

# To Syrie, With



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# Love

**BETTY BLAKE** has been a glamour girl all her life, so why stop at 90? With help from Joseph Minton, the Dallas socialite's daringly chic apartment pays tribute to legendary British decorator Syrie Maugham.


HER FRIENDS CALL HER "BOOP." AS in Betty. Which couldn't be more droll. Because while art maven Betty Blake, even at 90, does remind them of the iconic flapper—with two girlish curls, big blue eyes, porcelain skin, and a flirty charm that pegs her as much younger—this particular Betty harbors a patrician bearing, piercing wit, and an encyclopedic knowledge of culture and art and society for which one would pay the princely sum of the Hope Diamond to possess. A gem which—trivia buffs will appreciate this—her former mother-in-law once owned.

Most people starting their tenth decade of life steer clear of change. Not Blake. She's reupholstering. "That says it all," says longtime friend and design collaborator Joseph Minton. He's recently helped her reinvigorate a few pieces designed by another old friend of Blake's: legendary British designer Syrie Maugham. >>

**THIS PAGE:** Betty Blake poses on a Maison Jansen bench that belonged to her mother.



**THIS PAGE:** Upholstered, pickled-wood Louis XV-style chairs surround a 1950s Saarinen marble-top dining table. These chairs, as well as another sofa and a couple of small tables sprinkled about, belonged to Blake's mother and were all from Maison Jansen. William T. Wiley's "In the Quarry" hangs in the background.



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**THIS PAGE:** Antique monkey sculpture by German porcelain maker Meissen once belonged to Evelyn Walsh McLean. On the table in the background, Jeff Koons' ceramic sculpture "Puppy" serves as a vase. One of a pair of Knoll tables sits beside a Maison Jansen sofa. A Mario Shinoda bronze sculpture is in the foreground.



## SYRIE MAUGHAM Still Creating a Stir

English decorator **Syrie Maugham** (1879-1955) has a cult following for a style that was both glamorous and groundbreaking—a recognition far nicer than her scandalous divorce from husband W. Somerset Maugham. (*The Of Human Bondage* author had numerous affairs; Syrie retaliated in part by selling his favorite desk; he later left her for a male friend and disinherited their daughter, and so on.)

Maugham elevated interior design to an art form, creating rooms in all white (leading some to call her “the Princess of Pale”), or using bold, tropical colors (often in salmon, coral, and royal blue), and designing traditional furnishings with a twist—a low-slung sofa with an eye-opening amount of tufting, for instance, or an armchair with only one arm. Syrie also favored antique Chinese wallpaper and mirrored screens—all the above adored by her clients who were mainly made up of British and American aristocracy.

“Syrie offered the fresh new look of the 1930s,” designer Joseph Minton says. “Her taste was modern, but not in a severe way. Like *Elsie de Wolfe*, she sort of swept away the cobwebs of the Victorian age. It was clean and fresh—and very much the look of Betty Blake’s apartment today.”



**ABOVE:** The chair rosettes feature loops of ribbon, a signature Syrie Maugham look. “Some of which needed to be made new to match the originals,” Minton says.



Blake picked up Maugham’s radically curvaceous furniture just after moving to New York in 1940. At that time her designs were truly avant-garde—especially Maugham’s one-arm chairs. But Blake was fast becoming a risk-taker in the design world, having first been emboldened to trust her instincts by yet another friend, the highly regarded English country-style tastemaker Nancy Lancaster, a relative by marriage.

With Minton’s help, the Maugham pieces have been newly fitted with fine Egyptian cotton in a striated fabric, and then adorned with refreshed rosettes, voluptuous tufting, and—in what may come as a surprise to some—presented in more colorful hues. “A lot of people think Syrie only designed pieces in white, but that’s not true,” Blake says. “She liked to use white if everything else was white, but otherwise she really liked color. Vibrant color.”

Maugham’s take on design was much like her bold personality, Blake says. “She had such a way of putting things. Like when she’d talk about upholstery, she’d say, ‘Don’t upholster so it looks like the skin on a banana—loosen it up a bit,’” says Blake, who can sound a bit like Katharine

Hepburn with a Southern drawl. “But she also was a very keen business-woman. After all, she’d had quite a life.”

