

A photograph of a European-style interior. The room features deep green walls with white crown molding and a large, ornate tapestry on the left wall. A dark wood desk with a chair is positioned near a large arched window. A wooden chair with a floral seat cushion is in the foreground. A red vase sits on a table to the right. The floor is made of light-colored wood in a herringbone pattern.

# European Charm

Interior designer Fabiola Martens and her husband evoke timeless elegance in their Italian Renaissance-style home in Washington, DC

*By Meredith Stanton  
Photography by Angie Seckinger*



Belgian-born interior designer Fabiola Martens and her husband, Rudi Djabbarzadeh (above), share a love of antiques. In their home's central hall, a five-panel leather screen from 18th-century Holland with its original polychrome finish unfolds along one wall (previous spread). Overlooking the back garden is a French Directoire-style desk with its original leather top (right). A green decorative paint treatment throughout the foyer brings the outside in.

**I**nterior designer Fabiola Martens and her husband, architectural designer and builder Rudi Djabbarzadeh, are full of surprises. For one, neither began their careers in the building or design fields. Martens was a lawyer for nine years, while Djabbarzadeh worked in foreign affairs and film production.

And second, no room in their Italian Renaissance-style, 5,400 square-foot home is at all predictable.

"Somebody once said, you need some tension in every room—a little surprise to keep you on your feet," says Martens. "You don't want design to become too contrived. You always need to keep that sense of humor."

To both ends, the couple has been successful. Marrying Martens's attention to detail in interior design with Djabbarzadeh's eye for architectural

charm, they succeeded in creating a comfortable, European-inspired home in the Palisades neighborhood of Washington, DC, perfect for their quiet yet sophisticated lifestyle.

When the Swiss-born Djabbarzadeh purchased the property about 20 years ago and built the European stucco and stone house (a feat that took nearly three years), he considered every detail, from the design right down to the topography of the land. But after the couple met in 2000 and later married, Martens set to work putting her personal touch on the home's interior.

Working with the house that Djabbarzadeh had custom-built from the ground up was reassuring to the couple, because they knew they wouldn't have to worry about hidden problems or the need for remodeling down the line. "Sometimes, when you buy an



*Interior Design:* Fabiola Martens, Fabiola Martens Interiors, Washington, DC  
*Architecture & Construction:* Rudi Djabbarzadeh, Rudi:D, Washington, DC



existing property, you're dealing with old spaces and lots of renovations," says Martens. "It's never exactly what you want it to be."

Besides, "Washington is a transient city. If you really want to take roots in the house like I did, the best way of doing that is building it entirely the way you want to," explains her husband.

Touches of the couple's Belgian and Swiss backgrounds are infused throughout both the interior and exterior of the warm, tan-colored house. A three-bedroom floor plan integrates modern European design featuring clean, open spaces as opposed to the "nooks and crannies" approach so typically found in more traditional, Victorian-style homes, says Martens.

"A lot of things in this house are symmetrical," says Martens. "Everything is well balanced. We believe that when [the design] is simple, it always stays classical. It withstands the test of time."

Upon entering the home through the French doors, this is instantly apparent. Guests find themselves in a nearly 11-foot-high central hall, with

To counterbalance the green of the entryway, Martens designed the living room (these pages) in understated shades of taupe using fabrics of silk and velvet. An antique gilded Louis XV mirror hangs over the natural marble fireplace, both of which were acquired in France. The cabinetry designed by her husband (opposite) displays the couple's collection of Chinese temple fruit, which spans three centuries.

the living room to the left, the dining room to the right and a direct line-of-sight to the expansive windows, which open onto the back garden. The staircase is discreetly placed off of the entryway, but nonetheless grand with its large sitting bench and floor-to-ceiling window overlooking a bamboo garden. A green decorative paint treatment throughout the foyer brings the outside in, while the wood herringbone floor further guides you into the house.

To counterbalance the green of the entryway, Martens designed the living room in understated taupe colors using warm fabrics of silk and velvet. Two overstuffed sofas facing each other create a centerpiece in the room, promoting a good conversation or, at the very least, offering a relaxing place to sit. An antique gilded mirror hangs over the natural marble fireplace, both of which were acquired in France. Red Italian silk drapes offset the muted, neutral colors of beige and wood in the room, while lifting your eye to the decorated gold-leafed crown molding. More color is found in the wall display of Chinese temple fruit, a collection that spans three centuries. An antique Venetian Murano glass chandelier hangs delicately from the ceiling, playing off the colors and abundant natural light from the seven sets of windows and doors in the room.

