

Beauty in BALANCE

Richmond designers Lili O'Brien & Leigh Anne Muse have mastered the art of adapting their talents to showcase each client's personal style at its finest.

BY Lisa Frederick | PHOTOGRAPHY BY Kip Dawkins

Some interior designers have such a distinctive style that their stamp on a home is obvious at first glimpse. Not so with Richmond-based design firm O'Brien & Muse—and that's just the way they like it.

"I think it's a compliment when people can't pinpoint exactly who did the design, when it really looks like the homeowner instead of the designer," says cofounder Lili O'Brien. "Our job is to reflect their taste and their wants, versus our own."

Over the past decade, that mind-set has earned O'Brien & Muse wide acclaim throughout the South and beyond. Lili and business partner Leigh Anne Muse both worked for a local interiors firm for years before branching out on their own in 2004. "We were able to perceive that we had common aesthetic values," Lili says. "We came to depend on each other and bounce ideas off each other, even before we were working only together."

Their mutual approach melds fine antiques and traditional patterns with a pared-down sensibility—"classic design with one foot in the present," as Lili puts it. "It's all about balance: creating a balance of proportion, a balance of contrast, a balance of texture." In a city like Richmond, where historic homes and heirloom antiques abound, that equilibrium is crucial to prevent an older dwelling from feeling like a period piece. The designers might pair an ornate crystal chandelier with a modern dining table, freshen paneling and millwork with an unexpected paint color, or hang contemporary artwork above a carved burl-wood chest.

"Antiques give instant integrity to any interior, but we also make sure that there's some levity with other pieces," Lili says. "We may use a less-formal rug underneath a dining-room table, or a lightweight drapery material, or a more casual, textured wallcovering." Color is another key element—whereas traditional palettes tend toward jewel tones, Lili says, today's homeowners gravitate toward soft neutrals or clear, saturated brights.

At the same time, the design duo keeps a careful eye on preserving the historic bones that give so many Richmond houses their charm and character.

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“When young couples purchase these beautiful old homes, they want to make sure that the integrity of the house isn’t compromised and that there’s a cohesive flow between the old and the new,” Lili says. “That’s hard to do, because in some cases, proportions have changed over time.”

At its essence, Lili explains, an O’Brien & Muse project is all about a relaxed and realistic perspective on daily life. “I think the greatest success is if you can have a house in which every room is usable and comfortable and inviting,” Lili says. “That’s really a goal for us, to create livable rooms that are not untouchable.”

For information, visit obrienandmuse.com.

FROM THEIR HOMES TO YOURS

Lili and Leigh Anne share a few of their best style secrets.

- Reduce clutter at all costs. “[Clutter] will certainly detract from the overall beauty of a room,” Lili says. Editing down collections and bric-a-brac lends visual breathing room and a smoother flow.
- Pay attention to the light in a space. Balance natural sunlight with artificial lighting such as lamps and sconces. Take different times of day into account—your lighting needs midmorning won’t be the same as they are at dusk.
- Group collections to cut down on chaos. “When you’re dealing with a home that has lots of different elements in it, grouping like objects can be a really good way to manage the volume,” Lili says.
- Enrich rooms with books. “I like the weight and the sense of history they bring to a space,” Lili says. “It kind of knocks the polish off from the get-go.” She prefers to keep bookshelves free of decorative objects—but if you do use them, they should have a connection to each other, rather than being chosen just to fill a spot.
- Make the powder room special. “You can take a little bit more risk without worrying that you’ll tire of it, because you’re not going to spend an inordinate amount of time in that space,” Lili says. Powder rooms are ideal places to try a fun paint color or a splashy pattern or to use delicate materials that don’t need to withstand heavy wear and tear.