So has Betty Blake. After moving to Texas in 1943 with her third husband, oilman John R. “Jock” McLean, the well-traveled Blake, a product of Philadelphia and Newport, R. I.’s high society, immersed herself in Dallas’ emerging art scene. She opened the Betty McLean Gallery in Preston Center—Texas’ first contemporary art gallery—in 1951 (during which time modern art was anything but fashionable in Dallas). She later went on to lend tremendous support to regional artists and museums, most notably Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, where she’s served on the acquisitions committee for more than 50 years.

It’s not surprising that modern art plays a starring role in her Turtle Creek-area apartment, appropriately housed inside the Gold Crest, one of the city’s premiere mid-century modern mid-rises. Though her home represents many decades of collecting, it’s very much as youthful and now as the forward-thinking design doyenne herself. Black double-doors open into a salon-like realm where painted white floors allow exceptional furnishings, paired in >>

**LEFT:** Syrie Maugham’s five pieces—a sofa and four chairs—are featured in two different groupings. The sofa originally was “a creamy white, and not with its original upholstery style (it had too many tufts), which we rectified,” Joseph Minton says. “All of the pieces had been recovered over the years, but fortunately Blake has two of Maugham’s original, un-recovered pieces in Newport, and we took pictures of it from every angle. We’ve actually upholstered them back to how Maugham would have wanted them.” Minton won’t speculate on the worth of the Maugham pieces, “but let’s just say they are very, very rare.” Alfred Jensen’s oil painting “The Ten Thousand Things” and a stainless steel sculpture by Jose De Rivera complete the room.

**BELOW:** As for the museum-quality art around her, most notably there are works by such greats as Josef Albers, Joan Miró, Roy Lichtenstein, Jasper Johns, and Claes Oldenburg alongside the work of heralded Texans David Bates, Kelly Fearing, Julie Bozzi, Jim Love, David McManaway, and Thomas Benrimo—much of which will be featured this summer at the Newport Art Museum. In this photo, a horse-head sculpture by Daisy Youngblood is perched above an antique table and candelabra given to Blake by her mother. A large Alexander Calder print hangs on the right wall.





**THIS PAGE:** An antique dresser was painted to match the mostly pink-white-and-green bedroom, which is reminiscent of the 1930s and yet very today, with a sprinkling of grand antiques (mostly from her mother's Newport estate). Betty likes to mix old with new "because having all of only one thing would be dull, don't you think?" To the left (uppermost frame) and reflected in the mirror are two Gaston Lachaise sketches. Below sketch is a work by Claes Oldenburg.



various intimate groupings, to play more as sculpture. Floor-to-ceiling windows facing the terrace offer brilliant natural light as well as commanding views of the Turtle Creek area.

Blake has never wanted to leave the Lone Star State—even after her divorce from the man who led her here (though all the while keeping grand places in Newport and New York City). "There's just something about Texas," she reflects. "To me, the Texas horizon is so fascinating. It just seems to go on forever. You can look at it for miles and miles and miles."

Which is what she might recommend to her own family of three children and their children and their children. "It's just like I tell all of them: 'You've got two eyes in your head—use them,'" she says with a hint of defiance. "That's the most fun in life: to look. It becomes a habit."

Minton feels that way about Blake, whom he befriended in the 1960s while serving on the board of the Modern Art Museum—"but I knew *about* her well before then," he says. "Betty has an incredible eye for art, architecture, and design," he says. "She has such courage and makes up her mind very quickly, which helps her make brilliant decisions."

Case in point: "What's next? More upholstery," Minton says, referring to the four Louis XV-style chairs in Blake's dining space—ones designed by the celebrated French decorating firm Jansen and purchased by Blake's mother. Minton recalls seeing them some 40 years ago in *House & Garden*, when each was upholstered in a different and vibrant solid color. "I told her how inspiring that was to me, and I wanted to take the chairs back to the way I remembered them. They were so chic and fun." Blake's reply? "Yes!"

"Well, why on earth not?" she says. "Is there ever a time *not* to enjoy good design?" **ID**

**LEFT:** (Top to bottom) The guest bedroom includes a daybed by Maison Jansen and a Danish modern table Blake bought at an estate sale in Newport, R.I., which mimic the lines in the James Biedermaier painting above. A Kenny Price photograph leads into a bathroom, and a Picasso ceramic vase holds roses.

**RIGHT:** Even her Chinese Crested hairless dog "Reno" is a work of art: He's still strutting his stuff after seven years of being a champion show dog. A Gaston Lachaise sketch hangs behind him.