Overall, the look is formal, but still

cozy. "We do everything in the living room," says Martens. "It's formal in here, but it's also informal enough to sit in your PJs and read the paper. There used to be a rug in here but we took it out because we both thought it made the room too traditional. Without a rug, it opened it up. We just like to use every space in the house."

Since the couple frequently entertains small groups of guests, the dining room didn't need to be cavernous, merely elegant. The black and gold dining room table, designed by Djabbarzadeh, sits comfortably in the middle of the room surrounded by 18th-century English chairs made of ebonized wood and decorated with polychrome painting. Warm mahogany paneled walls, rich hues and a black marble wood-burning fireplace create more of a den-like feeling, rather than an over-the-top dining area—a design perfectly suited for the couple's intimate dinner parties.

For the larger events, the room can accommodate an arrangement of tables or even one big one. "The squareness of the room allows us to mix and match depending on who we're entertaining," says Martens.

When dining at home together, they prefer to use a small table set off of the kitchen. The couple's unpredictable charms are particularly evident here, where cabinetry seamlessly folds into

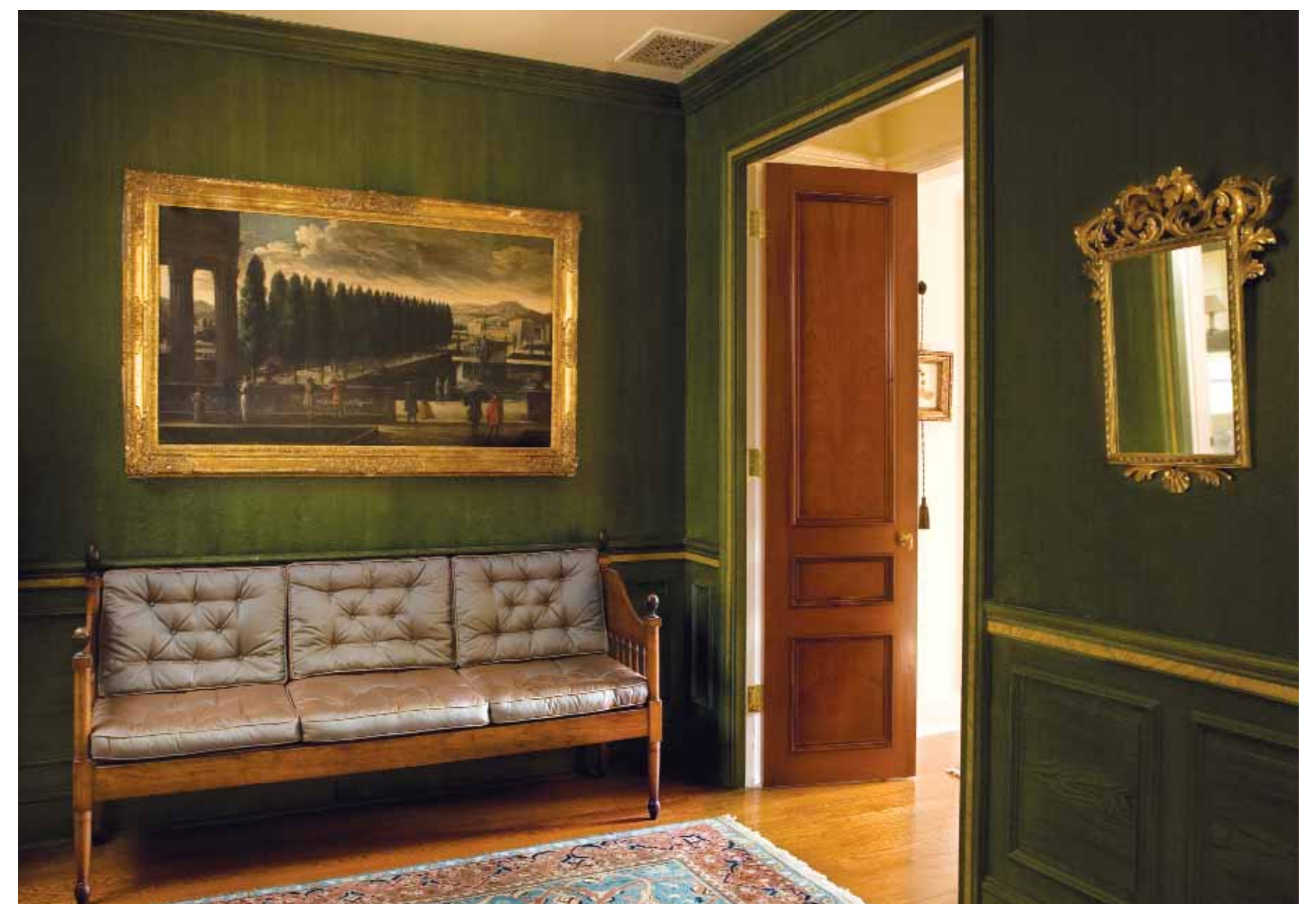
**"SOMEBODY ONCE SAID, YOU NEED SOME TENSION IN EVERY ROOM—A LITTLE SURPRISE TO KEEP YOU ON YOUR FEET," SAYS FABIOLA MARTENS. "YOU DON'T WANT DESIGN TO BECOME TOO CONTRIVED. YOU ALWAYS NEED TO KEEP THAT SENSE OF HUMOR."**

