

Southern Accents

The magazine of fine Southern interiors and gardens

March-April 2003

Welcome
SPRING!

fresh ideas
for Decorating

\$5.50US \$7.00CAN



www.southernaccents.com
AOL Keyword: Southern Accents

**Garden Style:
Indoors and Out**

A master at combining modern art and fine antiques, Herbert Wells arranged pale blue Wedgwood pitchers and a cheese cover atop a painted French console. To prevent the arrangement from feeling too precious, he placed a magnet sculpture in the center of it all. The blue in the abstract oil painting by John Millei creates a visual link between art and objects. The Louis XVI chair in the foreground is covered in what Wells calls a "no-color" Fortuny fabric. OPPOSITE PAGE: Wells says the wall color in his living room is "a shadow color" that his decorative painter matched from a fashion photograph. The painting above the Adam sofa is by artist Charles Arnoldi. The large wooden pineapple is a decorative American piece. Floral design by Lyman Ratcliffe





Houston's

Finest

Herbert Wells, a legend in the Houston design community and a prescient collector of all things enduring, has brought furniture and collections together in his new high-rise apartment

PRODUCED AND WRITTEN BY SUSANNA SHOWERS MOLDAWER
PHOTOGRAPHED BY TRIA GIOVAN



THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Wells displays his diverse collections in tabletop vignettes. The Jean-Michel Frank tables hold faux-painted tortoise boxes. He combines cultures and styles in each arrangement, like the French Palissy plate and antique amber apothecary jars atop an 18th-century Venetian chest. An old garden urn table holds a Venetian glass egg and two mercury glass containers. Wells encased Andy Warhol's *Gold Book* in a Lucite box. OPPOSITE: Wells pays attention to provenance, evident in the Louis XVI chairs that once belonged to designer Elsie de Wolfe. The Napoleonic campaign table in front of the sofa keeps the room from feeling weighted by too many objects.





Even though inviting, eclectic, and well-edited rooms are what have made Herbert Wells legendary in the Houston design world, clients say his quick wit and entertaining storytelling make

him the ultimate decorator—a man who dispenses advice without condescension and conveys taste in every step.

A few years ago, Wells decided to sell his house of 25 years and relocate to a high-rise apartment, where conveniences and views provided irresistible allure. Before he moved in, however, he gutted the place and designed a floor plan similar to his house, with all of the secondary rooms off a large center space. In lieu of standard window treatments and interior doors, Wells designed custom sliding shutter doors that can completely disappear behind the wall. His windows face the building's large formal garden so he gets a sense of the outdoors, important because his former home had an acre of property.


After running out of space in the apartment, Wells bought a small place across the hall that he converted to a home office. His apartment and office are filled with the important modern art that has been a passion for years, as well as collections of English ceramics, modern furniture, Continental antiques, and colors as subtle as they are striking. And he brings all the disparate elements

together in a way that is immensely unique and personal.

One of the reasons is his color palette. Years before the colors were popular, Wells was creating big drama with neutrals like khaki and taupe. Under his deft touch, muted shades come together in combinations that sizzle, but do so softly. "Maybe I see color differently than other people. I think it's kind of an instinct," he says. "There are rules, but I think you have to have enough confidence to ignore them, and hopefully the client will understand," he says.

Wells' skill with visual expression started with window displays he did at a major department store in his hometown of Hartford, Connecticut. "I've always said the store was my alma mater," he says. "It was very avant-garde and progressive, filled with designs from legendary names like Hattie Carnegie, the dress designer."

Eventually, he decided to make a change and move to Houston. With very little capital and some experience making hats for his friends in Connecticut, he started a millinery business in Texas. He found a seamstress who executed his designs and established a successful atelier,



“The gift of an interior designer is the ability to visualize the finished project, which a lot of people can’t do,” says Wells. “That takes experience.”



OPPOSITE: In the dining room, a luminescent shade of green provides a warm backdrop to the pair of walnut French armoires and the marble-topped dining table.

ABOVE: Tuesday, Wells' dog, has her own place of honor in a diminutive chair in front of a painted French chest that adds to the lightness of the space. BELOW: English dinner bells may have served as inspiration for Wells' palette.







LEFT: Charming and erudite, Herbert Wells surrounds himself in his office with prized pieces such as the French carved desk that once belonged to Yale R. Burge and the painting to the right of the bookcase by Helen Frankenthaler. **ABOVE:** Some of Wells' favorite projects hang above an English worktable that came from a boy's school. The "Wells" sign came from an Americana dealer in New York—it used to hang in the designer's shop, as did the French gates on the wall. The floors are painted in a three-dimensional pattern.

where stylish Houston women shopped. But Wells' ambitions extended beyond the hat business. Interior design had always been an interest, so when a client asked him to make curtains out of one of the fabrics in his shop, he didn't hesitate. "For a while I was making hats in the morning and making bathroom curtains in the afternoon. It was definitely an interesting transition," he recalls with a laugh.

Eventually, via word of mouth, Wells began getting more decorating jobs than hat orders, and Wells Design was born. His shop was filled with modern things, such as Scandinavian pieces, Kosta Boda crystal, and Venetian glass designed by Venini, that couldn't be found anywhere else in Houston. "It's interesting to see that period revived these days. In certain areas of New York, there are shops full of treasures of the '40s and '50s with very high prices—things we had to mark down to sell," he says.

Wells has always been fascinated by the elusive quality of stylishness. "You can design something and it can be very correct," he says, "but if it doesn't have a little sense of style, it's just sort of dull or repetitive, like it's been done someplace else."

The designer's store is long closed, but his home



ABOVE: The blue-gray tile on the terrace was custom-made for his former home. Wells had it moved to the apartment terrace, which overlooks the building's formal gardens, for sentimental reasons. **RIGHT:** In his bedroom, Wells attached the architectural piece, once an overdoor, to the bed he designed, which is upholstered in French mattress ticking. A Danish 1940s wing chair sits next to photos of Tuesday, Wells' dog.

is filled with his diverse collections. He says he usually selects pieces for their shape, form, and color rather than their popularity, and he encourages his clients to do the same. "I've had clients tell me they need a collection to fill a certain space," he says. "That's sort of like picking out art for people—it's so personal. I'm happy to be asked to advise them, but I still think they have to come into it themselves."

Wells stresses the value of the designer being involved in any design job from the blueprint stage. He says most architects appreciate that too because there are fewer surprises for the client. "In the end the client is the winner because they get the best job," he says. "The gift of an interior designer is the ability to visualize the finished project, which a lot of people can't do. That takes experience."

Not too long ago, Wells announced he was retiring, handing over the business to his associate Jerry Jeanmard. However, he still stays busy consulting on a number of jobs. He admits that decorating is his only true hobby, and one feels sure that Wells' work is never done. ♦

For details, see Sourcebook, page 189.



