

Barry Dixon's Look And How to Get It

By *Jura Koncius*

Washington Post Staff Writer

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The 1907 estate in [Warrenton](#) where designer Barry Dixon lives, works and raises chickens, goats and llamas is a visual banquet, a rich layering of old and new, formal and informal, objects that are rare and those that are not: weathered French garden orbs, bowls of Granny Smith apples, books Dixon read as a child in [Tennessee](#) and armloads of willow branches from the garden. Engravings of de Medicis mingle with flea market candlesticks. One favorite touch: antique apothecary jars filled with ordinary lemon drops from Target.

"The important things in a room are the essence of what you hold valuable," says Dixon, 49.

"Things that define who you are. A room should start a conversation before people actually start exchanging words."

The 20,000-square-foot Elway Hall, which Dixon bought with his partner Michael Schmidt in 1991, is a sprawl of rooms beginning with a vast foyer coated in chalky white (Farrow & Ball's Lime White) that leads to sitting rooms and libraries painted citrine, chartreuse and gold. There are 17 fireplaces and 10 bedrooms.

It is, by any measure, lavish abundance, artfully edited and arranged. "There has to be enough about you in a room to make it personal and individual," says the designer. "It's not just about pretty things." He and Schmidt use their travels to such places as [Istanbul](#), [Alaska](#) and [London](#) as a way to jointly select inlaid tables and antique farm implements that speak to both of them. Says Schmidt, "I leave it to Barry to figure out a way to weave in whatever we buy so it seamlessly works with whatever else is there."

Dixon brings that seasoned sensibility -- layering color, pattern and decorative objects -- to clients' lofts in Tribeca, new houses in [Bethesda](#) and sea captains' cottages in [Nantucket](#).

"Walk in and you think a room by Barry Dixon is beautiful, but the longer you spend in one of his spaces, the more you notice that everything there has a meaning and a purpose and a place in how the room works," says Karen Carroll, editor in chief of [Southern Accents](#) magazine. "He is enormously talented, and he is one of the most gentlemanly people I have ever met."

One of Washington's best known decorators, Dixon is a regular on [House Beautiful](#)'s list of top designers and in the pages of magazines such as [Southern Accents](#), [Metropolitan Home](#) and [Traditional Home](#). He has decorated for [Diane Sawyer](#) and former Senate majority leader [Bill Frist](#). In the past three years, Dixon has designed more than 50 sofas, ottomans and chairs for Tomlinson/Erwin-Lambeth. He is also working on other collections of rugs, fabrics and trims. These days he is shuttling between [Dulles](#) and [Beijing](#), where he's completing an unnamed client's residence in time for the Olympics. In September, "Barry Dixon Interiors," written by Brian D. Coleman, will be published by Gibbs Smith.

Dixon's philosophy is rooted in a confident mix of high and low: "I'm not shy about spending a small fortune on something rare that has character and personality," he says. "But I must earn the right to do that by supplanting it with other, less expensive things. It takes the pretension out of the mix." (Recall those bright penny candies in an antique glass jar.)

Dixon, son of a metallurgist, spent his childhood in such places as [India](#) and [South Africa](#), giving him a lifelong interest in other cultures. "If you want to be creative, go someplace -- anyplace. Drive to Harpers Ferry or get on a plane to [Morocco](#). You will come back with an idea."

"I don't know any other designer who has that broad a frame of reference; he has lived in so many different places," says Linda O'Keefe, [Metropolitan Home](#)'s director of design and architecture. "He can find this common denominator in so many different styles, and he ends up with a look that is uniquely his."

After graduating from the [University of Mississippi](#) with a degree in art history and design, he lived in Jackson and began decorating antebellum homes. He moved to Washington in 1984 and worked for designers Carol Lascaris and Bob Waldron before forming his own company in 1994. Dixon and Schmidt purchased Elway Hall, on 300 acres in the rolling hills of [Fauquier County](#), because the recently restored Edwardian manor offered so much room for entertaining family and

friends -- and a generous canvas for a designer's inspiration. The entire third floor became work space devoted to Barry Dixon Inc., in which Schmidt is the managing partner.

With the business now up to 16 employees, the offices are moving later this year a few miles away, into three buildings currently under restoration in the village of Warrenton. One large room will be a design lab where Dixon can keep stacks of antique textiles and shelves of art and design books, with space aplenty to experiment with design concepts.

Dixon does some of his best work on deadline. A 1999 Southern Accents Design House in [McLean](#) was the victim of construction delays. With three days to go before the splashy opening party and no electricity or running water, the designer camped out on a plastic-covered mattress, brushing his teeth with bottled water and living off the props of pistachios and jelly beans to finish on time. Calling from Beijing last week, he said he was trying not to sleep too much because he didn't want to adjust to that time zone before it was time to jet home and head to [Nashville](#) for an installation.

"I love what I do," Dixon said. "Hopefully, when people leave a room I've designed, they know a little bit more about the people who live there."

Dixon's Favorite Sources

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B. Viz Design. Couture pillows hand-stitched in [Louisiana](#) and made of antique textiles from all over the world. One pillow can make the simplest sofa special. <http://www.bviz.com>.

D.C. Big Flea. This five-times-a-year sale of antiques and collectibles by 500 dealers is a secret source for many top Washington designers. [Dulles Expo Center](#), 4368 Chantilly Center, [Chantilly](#), 703-378-0910, <http://www.damorepromotions.com>.

Floor Gallery. Dixon prefers sea grass to sisal for rugs because it wears better and is easier to clean. Get the nonskid variety. 12108 Wilkens Ave., Rockville, 301-468-1550, <http://www.thefloorgallery.com>.

Fox Den Antique Mall. A treasure trove of dealers and 700 consignors with a constantly changing stream of vintage kitchenware, children's books and holiday ornaments. 355B W. Shirley Ave., Warrenton, 540-347-1162.

Happy Mango Beads. A Web site for hard-to-find trade beads, seeds, coral and nuts from [Peru](#), [Nepal](#), [Ghana](#), [Italy](#) and more. Good for beading light fixtures or screens. <http://www.happymangobeads.com>.

Wollam Gardens. Bob Wollam sells more than 70 varieties of flowers at his small farm and at farmers markets in [Warrenton](#), [Arlington](#), [Dupont Circle](#) and Penn Quarter. Dixon favorites are quince, viburnum, sunflowers and mock orange. 5167 Jeffersonton Rd., Jeffersonton, Va. <http://www.wollamgardens.com>.