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A PERFECTLY BALANCED HOUSE

Using light, furniture and art, designer Zoë Murphy Compton creates perfect balance in design

WRITTEN BY THEA MARX



A dining room in Snowmass, Colorado, is warm, but clean. The recycled timbers, natural granite and local limestone bring the outside in while the antique geometric Serapi rug makes a perfect centerpiece for the Mimi London chairs with distressed leather seats and custom walnut table from Martin Pierce. Like jewelry finishing off an outfit, the custom pendant lights complete the room with copper shades cut with stars that sparkle through hand blown glass shades.

Photo: Timothy Hursley, Little Rock, AR

Her background is as varied as her concept on design. Light is imperative. Good color essential. Zoë Murphy Compton started her career in Houston in the 1970s when the city was a booming oil metropolis. She lived with her family in the Heights downtown during the school months and spent summers on her mother's family ranch outside Mason, Texas. She loved the wide open spaces, the horses, the river, the buildings and the furniture. She collected flowered linen feed sacks from her uncle's feed store in Mason and took them back to Houston where they became her bed coverings and curtains. Her friends wanted some just like them so next summer she collected more. She wore peasant

blouses and flowered skirts, cowboy boots and a straw hat, a far cry from the patent Mary Janes and ruffles of Houston.

Zoë's double life influenced her in many ways, but most particularly in her designs and work ethic. In 1978, she moved to Aspen. For Zoë it was an auspicious beginning. After two successful retail ventures and doing design work on the side, she was chosen to restore the Hotel Jerome. Zoë is the kind of designer who kept the original lighting, fixtures and hardware in her spare bedroom for two years while the hotel was being renovated and people were pilfering articles. Before she was actually hired, she chased down the cobalt blue tile floors from the hotel after they had been



One of Zoë's favorite projects, these guest quarters reside above a barn in Aspen, Colorado. The wall material is made of plaster with straw on top that was scraped down after it was applied to create a very unique texture. The quarters are very contemporary in architecture and warm in structure. They envelop the fireplace whose full copper repose of a Remington horse scene was fabricated by Judd Evans of Evergreen, Colorado. The antique sofa table and carpenter's bench where the Scookum Indian dolls stand hold true to Zoë's love of great antiques. The iron chandelier, cactus lamps and copper and hand-blown convex sconces are all from the Zoë Murphy Compton Lighting Collection. The rug is a Turkish Dashiri. Photo: David Marlow.



The dining room was added to Hotel Jerome to accommodate the sophisticated clientele that it was drawing in the 1930s. Zoë says the most important thing about this room is the lighting. The American Victorian chandelier is from an old hotel that was being torn down in the East. Zoë added it to complement the existing lighting. Zoë's many hours of historical research on the hotel proved valuable in her quest to work with Bradbury and Bradbury on the wallpaper and borders. The paper is hand-colored with 16 different colors and echoes the themes of the Charles Eastlake furnishings in the room. The gold leaf mirror was placed in the hotel in the 1930s by Elizabeth Pepke, the owner's wife. Zoë helped restore it to its original luster during the renovation.

Photo: David Marlow



In a departure from the multitude of layers and details that are common with Zoë's projects, she undertook this Snowmass contemporary home. The home is all about textures, a natural color palate, perfect proportion and perfect scale. "Contemporary work is more difficult because of its purity and simplicity," Zoë says. She accomplished the desired effect — clean and beautiful — by using extraordinary pieces. The custom sofa is mohair; custom sidetables are walnut; and the lamps are from a local artist. The oversized leather ottoman serves dually as a coffee table.

Photo: Robert Millman, Aspen, CO

sold, and bought them back. When she was done with the Jerome Zoë remembers Jack Nicholson sitting at the bottom of the stairs smiling, looking around.

All the locals (he was one) had been very concerned "their hotel and bar" wouldn't be the same and couldn't remain the "untouched" haven it had been since the 1930s. "It was perfect and everyone loved it," Zoë remembers. "Not overdone, but a little over the top for that time. It was a place where people could go dressed to the nines or in their cowboy boots and still feel comfortable." Ultimately Hotel Jerome won two National Trust Historic Preservation Awards for the restoration and renovation that Zoë did.

