

Old World Charm

European influences and classic design
reflect the quiet resonance of this home near the Mission Mountains.

Photography by Heidi Long





Architect George Gibson used Montana stone and French country architecture to design a new house that was meant to look as though it had been there 100 years. The living room is like a cloistered sanctuary with its thick stone walls and coffered ceilings offering protection from the outside world.

Soft, liquid notes of a French horn pour into the quiet air, lingering in the tall pines that encircle Ann and Paul Sebesta's northwest Montana home.

The Sebestas' elegant entryway doubles as a parlor for Paul's music rehearsals. His instruments stand in the curve of a graceful wrought iron spiral staircase that lines the uncommon stone walls and limestone floors. With its vaulted ceilings and abundant windows, the space is welcoming without being overly formal. Poured stone benches are nestled beneath the paned French windows that overlook a quaint courtyard in front of the house. Walking through the oversized front door the refined ambiance of the residence embraces its guests.

"Years ago, Paul and I used to love to canoe in this area," Ann says, "we would stop at this spot and stare at the mountains in the background; when the property came on the market it was like a dream fulfilled."

Sheltered by trees and skirted by the river, the Sebestas set out to build an unusual retirement home that would accommodate their current lifestyle as well as their changing needs as they grew older. The result is a blending of their eclectic tastes and practical mountain living.

Just off the entryway is an airy sitting room with floor-to-ceiling bookshelves, access to the back porch and a doorway leading to the master suite. The bedroom is comfortable, but not large. A carved mahogany Ralph Lauren bed dominates the



room. French doors frame a view of Ann's masterful landscaping and a private porch.

The master bath is a study in luxury, with a poured stone Jacuzzi tub overlooking the water. More rustic than the rest of the house, the floor is made from recycled wood planks and is chinked with concrete the way the walls of a log cabin might be. Two built-in vanities and a rain shower are other amenities. But it's Ann's personal touch, such as the vintage kimono that hangs on the wall above the tub, which set the decor apart.

"I'm not one who likes a real decorator look," says Ann,

who was an interior designer and color consultant in the San Francisco Bay area for many years. "I like to use pieces that I've acquired over the years because it reflects who I am."

Upstairs the couple created a his-and-her office area within the spacious library. Coffered ceilings painted a subtle gray give the room sophistication. Walls of bookshelves and comfortable oversized leather chairs bolster the intimacy of the space. Just down the hall, two guest rooms, furnished with striking, but simple pieces offer privacy from the main portion of the house.

Thick stone walls and deep window wells allow the windows to open into the house.

Architect George Gibson, whose namesake firm is in Big Fork, Mont., worked closely with Ann to craft her idea of the perfect mountain retreat.

"I like to call it a French Country, Napa Valley, Montana style," Gibson jokes.

Yet the house is all that without being gauche. Combining the gracious design of a classic Provencal farmhouse with casual California-style living with the solid stone and timber of the mountain region is a bold attempt to reflect a sophisticated sense of place. Gibson's design is seamless. The house would be appropriate in almost any landscape, but here, with the river drifting by and the gentle breezes coming off the Mission Mountains, it is perfect. "The idea was to design a house that looked as if it had been there for 100 years and had been added onto," Gibson says.

Ann wanted the building's core to resemble an old stone mill house or winery, something that had had another utilitarian use. That's where the French country influence came into play. After years of living in Northern California, Ann also wanted the necessity of comfortable indoor-outdoor living with a screened porch. Using native Montana materials for the project is a signature for Gibson's design firm.

Ultimately, an older ranch-style home was moved from

the property and the new house was nestled into its footprint. Gibson and his clients were conscientious of preserving the old growth trees that surround the home site. Still, views of the river from the main living area were essential as was the spatial relationship between the house and an existing barn on the property. The central part of the home is made of stone and timber. It is flanked by two small wings intended to look like additions to the "old" section.

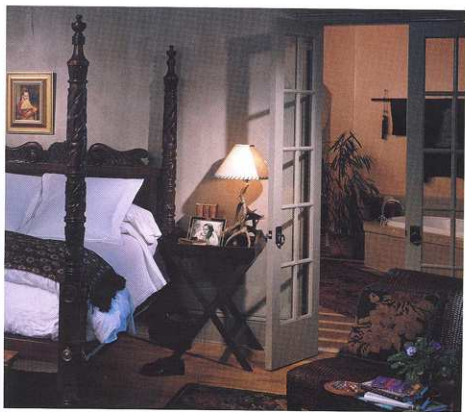
Although construction took just longer than a year, builder Dan Fischer, of Fischer-Paolini Contractors, comments that the project was unusual because the walls are 2 feet thick, whereas walls in most homes are only 7 inches thick. The use of so much stone set the house apart from other homes the contractor has built. But using 155 tons of Montana chief cliff stone is in part what creates the safe and sheltered feeling in the house.

Drawing on her experience as a designer, Ann requested specific detailing in her home's construction. Thick stone walls and deep window wells that would allow the windows to open into the house, as well as smooth pigmented, plaster walls were a few of her ideas. Gibson says Ann devoted herself completely to the project and credits her for its success.

Throughout the house, muted earth tones in the stone and plaster are contrasted by Ann's choice of windows trimmed with true red paint. Ann's collection of Asian antiques and extensive artwork create richness in the simplest spaces. She designed most of her furniture, but gathered accents from The Stone Chair, a local shop in nearby Big Fork.

The main living, dining and kitchen area is where her talent as a decorator shines. Lined by windows and French doors each space has an intimate feeling, although the floor plan is open and contemporary. Exposed beams carry the French country theme throughout the home's interior, as does the wide hearth

Owner Ann Sebesta designed her home's interiors; every detail has her unique, worldly touch. Opposite: In the kitchen poured concrete counters, a white farm sink and deep windowsills reinforce the home's Provencal design influence.



Exposed beams carry the French country theme throughout the home's interior.

on the stone fireplace in the living room. The natural blonde tone of reclaimed chestnut wood floors offsets the heavy, dark stained beams in the ceiling.

Although the Sebastas don't prepare elaborate meals very often, their kitchen is equipped with high-performance stainless-steel appliances. Storage and poured concrete countertops are efficiently designed with additional workspace on an island in the center. The sink with its thick apron and a wall of built-in glass cabinets used to display china along with other collectible kitchenware are reminders of features you might find in an old farmhouse. But the kitchen's best attribute is the walk-in pantry. Ann used antique temple doors she bought in Bali to frame the space, which is used as a utility room for laundry. Utilitarian items such as an extra sink, a window overlooking the garden and extra storage are made elegant with the use of additional built cabinets with vintage-inspired wavy glass.

Ann says that the 4,200-square-foot house started as a "cottage that got out of hand." Still, from the parlor to the upstairs library to the broad screened-in porch, every portion of this

house is well used. As the Sebastas move from space to space, during the course of their days and through changes in the seasons they can't pinpoint the most treasured part of the house. It is so artfully tailored to their lifestyle that wherever they are becomes their favorite room of the moment.

"You can't anticipate what your rhythms will be in a house until you live in it," Ann says. "The house dictates where you will go and this house is easy for us to live in."

In each room there are clues to the couple's living rhythms—Paul's music rehearsal in the parlor's morning light; delicately colored pastel eggs that Ann collects from her hens laid out on the counter in the pantry; afternoon reading in the sunroom off the kitchen; and a low fire in the living room fireplace when the mountain evening chills. The house is a reflection of the couple's quiet, full life, its walls resonant with their contentment here.

"The house is so much more than I thought it would be," Ann says. ■

— *Seabring Davis*

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