A custom table designed by Rudi Djabbarzadeh and an iron and crystal chandelier by Niermann Weeks perfectly complement the dining room's sparingly selected antiques, which include 18th-century English dining chairs, a 19th-century nude (unsigned) and a black marble fireplace from France.





Martens juxtaposed modern track-lighting fixtures with two giant antique wooden corbels salvaged from Paris in the sitting room off the kitchen (opposite). Resembling a villa in Italy or France, the back of the stone and stucco residence (above) opens to a stone terrace with gardens to the left and right.



The entry hall leads to a sitting area on the second floor (above), which Martens has furnished with a bench with cushions made of Prima Seta silk, a 17th-century oil painting (unsigned) and a carved 19th-century mirror.



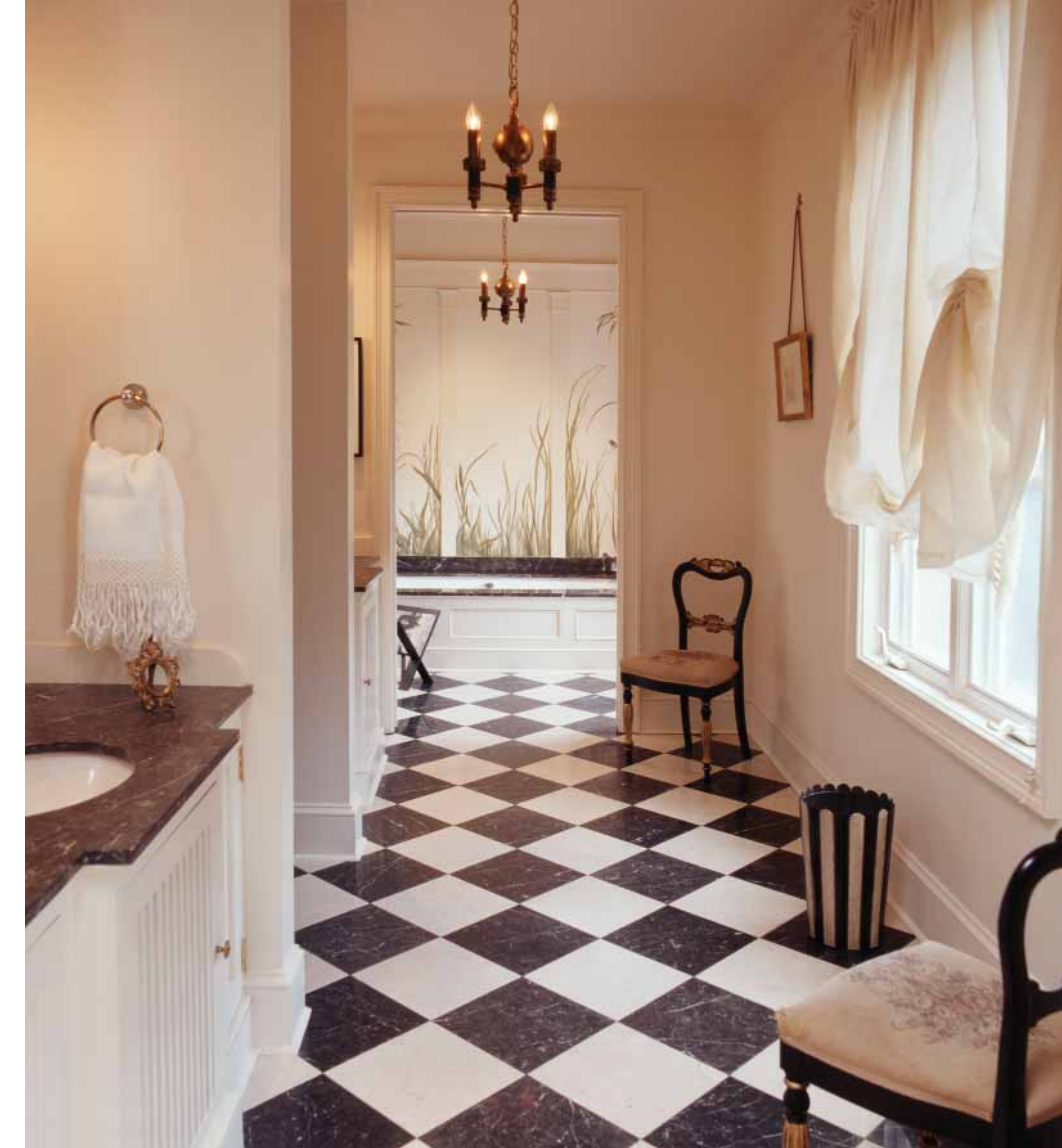
the wall behind mahogany woodwork and unconventional limestone graces the kitchen counters. Track-lighting fixtures add an element of modern design to the otherwise traditional sitting room off the kitchen.

“We did [the kitchen] with a lot of woodwork so it didn’t really feel like a kitchen,” explains Martens. “We also wanted the kitchen to be a continuum that you could just go through, and not have the separation between it and the rest of the spaces. Everything is done so that it’s attractive, but also very functional. And now and then, we like to throw you off and have a very contemporary element somewhere that gives an element of surprise. Design should never be predictable.”

Outdoors, Djabbarzadeh has created an Old World design with a garden reminiscent of one that might be found in a French villa. Separated into three distinct areas, the main space is centered with the rustic, stone terrace off the back of the house, and features a trellis-covered terrace overlooking a small pond. In essence, the design creates a country feel in a city house. Stone walls and plants divide the large space, with smaller gardens to the left and right.