Aspen opened the door for Zoë to express herself as a designer. If the terrain was different from Texas, so too was the culture. She had abundant work from lots of sophisticated people. Many were coming to Aspen from New York, but they weren't ready to go cowboy just yet. Still, they wanted a touch of Western. They wanted to fit in. Zoë helped them do just that. She understood both sides: the simplicity of

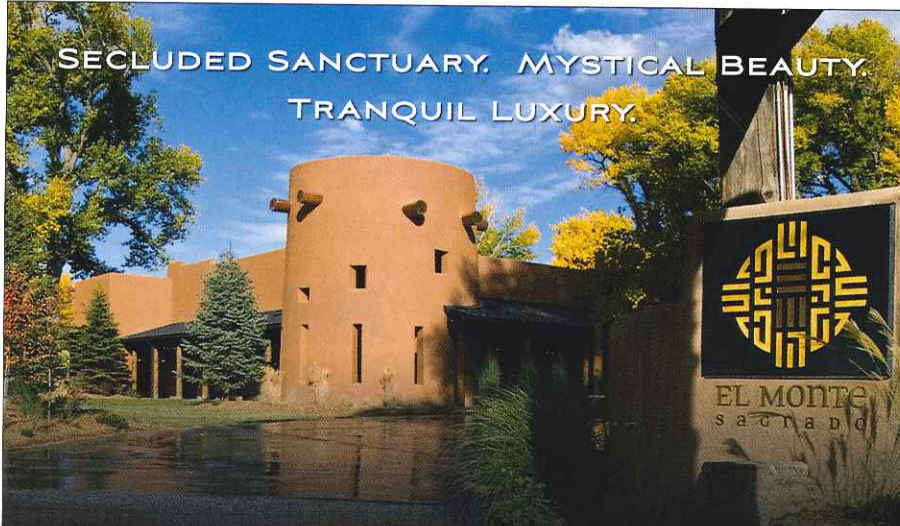

rural existence that Aspen was and the sophistication of the city. She helped Aspen evolve into the mecca of design it is today.

Crossing state lines, Western cultures and geographical boundaries, Zoë's philosophy in design came from being hands-on. "Personalizing makes the house distinctive and a designer has to be open enough to hear what clients really want. Listen. Dig in. Figure out who they really are. The home is a reflection of them." That's why Zoë doesn't work out of a book. When asked to do so she responds, "I'm sorry, I'm not your girl. My work is unique. I never want anyone to walk into a room and say, 'Zoë's been here.'" Zoë's take on design is why clients seek her out. Dr. Janet Zand from Los Angeles says of Zoë, "She has an amazing eye. She really is an artist. She is more than an interior designer. She considers every nuance, every detail. Everything has to be consistent — even when it is inconsistent. She is a dream to work with."

Zoë's experience as an artist, Houstonian, ranch girl and designer have given her a depth of knowledge she feels fortunate to have. Her longtime clients feel the same. Lica Pinkston's home in south Texas is full of family heirlooms. With Zoë's help she incorporated them into the home so it felt like it was hers and not just the generations' past. "She's ambitious, passionate and as down to earth as they come. That's why Zoë is the best decorator I've ever encountered," says Pinkston.

Longtime friend Gwynne Brooks calls her a "lusty designer." Zoë responds that she doesn't quite know

