

Quattrocento Clarity

Old World Elements Infuse a New Residence in Texas

INTERIOR DESIGN BY JOE MINTON, ASID
OF MINTON-CORLEY
ARCHITECTURE BY R. WELDON TURNER
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"It has a timeless, Mediterranean flavor, and it's very suitable for Texas's climate," says Joe Minton of the Fort Worth house he designed for Gray and Nelda Mills. PRECEDING PAGES, LEFT: A Venetian-style armchair and a "Giacco" chair, inspired by Giacometti, are paired with a gueridon in a vestibule with fine Italian stucco walls. PRECEDING PAGES, RIGHT: In the entrance hall, an iron-and-fossil-stone table holds a four-stone urn. Floors are paved with Arkansas limestone. THESE PAGES: A David Ligare still life and a 19th-century French seascape flank the French marble mantel in the living room. Above it is a trumeau mirror designed by Minton using an 18th-century carved parcel-gilt panel. The leather side chair behind the sofa is from Lloyd-Faxton.



"Joe Minton and the architect, Weldon Turner, understood what I wanted from the beginning," says Nelda Mills. "They expanded on my concept—courtyards, arches and stucco—and created a house that is reminiscent of an Italian villa." Marble Orant's *Landscape with Paint Box* hangs above a French commode in the living room. The low table, designed by Minton-Corley, holds a white cinnabar box, an Islamic bowl, a Venetian-glass vase and a Japanese tray. Pillows are covered with Belgian tapestry fragments. Northwest Persian carpet.

THE FINISHED HOUSE that entirely fulfills its architect, interior designer and occupants is usually a Platonic ideal that vanishes before the first set of blueprints have been drawn. But when Nelda and Gray Mills asked Joe Minton, co-owner with David Corley of the Fort Worth design firm Minton-Corley, to recommend an architect and design the interior for the residence they intended to build, they initiated a nearly flawless collaboration. The Millses' requirements were formidable: a new house that wouldn't seem obtrusive in a venerable Fort Worth neighborhood, Old World charm but family-oriented functionalism, an infusion of the outdoors combined with a sense of retreat—and all of it on a lot only fifty feet wide. But Minton, the Millses and architect R. Weldon Turner resolved these conflicting claims so deftly and seamlessly that it is surprising to learn that the solutions were arrived at by a process as unwieldy as consensus.

Nelda Mills, a dedicated Fort Worth preservationist, joined the legion of local Joe Minton fans nine years ago when she chaired the annual Historic Preservation Showcase House and he was a featured designer. "I wanted people who walked in to feel it was my house, not the designer's," she says in explaining her choice. "And Joe has a unique ability to do that." Minton in turn recommended architect Turner, with whom he had more than a passing familiarity. "Weldon's parents are old friends of mine," says Minton. As architect and designer, Turner and Minton also had a considerable history: a half-dozen successful collaborations.





small courtyard—at the very heart of the house.

The sideways orientation allows a remarkable atmosphere of spaciousness despite the narrow lot. “One of the most important things that Weldon and I considered was the need for a strong axis line,” says Minton. “I think the most charming feature of the house is its long, clean lines of sight, and it fulfills Nelda Mills’s request for both privacy and openness.”

There is a sense of airiness and massiveness as well. “One of the very early decisions we made was to have stone floors,” says Minton of the pale gray Arkansas limestone slabs that seem to anchor the living and dining rooms. The same stone is used for the baseboards, and the feeling of substance is echoed in the broad, unadorned, stone-colored wooden moldings that frame the arched door-

“We enjoy giving small dinner parties,” Nelda Mills says. “It’s a comfortable house for friends.” ABOVE: A coromandel screen stands near the marble-topped dining table. George I-style parcel-gilt chairs are from Manheim Galleries. BELOW: A contemporary oil is mounted above the Italian Renaissance-style credenza. Atop the table are a black-and-gold porcelain charger and “Giacco” candlesticks.

Architect, designer and clients built their unique harmony on one fundamental note of agreement. “We wanted an Old World feeling,” says Minton, “but it also had to be clean without seeming new and contemporary. We didn’t want Disneyland, a lot of Old World elements that didn’t fit in.” Seconds Turner: “Hard-core Postmodernists tend to be cartoonish. I try to lean toward substance without being pretentious.”

There was also a common inspiration. “Palladian architecture is something all of us like,” says Minton. “We wanted simple, grand rooms even though the space is relatively small.” A Neoclassical pediment that crowns the stucco facade announces the Palladian theme but also disguises an engaging bit of sleight-of-hand. Turner pivoted the main axis of the house; visitors follow a walled path down the side of the house to a small entrance court, and enter via a skylight-domed vestibule—flanked by the living room, library and another



ways and windows. The exterior stucco finish has been brought into the entrance hall, and the living room has been glazed with a sienna-hued faux-stucco finish. That these weighty elements are reassuring rather than overbearing is a tribute to Turner and Minton’s unerring calculation of the appropriate scale and proportion.

While the interior is distinguished by quattrocento clarity and an almost cloisterlike serenity, there are also some audacious strokes. “It took me a long time to tell my mother I have a black bedroom,” Nelda Mills says of the satiny black walls there and in the adjacent small library. Ebony frames all of the windows and exterior doors, carrying a crisp, unfussy note of line and detail throughout the house.

In furnishing the space, Minton exercised restraint, emphasizing a few salient pieces—predominantly



“There’s a Palladian feel to the house, but the antiques are from various cultures,” says Minton. ABOVE: Antique French tables bracket the Venetian headboard in the master bedroom. Cowtan & Tout chintz. BELOW: A Louis XV-style mirror, complemented by a Louis XVI-style chair, hangs above the iron fireplace in the library. The cane-back chair is Régence; tufted chair is covered with English linen.



country French antiques and Minton-Corley’s own line of hammered iron, stone- and glass-topped tables. Pattern is used sparingly, confined to such floral accents as Belgian tapestry pillows and the touch of chintz in the master bedroom suite; elsewhere Minton relied on his gift for textural contrasts to enliven the largely monochrome surfaces. The result is an interior that is both familiar and erudite, livable and elegant.

The Mills house sits comfortably with its half-century-older neighbors, and is certainly more of a piece with twenties eclecticism than with eighties Postmodernism. And it meets preservationist Nelda Mills’s foremost criterion: “The house has never seemed new to me,” she says. Perhaps most surprising is Minton’s summary, considering how effectively he has assisted his collaborators in fulfilling their expectations. “Of all the houses I have done,” he says, “I think this is the most representative of my own taste.” □