



ALL ABOUT BLUE  
THE COLOR ISSUE

# BLUE AS A TITIAN

Colors that say serenity and mystery

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European antiques and architectural details layer this 1980s Houston house, designed by Babs Watkins, Julie Watkins Baker, and Eleanor Cummings, with the patina of history. Louis XV carved-walnut front doors with traces of the original paint open into a foyer lit by a gilt-edged Venetian lantern. OPPOSITE: Moody blues on gently worn surfaces, such as the weave of this 18th-century French tapestry, lead the eye from room to room.





In the living room, French and Italian chairs work well together, next to sofas with Fortuny Delfino pillows. Curtains in Nancy Corzine Chantel in Savannah are extra full. A 1920s Oushak carpet, an Italian tole chandelier, and a Gustavian painted breakfront round out the mix of styles. Wall colors in the house are custom, by Iarussi Studio.



Silvery tones are the dominant note in the dining room, where Gustavian chairs ring a table set with antique Royal Crown Derby china and Miller Rogaska crystal. The French tapestry and the Sivas rug are from Matt Camron Rugs & Tapestries. Curtains are Nancy Corzine Silk Canvas in Azure.







**DOUGLAS BRENNER:** This whole place has an American-in-Europe mood. It's sort of Henry Jamesian—meditative, elusive, romantic. The Paris of *The Ambassadors* meets the Venice of *The Wings of the Dove*.

**JULIE WATKINS BAKER:** Calmness, a serenity, is what we were going for, and a feeling of soul and grace and history. Understated design is a signature of my mother, Babs Watkins. She has a great color sense. The palette here is so subtle—all these soft blues and platinum grays.

**You look at the living room and think 'blue,' but then you look closer and say, 'Wait a minute...just where is the color?'**

There's that blue-painted cabinet, some blue in the carpet, blue glass boxes on the table, but not much more. You don't need much blue for a whole room to seem blue.

**Are blues hard to get right?**

Really hard. We agonize over them. They change with the context, because other colors affect them dramatically. Natural wood warms them up, silver cools them down, white brightens them.

**Light seems to bounce and flow everywhere—silvery chandeliers, luminous fabrics. I can't take my eyes off those sexy curtains.**

They're ball gowns! We use that fabric a lot. It's duchesse satin, and it's got real weight and an iridescence that's very understated, and it just hangs beautifully. We have it lined, and the whole point is for it to look like a ball gown that's slightly rumpled—one you had a really good time in. Curtains should never be stiff. They've got to look like they've been opened and closed and touched. These are slightly too long, but not draggy and contrived. Nobody's going to trip over them. It's just enough to hold them out and rumple them up a little bit.

**I notice you don't have shades on any of the chandeliers. Do you prefer to leave the bulbs exposed?**

Yes, in most cases. Shades distract from a chandelier's sculptural quality. You don't have to stick on shades to make it appealing.

Many houses I've seen in Houston feel very done, with every hair in place. What gives this one its confident nonchalance?

That's another of my mom's signatures—the place seems *un*-done. It's not a paint-by-numbers thing. The character of the whole house comes from the character of

Some of these pieces individually are what might be classed as rather grand, and yet the way you've put them together...

...has a casualness. Right. If you arrange these bergères and fauteuils very formally, you don't want to sit in them. We don't want anything to seem staged and unusable. I guess you can tell we have a chair thing! They all have such distinct personalities.

**You also seem to have a thing for painted furniture.**

We like the way you can imagine all the different lives a piece has led by seeing the different coats of color. That was the appeal of reusing antique doors with layers of patina, even though they're tricky to retrofit. This was just a traditional builder home from the 1980s with no strong character. It had bad limestone-tile floors, which we replaced with 150-year-old oak planks. We added beams to break up the length of the living room. For the kitchen cabinets we bought wood from a Scandinavian dairy—you can still see the rings where they laid out cheeses.

**That range hood sure isn't off-the-shelf. Where did it come from?**

It's made out of an antique aviary that the client found at a Houston antiques show. After we inserted steel panels, it ended up being perfect over the cooktop. She also found the fragment of boiserie that Eleanor Cummings used as the master bedroom headboard.

With those carved putti on top it's so pretty and whimsical. There has to be a little humor in some of the pieces.

**You've put great decorative objects here, but little patterned fabric, except on pillows.**

I don't wear a lot of patterns, so I certainly don't want to sit on a lot of patterns. For us, the pattern comes from the composition. If there *is* pattern, it's usually woven in. One of my first rules in choosing fabrics is, 'If I wouldn't wear it on my body, I'm not going to put it on a piece of furniture.' Not that I'm going to be wearing a lot of mohair.

PRODUCED BY DAVID M. MURPHY  
STYLIST GREGORY BISSONNETTE



each piece. Each one has to speak to you. It's like a jewel with a history—you might not know what that past really is, but you could make up a good one! We do a lot of shopping in France and Italy, and our client has a real passion for European antiques.

**But you're pairing antiques with new partners, right? Sort of like the French couple in that tapestry, dancing what could almost be a Texas two-step.**

There you go! We want an interior to look like it's evolved, like you've collected over the years, your tastes have changed, and you've melded it all together.

**ABOVE:** An antique onion-dome aviary frames the kitchen range hood, perched above a backsplash of 19th-century concrete tiles. Antique Belgian limestone countertops, cabinets built with wood from a Scandinavian dairy, and a vintage French worktable set off the stainless-steel Viking stove and Sub-Zero refrigerator. Custom stools through Eleanor Cummings. **OPPOSITE:** A Swedish hutch, aging gracefully behind a Gustavian bench in a guest bedroom.





1. In the library, an Empire chaise longue and a Louis XV-Revival canapé covered in Dedar's Flair in Conchiglia flank an 18th-century mantel from Aix-en-Provence. Shelves hold part of the client's collection of religious artifacts. 2. The hallway outside the master bedroom. Rug from Matt Camron Rugs & Tapestries. 3. A collection of glass boxes on a living room table. 4. Watkins and Baker refined the master bedroom with a *parquet de Versailles* floor, Nancy Corzine Satin (in Steel) curtains, an 18th-century Buffet de Corps armoire, and a Louis XVI chaise. 5. A Baroque Italian mirror hangs above the powder room's antique basin. 6. Just right for informal meals, a massive Belgian blue limestone pedestal table from Chateau Domingue anchors the family room. OPPOSITE. In the master bedroom, a painted Italian ceiling panel hangs above a headboard made from a salvaged boiserie fragment.

