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# SIMPLY BELGIAN

THAT COOL, SPARE, AND SOULFUL FLEMISH STYLE SUFFUSES A NEWLY BUILT GEORGIA HOUSE WITH A GORGEOUS SENSE OF HISTORY. When a stylish Atlanta woman asked the designer James Michael Howard to create a clean, quietly intriguing house for her family, Howard had her over to his office to get a better sense of what she was after. "I have a thousand books there," he says. "People are visual, so I kept putting things in front of her."

She gravitated to modernism in general, but was most clearly attracted to the sensual, tactile brand of Belgian modernism perfected by Axel Vervoordt, the renowned Antwerp-based antiques dealer and interior designer. "She's Polish and she's been in a lot of important



INTERIOR DESIGN BY JAMES MICHAEL HOWARD ARCHITECTURE BY WILLIAM T. BAKER  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY MAX KIM-BEE PRODUCED BY LESLIE NEWSOM RASCOE WRITTEN BY MIMI READ



Dappled, color-washed walls bring depth to the dining room. Vintage Georgian-style chairs in Donghia chenille. Curtains in Duralee velvet. Sconce, Urban Electric. OPPOSITE: Sofa, Dennis & Leen, in Henry Calvin linen. Wing chair, Gregorius Pineo, in Jasper fabric. Custom armchair in Brunschwig & Fils chenille. Leather armchairs, Oiy. Curtains in Rose Tarlow Melrose House wool. Antique end table, Mrs. Howard. OPENING PAGES: Mantel, François & Co. Walls in Bare, Benjamin Moore. Flowers throughout, Nancy Izlar.

European houses,” Howard says. “There’s a sense of restraint and a monastic quality she likes.” It’s one thing to achieve Vervoordt’s chic monasticism by floating a long linen sofa inside a splintering medieval room in Antwerp. Conjuring that same primeval mood inside a brand new residence in Buckhead, however, might seem like a challenge. But the French-style manse in question is by architect William T. Baker, who gave it mullioned windows, hipped roofs, and a buff stucco façade. And Howard is a great visual translator who loves mellowed European glamour hitched to a spare sensibility. He’s also not afraid to adapt.

First, he took pains with the interior details to get a natural, timeless background: real plaster walls, chaste stone mantles, simple baseboard moldings, and French oak floors stained dark with aniline dye normally used on leather. Less viscous than oil stains, the dye lets curling patterns in the wood grain show through clearly.

In the living and family rooms, Howard gave the couple and their two teenage daughters clean, light arrangements of sofas and chairs slip-covered in sturdy linen. As far as color goes, his fabrics hover in the poetic, earthy zone between driftwood and stone, and they look great against chalky walls. “Doesn’t everyone love a white cotton blouse and a beige cotton skirt?” he asks.

Weathered wood and soft plaster warm up the cool-toned family room. Sofa and armchairs, Lee Industries, in Donghia linen. Coffee table, Oly. Mantel, François & Co. Floor lamps and dining chairs, Mrs. Howard. Rug, Prestige Mills. Walls in China White, Benjamin Moore.

“HIS FABRIC COLORS HOVER BETWEEN driftwood AND STONE. 'DOESN'T EVERYONE LOVE A WHITE COTTON BLOUSE WITH A BEIGE COTTON SKIRT?’”



A tall mirror helps scale down high ceilings. Antique mirror, Mrs. Howard. Custom console, Chair, Studio Workshops, in Hodson McKenzie velvet. Rug, Glen Eden. OPPOSITE: Bed, Ironies, with headboard in Classic Cloth fabric. Linens, Mrs. Howard. Curtains in Rogers & Goffigon linen. Armchair (right), Rose Tarlow Melrose House, in Classic Cloth fabric.



He also mixed in modern pieces of his own design, like the silver-leafed, marble-topped console he slipped into the dining room, where it lives, cool as an ice cube, among Georgian-style chairs and floor-to-ceiling cinnabar velvet curtains. “It’s like a gigantic smoking jacket,” Howard says of the unexpectedly rich textile.

Howard makes brilliant use of air, trusting volume and light to bring out the ancient or crusty essence of a thing. Scarred urns and black pottery add gravitas; so do those rough Afghan dough bowls arrayed on the family room wall. “It’s all about making a contrast,” he says. He also took liberties with the Belgian aesthetic. He points out that the master bedroom is hardly slavish to the style. For one thing, it has a sensational 19-foot cathedral ceiling that he had to address. He talked the homeowners into using a tall steel bed. “I had to push into that ceiling and make a connection, or else it would have been too vast,” he explains. A wild pouring of light from huge windows, cushy wool carpeting, and a plump chair with swerving midcentury-style arms add American-flavored sensuality and luxury.

The kitchen, as well, reflects a mix of cultures and ideas. The pendant lamps are by Italian minimalist Achille Castiglioni, the stools are American catalog-issue, and the plaster walls and arches are “simply sculptural, like John Dickenson’s Fred Flintstone furniture,” he says. “We’re exposed to so much in this 21st century,” Howard muses. “We like it all—and there’s nothing wrong with liking it all.” □

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