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Brave New Talents

Seven interior designers who are making their mark on the Bay Area

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Who are the hot new decorators? Where are they taking interior design? And how soon can you get them to make a house call?

We've selected seven designers who are making their mark on the world of decorating. There is nothing radical here -- just fresh, classic decorating that's comfortable and easy to live with.

``Compelling design today blends function and art -- and must have a few surprises," said San Francisco interior designer Kelly Lasser, a former press aide who left the hurly- burly of television and the mayor's office for the world of design two years ago.

``I might combine antiques or folk art with midcentury furnishings," said Lasser. ``Or I'll elevate humble thrift-store finds such as a vintage steel hospital cabinet, by juxtaposing them with classic French or English furniture."

San Francisco designer Martha Angus also has a passion for exceptional antiques. She combines them with today's classics such as Christian Liagre's leather-topped Giacometti-style benches, and fine black and white photography. What she does with flair: incorporate contemporary art and artist-made furniture with classic custom-made upholstered pieces.

Mill Valley designer Eugenia Jesberg gives tradition a push in new directions, with such combinations as Paris salon-style chairs and chunky leather-bound ottomans. Her strengths: vibrant fabrics, dramatic drapery, family-friendly ideas, elegant understatement and sculptural new furniture.

Tim Kennedy of San Francisco worked in designer Anthony Hail's studio for 17 years, and his well-trained discrimination shows in superbly appointed but relaxed rooms. Kennedy's forte: perfect pitch for proportion, subtle antiques and color used discreetly with a certain understatement.

San Francisco designer Jay Jeffers composes rooms that surprise with juxtaposed materials. Forged iron contrasts with bare wood, natural canvas is allied with vibrant printed textiles. His talent: tailored rooms with subtle colors and a bit of theatricality.

Katherine Hill, a San Francisco interior designer, assisted decorator Diane Chapman for seven years. Her mentor's influence is evident in Hill's bold use of color, deft handling of accessories, and elegantly tailored draperies and upholstery. Her strength: comfortably formal rooms that are well-organized and expertly accessorized.

Paige Koch, a San Francisco interior designer with a background in fashion design and fine art, is not afraid of color. For one client, she upholstered an elegant Louis XVI-style chair with a festive Chinese cotton print in turquoise, peppermint, chartreuse and cream to create a chair with character.

``If you're going to custom-design furniture," she said, ``it should look special, not mundane."

Refuges with a modern touch

Kelly Lasser creates soothing environments for families -- as well as rock musicians.

``It's important to have an escape, a respite from all the noise outside," the San Francisco designer said.

Her colors tend toward monochromatic. Fabrics have richness and texture rather than imposed pattern.

Lasser's aesthetic combines the taut lines of midcentury modern furniture by the likes of Alvar Aalto, Charles Eames and Isamu Noguchi, with sensual silk fabrics by Donghia and Gretchen Bellinger.

She recently completed an alluring living room for a couple who live near the Palace of Fine Arts.

The smoothly elegant color scheme of celadon, taupe, olive and cream is punched up with Donghia silk pillows in pale gold, an African-inspired McGuire ``Tambour" lamp with an ebony finish, and a custom-crafted rolling TV cabinet in walnut with steel doors.

``I especially like to juxtapose machine-made, very precise furniture like Aalto's with handcrafted baskets, ethnic sculptures and flea-market finds," she noted. ``We have to move the idea of 'modern' forward, give it a few quirks, never stay frozen in time."

Lasser, who recently started her own company, Shelter, is adept at finding accessories that add grace notes to her rooms.

``Tailored rooms need the kick of something exotic, something odd," she said.

Utilizing the drama of design

Martha Angus is crazy for antiques -- but her rooms are also alive with contemporary paintings, fine black-and-white photography, and quirky modern furniture.

Best of all, she plays out the drama of design against neutral rooms with perfectly detailed interior architecture.

In Angus' own creamy white dining room, a gilded tree branch stands on a Christian Liagre oak table, surrounded by three mismatched chairs.

