



POISED AND POLISHED

A TEXAS COUPLE WORKED THEIR DESIGN MAGIC TO TURN A BATTERED BEAUMONT ABODE INTO A CHIC YET APPROACHABLE SHOWPLACE.

BY Lisa Frederick | PHOTOGRAPHY BY Michael Hunter





Melinda and John James were bent on keeping it simple this time. Having scaled down from a grand family home to a much smaller cottage, the husband-and-wife design team tried their best to channel breezy comfort rather than the opulent style they usually prefer. But decorating habits die hard, and they couldn't resist slipping in a splash of glamour along the way. "When we try to dress something down, it usually gets dressed back up," says Melinda, founder of M. James Design Group and a Beaumont-area native.

That's not to say the result is fussy. Fine European antiques and Southern treasures mingle like old friends against a quiet backdrop, fostering come-on-in warmth enlivened by shine and sparkle. It's a haven with heart, elegant without being ostentatious—a perfect reflection of the gracious neighborhood in which it nestles.

Originally built as a model home in the early 1980s, the two-story structure bore the scars of hurricane damage and a botched renovation when the Jameses bought it. "It was in terrible shape, to say the least," Melinda says, adding that their renovator needed weeks just to sand the walls smooth. "But it had wonderful light and a certain





charm about it, and I knew I would be able to put a lot of details in. We're all about the details."

Just over the Louisiana border, Beaumont has a strong Acadian feel that the couple wove throughout the architecture and décor. "It's Southern, but it has a lot of French influence," says Melinda, who is of Cajun descent, a culture derived from French-speaking Acadia. "It just makes me feel more at home." Whitewashed cedar planks cover the low ceilings in the dining area and kitchen; towering cypress windows and broad double doors amplify the stream of sunlight. Floors of hardwood parquet and herringbone marble set a refined stage for tall gilt mirrors and tiered crystal chandeliers, which Melinda paired with sassy counterparts like animal-print textiles and dining chairs that wear oversize numbers on their backs.

A handful of modern finds, such as the white Eames chair in the lounge, offset classic upholstered seating and weathered case goods. John, who has an art degree, chose most of the artwork, buying what attracted him regardless of pedigree: Matisse-inspired prints to hang in the foyer; a statue from an antiques fair perched in the dining area; a colorful piece by late Texas artist Virginia Burnett over the living room chaise.

In less skilled hands, the mix could have looked like a mishmash, but a knack for scale and balance keeps the couple's unfettered style in check. "It's very instinctual—there are no





rules,” Melinda says. Her other secret? A healthy dose of black. Repeated in a breakfront, a fireplace surround, small accents, and other details, it anchors the palette of creamy neutrals and lends a sophisticated flourish.

Over three decades of furnishing multiple dwellings, Melinda and John have amassed a collection of pieces with staying power, like the painted screen used as a headboard in the master bedroom. “That screen has been in every home we’ve had,” Melinda says. In contrast to the pale walls elsewhere, she selected a deep, smoky gray and amped up the drama with shimmering accents and luxuriant fabrics. “In small rooms, I like to use dark colors,” she says. “I think they enlarge the space and move the eye.”

Just below the bedroom lies the home’s most enticing secret: a lush brick courtyard with a fountain and a wisteria-draped arbor, more reminiscent of Charleston or New Orleans than southeast Texas. It adjoins another alfresco seating area off the dining room, which allows for opening doors to blur the boundaries between indoors and out.

In a sweet, unexpected twist, one of Melinda’s design clients was so enamored of the house that the couple recently agreed to sell it to her, ensuring a personal connection as its story enters the next chapter. The décor may evolve, but the soulful, romantic character that the duo worked so hard to infuse will remain for years to come.