“When you look in the backyard, it’s really a continuation of rooms,” says Martens. “It’s not an open garden. The walls of the house continue through the green separations.”

The landscape is central to Martens’ interior design. Large windows and doors throughout every room offer expansive views of the garden or courtyard. Upstairs, the master bedroom and bath feature garden elements, including a bamboo scene painted above the bathtub (complete with a small, winking salamander) and a floral motif used throughout the bed-



room. Even on the second floor, “you create that sense of remembering where you are, and what the outside looks like,” explains Martens.

Given that the couple works from home, they opted to remove a stone wall in their front courtyard, replacing it with a large space for their new offices and a garage for three vehicles. All of the work should be completed this fall.

But don’t be amazed if the work doesn’t stop there. “Good design is a process,” Martens says. “It’s never ‘Do it all and then you’re done.’ You start with a thought; you think you have everything planned. But, then there are just more nice surprises.” ♦

*Meredith Stanton is a writer based in Washington, DC. Photographer Angie Seckinger is based in Potomac, Maryland.*

*See page 252 for Resources*

*Evoking the outdoors in the master bedroom and bath, Martens selected a botanical fabric by Braquenié for the bedroom’s drapes and upholstered walls (opposite). A Koplavitch & Zimmer silk upholsters the 18th-century French recammier. And in the master bath, a decorative-paint treatment depicts willowy bamboo (above).*