

The Beauty of Restraint

Robert Couturier, an architect and decorator, and Jeffrey Morgan, an architectural restorer, build an elegantly understated neoclassical country house in Connecticut that marries Early American substance and European flair



TRADE SECRETS

FURNITURE Couturier sits with shih tzus Henriette and Chuck on a 17th-century Italian bench in the entrance hall, opposite page. An early-19th-century English campaign table is featured at one end of the living room, this page. The armchair was made in Turin, ca. 1780. **ARTWORK** A Roman 4th-century bust of Faustina L'Ancienne, behind a Chou dynasty statue, ca. 400 B.C. **RUG** An antique Persian.



TRADE SECRETS

FURNITURE Spiral details on a walnut Louis XIII armoire, ca. 1600, add vibrancy to this end of the living room. Armchairs by Georges Jacob.
FABRICS The armchair seats, pillows, and curtains are in Stuart Renaissance Textiles' Norwich damask.
ACCENTS Delft urns sit atop an 18th-century Florentine stone mantel, with an 18th-century northern Italian Rococo fire screen below.
ART The painting is Utrillo's *La Cathédrale de Rheims*.

Come in, come in," says Robert Couturier, waving a visitor through the kitchen door, one hand clamped to the telephone at his ear. "Yes, I know," he says, turning back to his caller, "there's a lot to get used to." He murmurs a few more sympathetic words into the receiver before hanging up and turning to his guest.

"It's always difficult for clients when they move into a new house," Couturier explains, with a wry smile. He should know. In almost 25 years as decorator and architect to an international coterie, the Frenchman has seen more than his share of moving-day jitters.

Symmetry rules in the second-floor living room. Rolled-arm sofas anchor each end, with identical coffee tables in front of them. Twin sets of Jacob mahogany chairs and gilt-bronze floor lamps flank the fireplace

Fortunately, the transition that Couturier made to his own house, which he built last year with his partner, architectural restorer Jeffrey Morgan, was much less taxing. After years of anticipating the needs of others, Couturier knew exactly what he wanted. "I sketched out the whole thing one Sunday afternoon," he says of the charming 3,000-square-foot structure, a pair of two-story square pavilions connected by a short hall. "It's not a classical house—there is no grand entry with a large kitchen and dining room; it's all compacted here," he says, gesturing to the cozy kitchen fitted with discreet minimalist appliances, Directoire chairs, and a substantial 300-year-old English oak



table. "People request enormous spaces and never really use them," he says. "They build giant houses and then have no money left to furnish them."

Lack of decoration is not a problem for Couturier and Morgan, who share a passion for antiques. Their neoclassical house, built on the edge of a small lake in northwestern Connecticut, is brimming with a sophisticated mix of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century pieces, each with its own story.

In the ground-floor sitting room, across the entry hall from the kitchen, Couturier points to a pair of Jacob side chairs, once the property of Marie Antoinette at Fontainebleau. "The rooms were low, so the chairs had to be, too," he explains of the surprisingly diminutive seats. A leggy octagonal side table also has an impressive provenance: it is the work of eighteenth-century master furniture maker Joseph Canabas. But both table and chairs are trumped by a turned-wood and cane étagère filled with magazines and books.

"We found it in New York, but in all probability it came from my mother's house in France," Couturier says with a mischievous grin. "She likes to sell things." No matter. For the transplanted Parisian, who spent six years working with Adam Tihany before striking out on his own in 1986, it is enough to have a piece of home nearby again.

Elegantly proportioned and refined, the pieces are a far cry from the overstuffed sofas that populate many traditional weekend retreats. "I used to say with pride that I had no upholstered furniture," says Morgan, who specializes in pre-Revolutionary American architecture and design. Couturier is sympathetic. "Club chairs look like big toads," he declares. "They are venomous flowers that eat you up." Even so, one has the distinct feeling that the presence of the occasional down-filled pillow and rolled-arm sofa are hard-won concessions, made by Morgan to Couturier only out of love. ▶

TRADE SECRETS

The feeling of seclusion begins in the wooded entry, above, and continues in intimate spaces like the dining area, right. **FURNITURE** An 18th-century American wing chair and two 18th-century benches surround a 17th-century English dining table. **FABRICS** Rubelli's Rossey covers the chair and seat backs. **ACCENTS** The chandelier and Talavera ceramic bowl are 17th-century Spanish. The chargers and candlesticks on the mantel are 18th-century American.



