

Erin Martin

Interior designer Erin Martin is working to make every house a home

By Jim Brumm



St. Helena interior designer Erin Martin is the daughter of creative parents. Her father was an architect and her mother was an artist and interior designer. Martin seemed destined to follow in their footsteps.

Though her parents blazed the trail, Erin Martin had no formal schooling

in the art of interior design. "I don't feel limited by the rules of design, which allows me to be creative," she said.

Perhaps that very lack of formal training is what gives Martin her special touch. She worked with "Youth on a Mission," in Europe and Africa, helping orphans. During her

travels she was exposed to a wide variety of cultures and styles which have inspired her work today.

"I loved Morocco," said Martin. "The style there was clean with much attention to detail. Experienced a nomad mentality provided a contrast. You learn that it's possible to live very simply. They're just possessions."

But let's back up. Just eight years ago Martin was waiting tables at a restaurant in Santa Rosa and was, as she put it, very content. One day, she said, she wandered into a design store in that town – Randolph Johnson Design. She was smitten by what the store offered and took a job on the floor.

"I stayed on the floor until Randolph discovered I could draw," said Martin. "He brought me into his studio and I began working on huge murals with him. He tapped into my talent and gave me a chance."

Eventually Martin got the opportunity to do her first big solo job. "I met a painter who introduced me to Jack Daniels, the owner of Wilson-Daniels, LTD., a large distributor of French wines. Upon finishing his home Jack recommended me to many of his friends and my business took off.

In the beginning Martin would go to appointments with her daughter, Lauren, now four-years-old, in tow.

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Clients responded to Martin's unassuming demeanor and work style. Four years ago she opened Erin Martin Design in St. Helena and word of her talent has spread. Today Martin and her four employees are busy every day with numerous clients, half of whom are here in the valley, and half of whom are spread out all over the western United States.

Martin said she's inspired by Michael Taylor, a founding father of the California design style.

Martin, a free-spirited woman who admitted that she has been known to sing the *Queen* hit *Bohemian Rhapsody* in a karaoke bar, is as comfortable in blue jeans and bare feet as in a formal setting. Her laughter and enthusiasm for her work are contagious. She said she becomes emotionally involved in every project she does. She works closely with clients to create many custom designs, from the lights to the furniture to the floor plan. She begins by asking questions to learn about her client. Do they entertain? Do they have kids?

"I want to create more of a home, not a showroom," she said. Unlike

many designers, Martin usually doesn't bring photos of past jobs to the table. She wishes to create fresh ideas without trying to steer them in any one direction. Typically she will sit and talk while making design sketches right there on the spot. The clients not only buy her ideas and talent, they buy her passion.

According to Martin, the houses she loved designing the most are those where the clients trusted her and "let me go."

"I work to create the perfect home for my clients. It's *their* life, it has to reflect their personality. I don't design for showing off. I make homes that feel great – and oh, by the way, they look great too!"

Martin was written up in the December 2002 issue of *Architectural Digest* as one of the best sources for design. Her showroom offers one-of-a-kind pieces from around the world.

So what interior design look is popular today in the Napa Valley? According to Martin, much of the nation still likes a "country" motif in their decorating and the rest are more open to other ideas. Many homeowners in the valley have gone for the very popular Tuscan look, she says, but she prefers to design something unique and special for each client, based on their lives and their dreams.

For example, in the home we visited, Martin pointed out the glass-topped dining table, which beautifully showcased an old fishing net under the glass, a net the homeowner fished with years ago. The living room's lamps incorporated sprockets from bicycles to celebrate the owner's cross-country bicycle

trek.

Today, she said, the valley is more about comfortable lifestyles, inside and outside, rather than a particular look. Often, Martin works closely with the architect in the design of the structure itself, incorporating her ideas literally from the ground up.

"I love the Napa Valley because the people here are so open to styles and ideas in design," she added. Her favorite designers include Ron, Mann, Terry Hunzinger, John Dickenson and Hugh Newell Jacobson. But while she has learned much from many, Martin's style is uniquely her own.

In the future Martin hopes to launch her own line of furniture and showcase it in cities across the



country, along with branch offices for the design side of her business.

"It's simple," she said. "I'm passionate about design."

Erin Martin Design is located at 1118 Hunt Avenue in St. Helena. 707-963-4141.