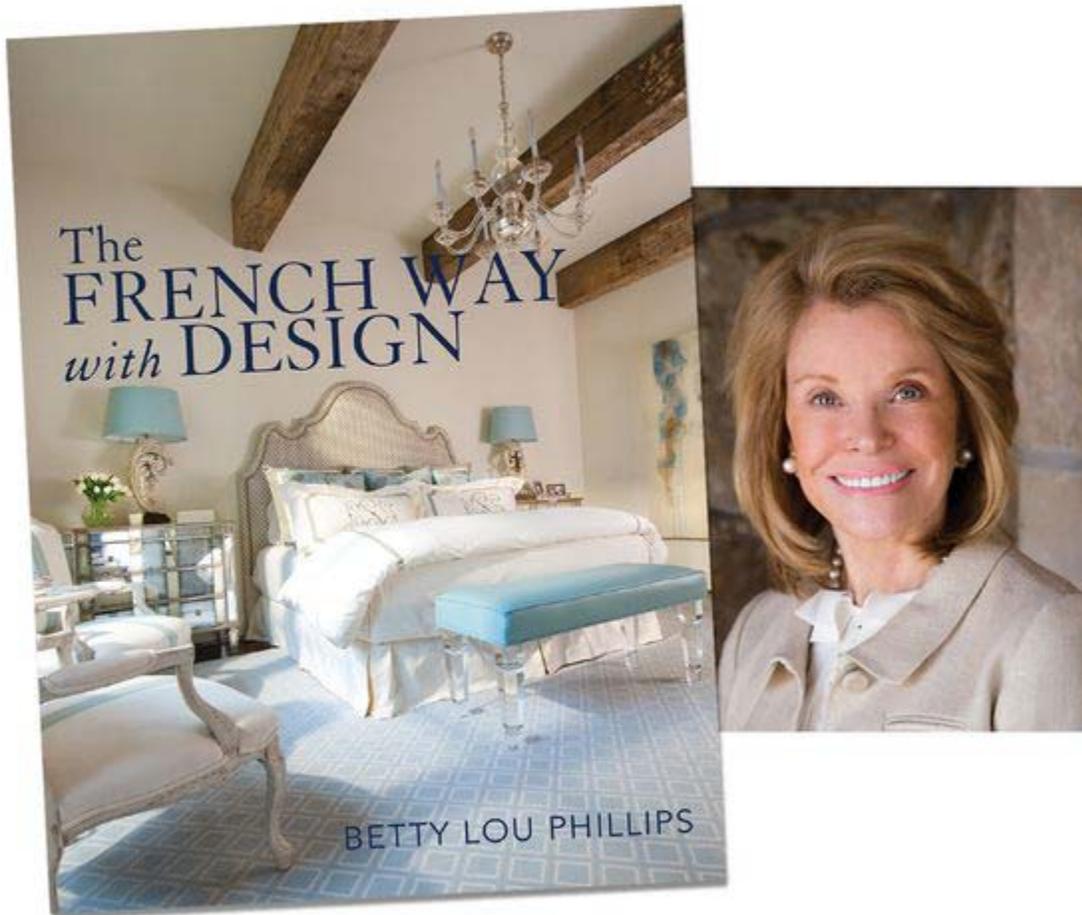


# Interior designer shares secrets to great French design

Judith Harris Solomon, Special to The Detroit News 8:59 a.m. EST February 13, 2015



Hand-brushed glazed cabinets infuse the room with innumerable shades of gray. The island countertop is quartzite, a stone that is currently very much in demand.



Interior designer Betty Lou Phillips, the author of 13 design books (most of which focus on French design) grew up in the Midwest (Ohio), studied design at the University of San Francisco and has lived in Dallas for the past eighteen years "in a French home, of course," she says. Her latest tome, "The French Way With Design" (Gibbs Smith, \$50), was published last fall.

Even though Phillips is as busy as a bee concurrently working nonstop on eight different design projects in several different cities, she graciously found the time to chat with us about how to incorporate the tres chic Gallic style into your home décor.

**Q.** When and how did you become so passionate about French design?

**A.** Like millions of Americans, I was — and remain — struck by the flair of the French. And why not? With their self-assured approach to design and mesmerizing way of projecting a rich cultural heritage with matchless sophistication and lack of showiness, they quite rightly have captured our respect.

**Q.** What French elements do you particularly like to utilize in your design?

**A. 1.** Subtle details add interest to a room. For example, a tape trim may adorn the skirt of a sofa, an ottoman or a chair, making a space more approachable by softening the tailoring while dressing up the room.

