

Marni Jameson

To Define Your Style Think Like Plato

By Marni Jameson



House Beautiful

The woman at the party got right down to it. After the usual first-meeting patter -- Where do you live? Who does your hair? -- came the inevitable: What do you do? When I said I was a home design columnist, she got a horror-stricken look I'm used to. Translated: "I'm never having this woman to my place." Then she just came out with it: "Okay, so is your home all tricked out?"

"Heck no!"

"You're kidding?"

"I'm just like most people dealing with the same three-pronged trap -- no money, no time, no courage." "But it's your business."

"My business is making myself feel better by letting readers know they're not alone as we try to make our homes look like something better than the dog's breakfast." I'm no threat to the common home decorator. I have all the same issues. I just get

paid -- about enough to cover my Starbucks tab -- to vent about them, and offer a little hard-won advice along the way.

Then she hit on a common stumbling block. "My problem," she said, "I like so many looks I don't have a look."

"I can relate. One minute a sleek modern look sweeps me away. Next I'm in love with rooms filled with cozy English florals. Then a Tuscan-styled home with terracotta pavers turns my head. They're all great looks, but not in the same house."

"So how do you *commit* to one?"

"It's like marriage," I say. "Success requires love, faithfulness and discipline."

We laughed, but she got me thinking: *How do you define your style?*

I was lucky to have someone tell me my style, before I took off on a wrong and expensive track. When I moved to Colorado from California four years ago, I was smitten with all the Rocky Mountain interiors. I walked through model homes decorated with heavy wood furniture, rough hewn timbers, and muted shades of olive, rust and brown. The mountain lodge decor made me feel as if I were on vacation. If my home looked like this, I thought, I would always have that vacation feeling, which of course is pure tripe.

Meanwhile, I was building a home and needed professional help -- in more ways than one. I hired a Denver interior designer for eight hours of consulting to help me pull together the

background -- wall color, flooring and tile treatments -- and to give me a design direction. I'd take the project from there. I showed her the local interiors I loved, and some pictures of my former home and furnishings.

"This look is great, but it's not you," she said bluntly. "This is too Beaver Creek. The lines are too beefy, the furniture too heavy, the granite counters too thick. It would be a mistake. Everything I can see about you leans toward French Country, lighter lines, something more European. Look at the furniture you've already bought." Was this woman a designer or a psychic?

Suddenly, the typical Colorado lodge-style armchair sitting by the Colorado fireplace did seem like something Paul Bunyan would sit in, not five-foot-three me. I would feel like Goldilocks in Papa's chair. In that Oprah moment, I stopped trying to make my new interior into something I wasn't. Rather I was going to be myself in a new place.

Short of finding an interior design psychic, how do you find your style? I floated the question by Stephen Drucker, editor in chief of *House Beautiful*. "You were lucky," he said, when I told him my story. "Most people have a blind spot about their style."

Start by going through stacks of home design magazines, he said. "Tear out pictures of any rooms you like. When you have 50 interiors, go back through them. A look will emerge." He also recommended looking around your home, for the three things it would break your heart to part with. "If it's a pine table, a hand-woven throw and a canvas sofa, you're a country girl."

Beyond that, I believe you also need to pretend you're Plato, and ponder some deep questions.

Where am I?

Look at the architecture around you and of your home. Architecture and geography should influence your décor. If you have a colonial home in New England, a Moroccan decorating scheme would be a mistake.

What am I doing here?

What is the job your house needs to do? In great design, function comes first, form second. "Be brutally honest when analyzing how you live," said Drucker. "If you never entertain, turn your dining room into a library." An executive bachelor who is a gourmet cook should have a much different home from that of a family of four kids with two dogs.

Where did I come from?

Consider your heritage and express that in your home. I'm a fifth generation Californian with European roots. I feel most at home with a style I would call relaxed Old French with a few nods to the west. I like many looks, but this one suits me.

While you don't have to strictly stick to one style, if you pick one -- modern, rustic, traditional, country, ethnic -- be consistent. Mexican, Scandinavian, and Early American are all distinctive looks. Blend them and you get a camel wearing plaid and stilettos.

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