An antique Spanish chair with claret silk upholstery stands beside an oval-back Louis XVI-style chair with Aubusson tapestry upholstery and a pair of black lacquer Charles Rennie Mackintosh chairs.

``My work is less about decorating and more about arranging beautiful objects and art within a historically correct shell," said Angus, who describes herself as an ``auction junkie."

Her apartment in a 1912 Edwardian building in San Francisco had been painted in many colors with an elaborate pink bedroom.

Angus painted the entire apartment with Ralph Lauren's Matte White, an elegant cream-white that gives the rooms a rich but understated background. Moldings were painted white with a satin finish.

In her bedroom, a custom-made bed stands beneath a David Salle aquatint. A Gerrit Rietveld reproduction end table is topped with a Jean-Michel Frank-style lamp. ``I think it is important to retain or recreate the architectural integrity of a room, whatever the period of the house," said Angus, who gets walls, floors and ceilings right before tackling the decorating.

Versatile rooms for family living

Tim Kennedy considers Anthony Hail the ultimate mentor.

``From Tony Hail, I had an invaluable A to Z education in all aspects of interior design," said Kennedy.

Hail's measured color sense, elegant furniture placement and deft use of antiques are strong influences on his protege's new designs.

Kennedy started his own San Francisco firm three years ago. Like most people in younger firms, he prefers to work with just one assistant so that each assignment can be given hands-on treatment.

Many Kennedy projects are oriented toward family living.

``People don't necessarily live as formally today as they did in the past, so my decorating reflects that change," said Kennedy.

For a couple who live in a Mediterranean-style house in St. Francis Wood, Kennedy designed a relaxed living room with sisal rugs, and a pair of low-slung club chairs upholstered in a cotton/linen fabric.

``We reupholstered a classic roll-arm sofa -- a family 'heirloom' -- with amber-colored cotton velvet, a tailored skirt and three big loose cushions," noted Kennedy.

``To keep the room low key, we had pillows made of mismatched antique kilim fragments. I put antique Oriental rugs on top of the sisal carpets, and chose a straightforward English tray table with a simple walnut base for a coffee table."

For the living room of a house in San Francisco, Kennedy chose childproof Napoleon III-style open-arm chairs upholstered with a Clarence house cotton in bold multicolored stripes, and added a wheeled ottoman upholstered in dark blue wool mohair.

Neutral color schemes get a lively, fresh look

Jay Jeffers is adept at using neutral colors such as mushroom, taupe, cream and white, along with pale woods, teak and rattan for basic room schemes.

But he bestows these restful and monochromatic rooms with freshness by introducing ebony-finished ash tables, boldly checkered fabrics, bamboo shades, Donghia chairs finished with dark stains, steel finials, and black-and-white photography.

``Colors like taupe and cream never go out of style," noted Jeffers, a designer with Richard Witzel & Associates in San Francisco. ``But they need contrast and texture to keep them interesting."

For his own house in South San Francisco, Jeffers used mostly neutral browns, ivory and taupe, but punched them up with a rattan sofa by Palacek he refinished with a dark Jacobean brown stain.

His coffee table is a basket-weave metal design with an antique copper finish from Pier 1 Imports.

For his bedroom, he designed a headboard upholstered with a striped Henry Calvin chenille, outlined with a double row of nail heads. An unmatched pair of old metal finials, which give a sense of architecture to the room, were handcrafted in Mexico.

'conduit' of design offers great design, endless creativity

``I have one foot in the 17th century, and one in the 21st century," said Paige Koch, who double-majored in oil painting and Russian and Chinese history at the University of California at Davis.

``I love very complex and unusual antiques, but I also work with the newest technical equipment and electronics."

Interior designers are ``conduits" of design for their clients, said Koch, who owns Paige's Interiors in San Francisco. The designer must offer a solid package of business skills, superb design and endless creativity.

``For the best design to happen, the homeowner must trust the designer and let go a bit," noted Koch. ``Designers do their most imaginative and memorable work when the client allows them to stretch beyond the expected, the mundane, the obvious."