**2.** Rooms can benefit from a touch of the unexpected, whether one opens a guest closet door to a patterned paper or discovers chalkboard paint on the back of a pantry door.

**3.** When the humble sits across from the grand, the ordinary across from the extraordinary, the latter are not necessarily the talking points. Accessories perceived as poor relations of their more refined cousins help signal that good taste is not about extravagance.

**4.** A tablescape with a variety of heights, textures and shapes makes the most artful display. (Top a stack of books with a candle snuffer or vessel of fresh flowers; nearby, place a few votives or an interesting piece from one's travels.)

**5.** Big is often better.

**6.** A fluid mix of textures is important. In French minds, a setting with all sleek finishes is unavoidably cold.

**7.** A work of art — large or small — that eclipses the rest in value or in sentiment is worthy of pride of place at the center of a grouping. A small painting hung beneath a larger one arouses interest. Some of the strongest groupings mass similar subjects — say landscapes, ladies, children, fruit, animals, birds, flowers.

**8.** Collections make the strongest impact when gathered together, not scattered around the room.

**Q.** Mid-century modern furniture seems to be the rage now. Do you use it? Do you think it has staying power?

**A.** Mid-century modern furniture is definitely au courant. For most people, overindulgence no longer has a place among 21st century economic worries. Far less — or certainly less lofty — is now plenty inside many stateside spaces. Mid-century modern fits our more conservative way of life and is in

keeping with the new international mood. Will mid-century modern have staying power when color trends come and go as do patterned fabrics? Time will tell. Remember Santa Fe style, and more recently Swedish design. And even at a time when a more conservative way of life is emerging, our fascination with the French remains.

**Q.** Antique or "brown" furniture has declined in value. Why do you think this is and do you think it will have a resurgence anytime soon?

**A.** In this age of merging sensibilities, our clients still opt to anchor major areas with timeless investment pieces. Seemingly, they are moving forward while looking back believing that classic French furnishings are an investment.

**Q.** Explain your statement in the book that "Fabrics that meld rather than match give depth to a room."

**A.** Appealing fabrics with soul meld, setting the mood in a space by layering comfort, warmth and style. In contrast, the same shade of blue — whether called azure, cobalt, cornflower or sapphire, for example — results in a room looking "forced" — a taboo in French circles.

**Q.** What was or is your most challenging project?

**A:** Admittedly, pulling together a condominium in Florida as it was my first foray mixing mid-century modern with classic French.

**Q.** What are you currently working on?

**A.** We are currently working on eight different projects. And right now we're counting the days until the end of the month when we install a Dallas project that we've been working on for the past two years. As you might suspect, an installation is the most satisfying aspect of the job. It is a treat to see a house become a home — and, of course, the joy on the homeowners' faces when they walk in. We ask that the family doesn't enter the house during the five days we are installing. The teenage daughters of a California doctor didn't let her leave the house at night without them as they knew she was so eager to see everything in place that she might be tempted to take a sneak-peak.

**Q.** What is something Americans tend to do differently than the French?

**A.:** While we Americans frequently push old-world tradition to the extremes, wanting everything to look picture-perfect, the French don't mind if something they treasure looks a little "off." Family furnishings merit pride of place. This is not to say that our antiques are necessarily museum-worthy, only that we long for them to be in near perfect condition. Also, Americans often strive to have their rooms come together overnight. On the other hand, more than necessity must prompt the French to buy. They're capable of waiting years until the perfect piece comes along.

## **10 Design Tips From Betty Lou Phillips**

In the fickle world of design, where ideals come and go:

1. Quality does matter.
2. The past must be present.
3. Two wood pieces sitting side by side are less than neighborly.
4. Throws bestow a luxurious look while imbuing warmth in a room.
5. Harmony is more important than conformity. While some crave five-piece place settings of the same china, our French cousins do not. In fact, most frown on matching sets of anything. For them, a bedroom "suite" or so-called dining room "set" with wood finishes boringly alike would be too dismal to contemplate. In homes that want for nothing, disparate elements, often each with its own centuries-long résumé, come together in a predictably sophisticated fashion.
6. Elegance must mingle with ease.
7. Balance is key to creating a feeling of well-being.
8. Imitation leather is less expensive, easier to work with than real leather and available in myriad colors. In short it's a modern marvel.
9. Unique details awe and inspire.
10. Interiors merit furnishings with presence. Because French architecture is so strong, furniture that's substantive supports the look.

**Website:** [Bettyloupillips.com](http://Bettyloupillips.com)