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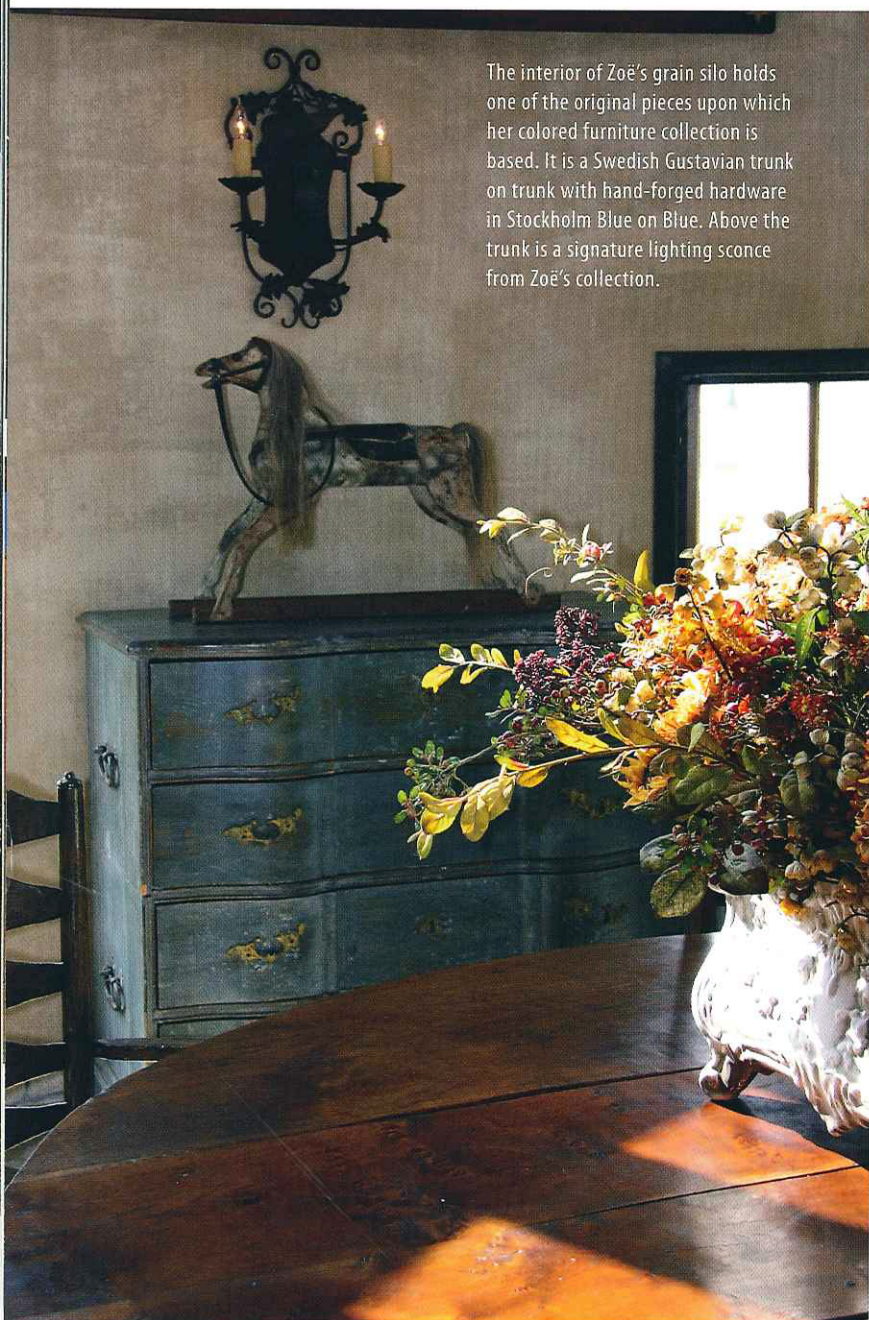
how to take that, but even in her own home, her fearlessness is evident. She is unconventional and practical all at the same time. A perfect example is the grain silo she moved onto her ranch and converted into a glorious dining room.

What's next for Zoë? Zoë Murphy Compton lines of lighting and colored character furniture will premier in Houston, Denver, Dallas and LA Design Centers this fall.

Toni McWilliams, Zoë's junior designer for 10 years and now a successful interior designer in Aspen, states, "It all comes from her head. She is a pioneer in the field, without question." ■



The interior of Zoë's grain silo holds one of the original pieces upon which her colored furniture collection is based. It is a Swedish Gustavian trunk on trunk with hand-forged hardware in Stockholm Blue on Blue. Above the trunk is a signature lighting sconce from Zoë's collection.



The Importance of Good Lighting

Zoë Murphy Compton considers lighting the most overlooked element in the home, yet one of the most important. She helps clients use lighting to set the tone or mood of the room using multiple sources, according to the time of day. Lighting balance is important, too, both up and down, centered on the furniture and rugs; she reminds clients about the practical needs of every room. She encourages the use of layers in lighting — natural light, then layer artificial light for balance and ambiance. There are three kinds of light: natural, decorative and assisted.

Natural Light

To Zoë, natural light is imperative. Her advice: take advantage of as much natural light as possible by putting windows in rooms to catch the most light for the times of day when they will be used frequently. For example, breakfast rooms, kitchens and master bedrooms should catch east light and the dining room positioned to catch light from the west as well as the light of the moon. Be cognizant of where the light is relative to the purpose of rooms. Do the floor plan in the same breath as the light exposures. Peek-a-boo light through the day in a home is a most essential aspect for good design.

Decorative Lighting

Usually in the form of a chandelier or sconces, decorative lighting is the pretty element that can be managed to create a mood. Though it shouldn't be the main source of light, decorative lighting can be managed to create ambiance. Any room that has decorative lighting should also have assisted lighting. Each should operate independently of one another so a mood can be created.

Assisted Lighting

The functional part of the lighting equation, assisted lighting can be found most often in recessed can lights or tracks that operate on a dimmer. If you have a bedroom with a ceiling fan, you need assisted lighting to light the room and specific accent pieces. Bedside lamps are another form of assisted lighting. In addition, Zoë suggests the need to uplight. If you have a beautiful ceiling or art that hangs high overhead, uplighting with assisted lighting is essential.