Koch, who also studied fashion design, uses color with great confidence, going beyond pale neutrals to bring together marine blues, acid yellows, apricots with amber and acid green in elegant, refined interiors.

``It's important to spend a lot of time getting the architecture and background of a room right, and then you can add some theatrical and unexpected," she noted.

``Each custom-designed room should have details that are special and unique, such as a one-of-a-kind Chinese-patterned chintz used on a Louis XVI-style chair, or a silk tassel fringe used on a simple velvet pillow."

Everything in a room does not have to be paired and matched relentlessly.

``Living rooms and studies will look more interesting and less inert if all chairs and lamps do not match," said Koch.

For a bedroom she designed recently, Koch placed a Chinese porcelain lamp on a round table on one side of the bed, and a black ``Tizio" lamp on a petite commode on the other side. The result is symmetrical but energetic, and the room feels more personal.

Interiors marked by colorful combinations, elegant windows

Katherine Hill gained her design certification through the University of California at Berkeley Extension interior design program, and worked with Diane Chapman for seven years.

Now she has her own company in San Francisco, Katherine Hill Interior Design, and is working on apartments on Nob Hill, houses in Pacific Heights and other commissions for a broad range of clients. Still the influence of Chapman is evident in Hill's confident use of color and her taste for ``dressed" windows.

``I like to create rooms that have elements of drama and detail, but which also feel warm and inviting," said Hill, who grew up in Piedmont. ``I encourage my clients to acquire antiques, perhaps over time. They add richness to a room."

Prints, porcelains, chests, bamboo shades and collections are also part of her design arsenal. Hill pays a lot of attention to finishing touches and accessories because she believes they make a room personal and individual.

Hill likes to design deep, comfortable upholstered furniture with trim and perhaps tufting. Large armoires, artful, versatile window treatments and vibrant fabrics are also part of her repertoire.

``Color gives a room life," said Hill, whose own dining room has raspberry-glazed walls and elegant swagged draperies. ``Often a more neutral approach is called for, so a monochromatic room can be punched up with colorful pieces of art or vibrant pillows."

Designing rooms with lasting style

Eugenia Jesberg, who grew up in Pasadena, first pursued a career in finance. After eight turbulent years, she decided to study interior design, learn to draw and pursue a career in decorating.

She also renovated a Marin cottage, which was invaluable experience, she said. After working for a retail furniture store for two years, she started her own firm in Mill Valley, EJ Interior Design, five years ago.

Families grow and their needs change, so Jesberg pays attention to practical details such as child-friendly fabrics, and versatile living rooms that comfortably welcome two people or a crowd.

Among her recent commissions was a Sausalito dining room for a young family.

Walls were painted creamy white as a backdrop for dramatic and colorful contemporary art. Eight Donghia chairs were upholstered in red, blue, gold and green-striped cotton moire. The chairs are trimmed with a broad contrasting welt of the striped fabric.

``My emphasis is on creating rooms that will not be outdated in five years," said Jesberg, who has two young children.

``My style varies along with my clients and their lifestyles. The look may be `modern with an interesting past' or `traditional with a new twist,' but it will always be classic, never trendy."

Resources

- Martha Angus, Martha Angus Interior Design, San Francisco; (415) 931-8060.
- Katherine Hill, Katherine Hill Interiors, San Francisco; (415) 922-6055.
- Jay Jeffers, Richard Witzel & Associates, San Francisco; (415) 674-8300
- Eugenia Jesberg, EJ Interior Design, Mill Valley; (415) 383-8333.

-- Tim Kennedy, Tim Kennedy Design, San Francisco; (415) 546-6330.

-- Paige Koch, Paige's Interiors, San Francisco; (415) 931-8428.

-- Kelly Lasser, Shelter, San Francisco; (415) 567-4200.

Diane Dorrans Saeks is a San Francisco-based writer of nine design books. Her newest books are ``Kitchens," ``Living Rooms," ``Bedrooms" and ``Bathrooms" in the California Design Library series (Chronicle Books)

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