sophistication and seduction that is, rightly or wrongly, considered to be so very French. Do they match your ideas? It is for you to say. And you must decide, too, whether these thirty-five houses and apartments chosen from the pages of *Maison & Jardin* conform to your idea of the “French touch.” For me, each of these places represents one facet of the beloved land of my childhood. Each room displays the talent of architects, interior designers, craftsmen, colorists and others whose taste is matched only by their perfectionism. Not *all* the available talent, though: once again, let us be modest in our claims. To cover new trends not yet part of the mainstream, and to examine ideas that may form the creative world of tomorrow, would require a second volume. Another book on interior design?

My shelves are overflowing. Yours too, perhaps . . .

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PARIS: THE DECORATOR'S EYE

They are the ones who set the tone, start new fashions, create color harmonies, invent mixtures of styles, manage space; they who, by their skill, coax out the personality of a house. "They" are interior designers. That is to say technicians, colorists, researchers, artists, poets, psychologists – and more. Without their imagination, our bourgeois apartment in town would look just like that of our great-aunt, and our country house would be merely rural; eternal safe beige would still be our favorite color, 18th-century furniture (genuine or fake) would be the touchstone of good taste, and bedrooms would still be bowers of flowered chintz. These "pros" lay before us a treasure-chest of ideas. They let us share their aesthetic sense and their skill. They encourage us to be bold, but also sensible: together with clever conceits and ingenious tricks, they give us lessons in taste. One teaches us how to hang pictures; another how to group objects into compositions; a third how to use fabrics; a fourth how to arrange happy marriages between unlikely partners. Some give detailed information on sophisticated improvements to a bathroom or how to transform a dressing-room into a kitchen. So when Madeleine Castaing, Jacques Grange, Sabine Imbert, Dominique Menvielle-Bourg and other Parisian interior designers ask us in, we should rush to take up their invitation. It is fitting that they should also usher us into this book.



AUTUMN FIRES

Some designers find inspiration for a decorative scheme in a painting, the pattern of a carpet, or the colors in some exotic fabric brought back from abroad. For others it might be the motif on a plate, or a collection of objects, prints or china. Yet others take their cue from the style of the building or the view from a window. For Michèle Gayraud, who has worked closely with Jacques Grange and is a designer in her own right, the spark was a bunch of autumn leaves picked up in

the park at St.-Cloud. Faded green, dark red, and all shades from yellow through to brown give her apartment a golden autumnal glow. There are comfortable large sofas, books within easy reach, well-placed lamps, and eloquent groups of objects; and there is, too, a remarkable spaciousness, as the doors between the rooms stand open. It all feels rather like a formal French garden. Might that, too, have been inspired by an autumn walk?



Skilfully composed still-lives enliven a chest of drawers and a fireplace. To a mixture of bronzes and Gallé glass vases (*above*) Michèle Gayraud has added two little paintings, treated as if they

were *objets d'art*. *Opposite:* Amusing 19th-century ceramics stand below a painting from Cuzco in Peru, which is hung against the mirror. The objects pick up the main colors used in the apartment.

