

# Mary Evelyn McKee

Passionate about art and practical about how we live today, the Birmingham designer creates serene spaces spiced with character and collections, texture and soft tones



**THOUGHTFUL, STYLISH, AND INSTANTLY** gracious, Birmingham designer Mary Evelyn McKee multitasks and issues directives with the authority and deliberation of a woman who has raised three sons and balanced a design career for most of her adult life. She keeps all her projects in her head, putting out figurative fires as they arise and then focusing on the task at hand with remarkable efficiency.

**Southern Accents:** What is your signature style?

**Mary Evelyn McKee:** Pared-down and edited rooms within a strong architectural framework, and a good sense of scale.

**You are known for using a narrow range of colors in a room. How do you keep your spaces so interesting with such a subtle palette?**

I select colors based on the exposure of the room. Is it a large space? Is it a cool room or warm? In the South, cool colors tend to work best. Of course, I recently did a hot-pink bedroom for a young girl. But most people want their personal spaces to be soothing, so I work that in with color. In a room that is not one you live in all the time—a dining room, for example—I like dramatic color. As for trim, I like matte walls with high-gloss trim.

**How does your background in art history affect your approach to design?**

Art history trains the eye to appreciate the

**Designer, shop owner, and art historian** Mary Evelyn McKee assembles the modern, traditional, and eclectic in her eponymous shop. A lover of Palladian style, McKee filled the arched niches in this living room with her favorite things—books and art.





linear as well as modeled form, and you begin to see a room just as you do the composition of a painting.

**How do you keep your rooms elegant and relaxed?**

Tailoring. Keep the details simple within the spirit of the room. Choose elements that are underdone or unfinished—pen-and-ink drawings for a study, figs on a branch in an urn; a slipcovered chair.

**Slipcovered dining and kitchen chairs are favorites of yours. Can you give some tips on achieving the dressmaker details you use?**

Slipcovers are best when they are precisely made and hang clean and close to the body of the piece. I prefer topstitching for a fresh profile. Think of them like dresses—best when they hug the body, but not too tightly or with too many frills. I don't use buttons or ties, just a little gusset or tape. They make me think of the summer shifts I wore years ago. I often use ungessoed artist canvas—I go to the art supply store—and bleach it when it gets dirty. The canvas softens with age, so it gets better with time. It's more of an off-white than a pure white.

**What are your thoughts on upholstered walls—when do you use them, and what fabrics do you prefer?**

A small print can hide flaws and give overall subtle movement, but solid texture can be just as comforting. It can add interest if the room lacks significant architectural detail. I like very little padding under the fabric, sometimes just felt. But I love how much selection you have with fabric. And one thing so many

**McKee exercised restraint** in a dressing room (top) with definite feminine elements; the daybed is undressed, and the vanity reflects walls covered in fabric by Hable Construction. She stripped away most of the upper cabinets for a kitchen that's open and airy.



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of us forget is the acoustic element of a room. It's so important, particularly in a bedroom. Another time I like to use fabric on walls is when you have a lot of varied elements—windows, doors, corners, and trim. Upholstered walls take out the elbows and knees and wrap the whole room, which is very restful.

### Your kitchens are modern but not cold. How do you achieve this look?

Kitchens that invite cooking together seem to have more celebration about them. All of our boys cook, and we like to cook as a family, so in my kitchen I want plenty of air and multiple workstations so everyone can pitch in. For floors, I favor wood. For countertops, I like natural stone, such as marble or limestone, or a combination of teak, stainless steel, and stone. It gives the space a contemporary edge. As for my backsplash—stainless steel or tile with a contrast grout that is hand-hewn.

### What are some of your favorite design books?

I go back to architecture books again and again. *Small Castles and Pavilions of*

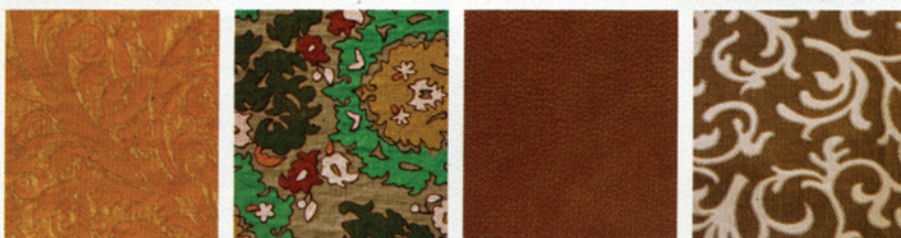
#### MARY EVELYN'S FAVORITES

##### Paint Colors

1. **Gray Wisp (1570)** by Benjamin Moore A beautiful bedroom blue. A wash of this on everything—trim, walls, and ceiling.

2. **French Canvas (OC-41)** by Benjamin Moore A reliable white—warm enough, yet not so much that it loses its crispness.

3. **Maple Leaf Red (2084-20)** by Benjamin Moore I have used a custom color similar to this rich red everywhere from a foyer to a powder room.



##### Fabrics

1. **Uccelli** by Fortuny A sunny, neutral cotton that's great for slipcovers, upholstery, and curtains.

2. **Caravane** by Manuel Canovas A snappy play on a traditional crewel; great texture. Use judiciously—a little says a lot.

3. **Bavaria Doeskin** by Hickory Chair The most supple leather outside an Hermès showroom. Great for nailhead-trimmed upholstery in small doses.

4. **Piqué Sellier** by Pierre Frey A reversible pattern. I like it on heavy upholstery, as well as slipcovers.





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### IN MARY EVELYN'S OPINION

	Love It	Leave It
<b>Color</b>	A one-color house	Unbalanced color intensity
<b>Art</b>	Conté crayon drawings	Excessive personal photographs
<b>Flooring</b>	Wide-plank wood	Composite; man-made
<b>Kitchens</b>	Dish pantries	Islands that are too large
<b>Curtains</b>	Simplicity of line	Ruching or frills
<b>Lighting</b>	LEDs; dimmers	Too many recessed cans and ceiling fans

*Europe* by Jerome Zerbe. *The Country Houses of David Adler* by Stephen M. Sahn. *Classic America: Federal Style and Beyond* by Wendell Garrett, and *The Most Beautiful Libraries in the World* by Guillaume de Laubier.

### Who are your greatest design influences?

David Hicks and Albert Hadley. I love the geometry in Hicks' work, as well as the blending of old and new, and the editing in both designers' projects.

### What department do you gravitate to when you're visiting a museum?

I always go to the American Wing at the Met, and I always find something wonderful in the Eugenia Woodward Hitt Collection of French furniture at the Birmingham Museum of Art, so I guess I gravitate toward decorative arts. But my favorite museum is the Frick. I went there when I was 17 with my parents, and I think that was where I found my love of design and art history. My favorite painting is *Comtesse d'Haussonville* by Ingres. Oh, and I love *The Return of the Prodigal Son* by Rembrandt at the Hermitage in St. Petersburg.

### Your displays of art are wonderful. How do you go about grouping and arranging paintings?

First, the works need to have thematic unity—it can be subject matter or even color. But they don't all have to be the same medium, except photography. I think photography looks best when it's all together. I like putting different media together—silk screen, gouache, pastel, oil on canvas, drawings. There's no set formula. It's all about balance. As for frames, that's a whole other area of artistry. I went to a Lucian Freud exhibition recently, and I admired the frames as much as anything. ♦

For details, see *Sourcebook*, page 120.

