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Perfect Harmony

A husband-and-wife design duo refreshes a Charlotte abode with traditional touches, plentiful light and lots of color.

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Architecture: Matt Benson and Julius Richardson, Meyer Greeson Paullin Benson
Interior Design: Barrie Benson, Barrie Benson Interior Design



Modeled after the work of 1960s Venetian designer Alessandro Albrizzi, a clean-lined console tempers the opulence of a Carvers' Guild reproduction Chippendale mirror in the entryway of this Charlotte residence. Designer Barrie Benson topped a gilt-wood urn lamp with a shade of Fortuny silk, visually connecting to the vignette on the opposing side of the stair hall.

T

he classic hallmarks and gracious oaks were reasons alone for a couple to move to Foxcroft, a storybook Charlotte neighborhood dotted with five-four-and-a-door charmers. The dynamic homeowners and their two teenage daughters were immediately drawn to a traditional Georgian residence there—a “saltbox,” as the wife describes it—particularly for its high ceilings and straightforward façade. In their former home, the family of four had frequently found themselves contained to only a couple rooms, so they knew tailoring this one to their unique needs would be necessary.

Having befriended designer Barrie Benson (and, by extension, her architect husband, Matt Benson) 25 years before, the wife knew just who to tap for the home's transformation. Thanks to their close familiarity, the designer innately understood her client's traditional taste—right down to a noticeable affection for her formal dining room. Evident above all was her abiding love for Imari, the Japanese export porcelain that would come to inspire the home's entire color palette. But first, the couple looked to Benson's husband to improve the layout.

“The clients appreciated the formality of the house, but the spaces were disjointed and separate,” says the architect, who worked with project architect Julius Richardson to revise the floor plan and widen doorways, ensuring every inch of the home would be livable, purposeful and inviting. “Matt also knew we should be able to see straight through the house to the patio and our backyard with its 300-year-old oak trees,” says the wife, referencing a point of pride in a city famed for its tree canopy. “By removing a wall, he opened up the space, filling it with light and beauty.”

The Bensons worked hand-in-hand as they retrofitted rooms, tweaking interior architecture to accommodate special artworks and fourth-generation heirlooms. “It's so much fun to watch Matt and Barrie work, because they feed off each other creatively,” says the wife. “Matt is the methodical one; he asks first, acts later. Barrie is all instinct.”

Recasting the formal living room as a library created a cozy spot for the adults to enjoy cocktails in the evening, so the Bensons dialed up the detailing, tucking an oxblood red bar behind wood paneling reminiscent of that in the wife's parents'

home. “The room's recessed bookcases create a sense of rhythm and depth,” says the architect, to which his wife adds: “We backed the shelves and inset the panels with hand-blocked wallpaper made in small batches with foil accents.”

The designer's scheme—achieved alongside designer and project manager Elizabeth Dooley—benefited from an armload of objets d'art gathered on her clients' travels to India, Italy, Australia and beyond as she refreshed old treasures such as an inherited lamp updated with a colorful shade and Lucite base. Given their close connection, the designer understood antiques would become the cornerstones of the new design. “My goal was to mix all these family pieces together with little punches of modern that feel youthful,” she says. But it wasn't the wife's heirloom secretary or childhood dressing table that garnered the highest rankings. It was the Imari. “I inherited my most cherished pieces from my mother and grandmother, but also have several flea-market finds and one-offs that I hold dear,” the wife expresses. “I've picked them up along the way and can name where each came from.”

Unearthing them from drawers and exhuming them from boxes, Barrie Benson cleverly arranged the collections in high-contrast groupings throughout the house. “She loves jewel tones,” notes the designer, who pulled the dining room's saturated sapphire and a bedroom's bold chartreuse directly from the plates. Since neither woman shied from pattern (“You can keep going and going with it if you know how to play with scale,” Barrie Benson reveals), the designer was quick to combine overscale florals with plaids that speak to the couple's sportive passions, plus a classic houndstooth to nod to the husband's tastes.

Still, nowhere are graphic motifs bolder than in the entry. “Georgian homes are known for their black-and-white checkerboard floors, but marble seemed too formal and predictable,” says the designer, who went with a painted approach. “I found a historic pattern in an old Colefax and Fowler book and tinkered with it until it felt fresh, but familiar.” The daring move represents just another way the designer made old things feel new again—much in the same way an improved environment allows the homeowners to appreciate their most cherished items. Says the wife: “Though we once used only one or two rooms, now, we use them all.” ■



Above: Built by Bill Truitt WoodWorks, the library's honey-colored paneling reinterprets that of the wife's 1920s childhood home. Insets of hand-blocked and foiled Flat Vernacular wallpaper give architect Matt Benson's concept contemporary verve. Benjamin Moore's Classic Burgundy graces the hideaway bar, which was inspired by a feature at Houston's historic de Menil house.

Right: The library "is perfect for sipping cocktails or lounging with a book," says Barrie Benson, who paired Thom Filicia's Nottingham sofa for Vanguard with a Hollywood Regency bench updated in the same Osborne & Little wool tartan used for the Roman shades. Swivel chairs from the designer's collection for Highland House don Lee Jofa's Flying Ducks linen, cueing to the owners' outdoorsy interests.





Right: In the dining room, Franco Luce's iconic 1970s Murano-glass Lotus Leaf chandelier offers a flowery counterpoint to inherited Chinese Chippendale chairs and Suzanne Kasler's Choate dining table for Hickory Chair. A Selena Beaudry abstract from Hidell Brooks Gallery and draperies of Jim Thompson's Leo de Janeiro linen underscore the wife's penchant for jewel tones.

Opposite: Pieces of the wife's cherished Imari ware are displayed prominently in the dining room, as well as throughout the home. Walls saturated with Benjamin Moore's Evening Dove create a dramatic backdrop for the collection as they add gravitas to an ebonized Louis XVI-style Maison Jansen sideboard from 1stdibs.





Right: The family room's coral color scheme starts with a Sherwin-Williams grass-cloth wallcovering, punctuated by floating book boxes as alternatives to built-ins. The Thomas O'Brien-designed swivel chair wears Lelièvre's Alchimie textile in Feu from Karen Saks and is paired with a pillow of Schumacher's Gainsborough velvet in Petal.

Opposite: In a sunny corner of the kitchen, Kravet's Samarkand cotton-linen creates a statement on Chinese Chippendale dining chairs and a Hickory Chair banquette. Oomph's Hobe Sound lantern, finished in Sherwin-Williams' Gambol Gold, boosts the vignette's chinoiserie appeal above a Cloister Pedestal table by Holland MacRae.





Left: "The client was willing to push the envelope with pattern," says Barrie Benson, who mixed motifs in the main bedroom using shams of Donghia's Spice Market silk, Manuel Canovas' Parfum d'Ete chintz and Romo's Itsuki Citrine ikat linen. A custom Holland & Sherry wool-tartan throw and Stark houndstooth rug add hints of masculinity.

Opposite: Accenting Room & Board's bold Architecture bed in green, a headboard pillow of Manuel Canovas' Boheme linen corrals the colors of a daughter's bedroom—including Kelly green on the Robert Allen Helios Plaid throw and mulberry on the Matouk linens. Dedar's Wild Party textile in Acqua, sourced through Jerry Pair in Atlanta, adds flair to a wing chair.

