

Southern Sophisticate

A YOUNG NEW ORLEANS DESIGNER HELPS BRING A HISTORIC HOME INTO THE NEW MILLENNIUM BY COMBINING DARING CHOICES WITH TIMELESS STYLE.

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In the living room, an abstract painting by Kevin Gillentine hangs over a lucite console fronted by X-benches outfitted in Manuel Canovas cut velvet. Opposite page: Rivers Spencer found the nude painting by Ida Kohlmeyer in Gerrie Bremermann's Magazine Street shop, and now it resides above a Biedermeier table. "I love mixing modern art with antiques," says Spencer. The coffee table is by Pierre Vandel, French designer of 1970s hotel furniture. Previous pages: A low-slung sofa by Verellen, the furniture line Spencer sells in her shop, is upholstered in Belgian linen, in contrast to the shield chairs by Victoria Hagen covered in mohair. The tête-à-tête chairs are by Jan Showers.





New Orleans has perhaps the most distinctive decorating tradition in the United States. A high-ceilinged room with silk curtains billowing at the windows, French chairs arranged in intimate vignettes, and trumeau mirrors hung over the fireplace instantly establish a sense of place. But a fresh face on the New Orleans design scene is reinventing the trope. To be sure, you can find all the hallmarks of Big Easy style in Rivers Spencer's work, but she infuses her rooms with a sophisticated mix of 1970s glamour and bold, contemporary touches. The owner of a historic house near Audubon Park took note of Spencer's polished style and enlisted her help with a drastic overhaul. And Spencer, who took on the project with relish, started by getting rid of practically everything in the house. "We sold most of her antiques at auction," she says. "They were beautiful but the wrong scale for the house." Then she set about fashioning rooms that showcase layers of texture and subtle finishes, with antiques chosen for scale and shape.

"The owner is an elegant and sophisticated person," says Spencer. "She wanted her house to display a certain amount of formality." Stepping into the foyer, the visitor is greeted by a round antique walnut table, one of the few pieces that remained from the cleanout. The graceful curves of the legs establish a theme of impactful elegance. Another item that stayed was the grand piano. "We tried placing it everywhere," she says. "The only place it fit was the end of the living room." Around it, she created a shimmering arrangement of upholstered furniture and statuette chairs, acrylic and brass tables, and sinuous antiques. Underlying it all is a white cowhide rug whose luxurious texture belies its practicality. "The wife spilled gumbo on it, and it came right up," Spencer says, smiling. "It makes sense—cows get muddy, and it just washes off."

Throughout the house, the designer played with contrasts: abstract modern art with antiques, metallics with acrylic, silk taffeta and mohair. "Since we painted the whole house Decorator's White, I used antiques for depth and metals and

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acrylic for texture in place of color," she says. In the dining room, beneath the antique table and chairs, the wife opted for sisal rugs where one might expect to see an antique Oriental. It lightens the mood of the room and plays off the gilt finishes of an antique mirror and chandelier.

The homeowner's favorite hangout spot is the sunroom, graced on three sides with Palladian windows. Spencer used a sectional sofa to maximize the use of space and reupholstered an existing chair and ottoman in a blue-and-white silk toile. A pair of glass, brass, and chrome tables designed by Maison Jansen—the French firm that decorated the Kennedy White House—serves as a coffee table. An art deco end table brings the warm tone of walnut to the mix.

The kitchen received a major renovation and a bold new look. Lime-green silk taffeta window treatments give an energizing jolt to the monochromatic space where even the floor is painted white. A waterfall marble island gives the room a commanding presence. Spencer found the modern barstools online, and shopped the homeowner's collection for colorful artwork to enliven the room.

The master bedroom, directly above the dining room, shares a bay window with its downstairs neighbor. Spencer placed the antique rococo bed in the bay, against the folds of silk curtains, and covered the wingback chairs, inherited from the wife's grandparents, with lavender silk mohair. She had her seamstress create the bed linens, with a to-the-floor coverlet for a neatly finished look. Despite the overall formality of the house, Spencer's light touch and confident mix of antiques and artwork results in a cheerfully appealing place to call home.