To save space, Couturier dispensed with a formal dining room. For a cozy, handsome eating area, he placed his prized 300-year-old table and settee opposite the kitchen sink, which is hidden behind cabinets.

"Jeffrey is much more of a purist than I am," says the decorator, who thinks nothing of placing an ornate eighteenth-century Italian fireplace screen opposite a pair of sleek Jean-Michel Frank coffee tables. "He has little use for eccentricity."

Perhaps. But it may depend on one's definition of the word. Both Couturier and Morgan clearly revel in the visual puns and oddball humor of antiques aficionados. A bust of Marie Antoinette, which sits on a table next to an urn inscribed with the revolutionary slogan "A death to all Jacobians," elicits giggles. A Utrillo painting of Reims cathedral hangs opposite an ancient Chinese sculpture and produces knowing smiles. "See?" asks Couturier, unable to contain himself. "The sculpture is called *The Gate of Heaven*, and it's across from a cathedral!" And both men take an almost perverse delight in a claw-foot Federal-style footstool that they bought several years ago for a steal and that was later revealed to be a brilliantly executed 1950s fake. "It was all done with antique lumber," says Morgan admiringly.

The two men share not just a love of craftsmanship, but also an appreciation for architectural restraint. They used rusticated mahogany blocks for part of the facade, and painted them white. "It was very important that the house feel neatly proportional," Couturier says. "I like things that are open and clear and light." Thus, the second-floor living room is almost a perfect cube, thanks to a raised tray ceiling that reaches nearly 23 feet. Floors, made of salvaged antique

The delicate proportions of the French-style moldings in the sitting room are echoed in the 18th-century chairs and settee. The daybed is positioned to take advantage of the view

TRADE SECRETS

FURNITURE The sitting room features pedigreed Louis XVI pieces. The mahogany center table is a signed Canabas; the armchair was made by Georges Jacob for Marie Antoinette. The daybed, left, is also a Jacob piece.

FABRICS Curtains in Stuart Renaissance Textiles' Genoa.

ACCENTS An 18th-century Chinese bowl sits atop the center table. Regency sconce, French, ca. 1730. The figurine candlesticks, far right, are Victorian.

PAINTING By Jean-Baptiste Huet.



Floors in the master bedroom are made from antique chestnut beams, which convey warmth and a sense of having been there a long time



TRADE SECRETS

FURNITURE In the master bedroom, Victorian bed steps lead to a canopied bed based on an American 18th-century design. The chest of drawers was made in Boston in the 18th century.
FABRICS An Indian throw is placed atop Colonial Williamsburg's William and Mary bedspread.
RUG An antique Persian.
ARTWORK Above the dresser, an 18th-century watercolor of the Palais-Royal.
ACCENTS The mirror is 18th-century Italian.

lumber, are left clean and uncovered, save for a few carefully chosen area rugs. Fabric is treated as an accent, rather than the focus of each space, so even in the relatively plush living room, the window treatments are tastefully subdued. "The pattern in the damask was enough," Morgan says of the pumpkin-colored wool that Couturier hung high on the wall just below the cornice. "When Roman shades are placed under the window they just look bunched and ugly," he says. "Like this, it gives you the idea of window treatments without interfering with the light and view."

Such attention to detail belies Couturier's professed indifference to leading the life of a country gentleman. Before he met Morgan, who was born and raised in Connecticut, Couturier often visited friends in the area. "But I never believed in country houses," says the decorator, who keeps an apartment near his SoHo offices. "I don't know how to cook. I don't know how to garden. I like views almost the way I like ornaments." Couturier smiles. "Jeffrey can't sleep in New York," he says. "When we go to the theater in Manhattan, he drives back home right after the show." So, adjustments had to be made. Now, most weekend afternoons, Couturier can be found happily ensconced with Morgan and their three dogs in rooms that clearly reflect their shared love of decoration. Rarely have such compromises been so beautifully achieved. □

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