

Elisabeth Wedel's philosophy of decoration is an ascetic one, in which rooms form a functional backdrop for works of art.

SIMPLY PUT

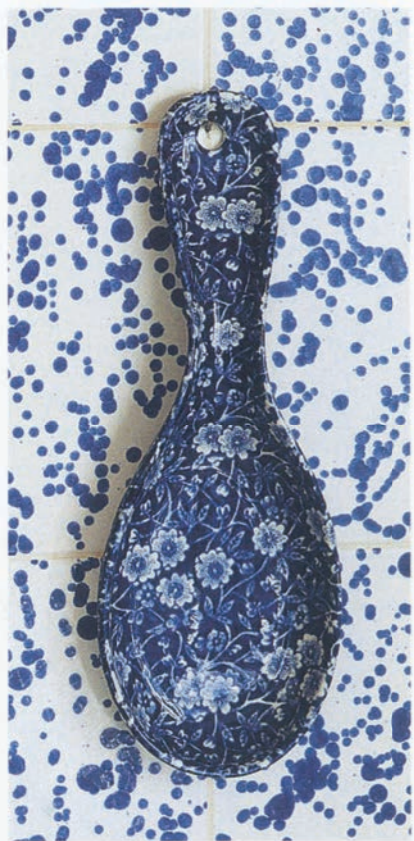
Toby Alleyne-Gee finds these aesthetic ideals brought to life in her Burgundian home. Photography: Fritz von der Schulenberg

The outside staircase originally provided access to living quarters. The south-facing terrace was added by the owner and is used for a fresco eating. Japanese-style blue and white plant pots are modern.

entrance hall.
The wicker
daybed is a
French copy of
one found in
Tutankhamen's
tomb. The
cushion covers
are modern
African fabrics.
The floor is ash.

This page:
The balcony
over the
entrance hall.
A modern
trestle table
serves as a
desk, and
antique silver
tumblers
store pencils.
Opposite: The





The hush of the sleepy Burgundian village in which art dealer Elisabeth Wedel has made her home is disturbed only by the barking of her golden retriever and the crunch of gravel underfoot. I am welcomed by a tall, svelte, imposing woman with fair hair and a wry smile. Over a glass of wine in her garden, Elisabeth relates the history of the place.

Built in the 1790s by two brothers, prosperous wine-growers on their way up in the world, the house was intended to symbolise their success, and is hence – to this day – the only three-storey building in the village. One brother was the architect, the other the builder. Because they frequently quarrelled, the architect deliberately sent his brother to fetch stones from a remote quarry to keep him out of the way.

Elisabeth received a thoroughly classical training as an interior decorator at the Nissim de Camondo design school in Paris, and rapidly developed an interest in art, stimulated by the Musée de Camondo's collection. She soon moved away from the concept of interior decoration for its own sake in favour of creating a neutral framework for paintings and *objets d'art*. 'Like an art collection, interior decoration must have a consistent thread. Most collectors entirely neglect the decoration around the pieces they collect, while decorators are so busy decorating that they smother the works of art.'

A spell at design school in Germany, where she came into contact with the Krefeld textile and ceramics industry, also had a profound influence on Elisabeth, awakening her interest in textures and the functional simplicity of industrial design. Yet the Bauhaus had the greatest impact on her design philosophy. 'I apply the same visual criteria to decoration as I do to works of art. Simply put, there is what I call a language of layers – background, central plane, foreground – and of colours – cold or warm. What is especially important is a visual understanding of everyday objects. That's why I choose my furniture and decorative objects according to purely functional and aesthetic criteria.'

This explains the culturally diverse combination of influences with which Elisabeth has created a distinctly exotic ambience in the sitting room. A collection of Chinese and South American sculpted stone heads is displayed on an English mahogany console; Indian colonial wicker chairs blend perfectly with a Dutch cabinet or a rare cast-iron caryatid candlestick after a design by the German neoclassical architect Schinkel. Yet, as Elisabeth explains, because the furniture and several of the decorative objects are predominantly black – a 'non-colour' – they fade into the background, providing a discreet framework for her pictures.

If the link between the oriental flamboyance of the sitting room and the entrance hall-cum-library is not immediately

The table is laid with family silver and heavy blue tumblers from Kiel, Germany. The tablecloth and napkins are from Guess Homes, New York. The blue chairs are from Swiss chain Interio. Above: A modern English china serving spoon

Opposite: The kitchen. The 'splashed' blue-and-white tiles in the alcoves are in an Austrian style typical of the Gmundener Keramik factory. Old and new china: 'Bleu des Fès' from Morocco; pots from Japan, Persia, 19th-century Staffordshire.



is a modern paisley fabric. The electrified candlestick is Indian, from Haga, Paris. On the table, the Bohemian glass decanters are in a traditional design; the 19th-century horn-covered box is Indian; the black Burmese rice pots are lacquered bamboo leaves

The sitting room. The sofa is a single bed covered in an old kilim. The cushions are old kilims; a few are modern imitations. The tablecloth is a traditional Afghan print from Bukhara in Uzbekistan. The Sri Lankan colonial chairs came from Ciancimino in London. The red throw





Top: The bathroom. The folding canvas chair is Italian; the plaster obelisks, busts and bas-relief medallions are from Weimar. The blind, in brown-and-white ticking, matches the walls. Above: The terrace. The cast-iron chair in white canvas is from Provence; the marble-topped table from a

junk shop. The wall lights are copies of 19th-century French lamps. Opposite: The guest bedroom. The blue-and-white fabrics are from Laura Ashley (discontinued). The lamp base from Haga; the shade from Laura Ashley; the black-and-gold painted wooden chairs 19th-century English

obvious, Elisabeth's philosophy of colour will clarify it: the 'non-colour' white, used for walls, curtains and sofas, also serves as a backdrop for diverse *objets d'art* – an aboriginal bark painting, an African mask, a Han funeral flask, or the daybed, a French copy of one found in Tutankhamen's tomb.

Although most of the fabrics in this room are neutral in colour, variations of texture create a sensual interest: heavy canvas is used for the curtains, and the African cushions on the sofas, roughly printed in a starkly graphic design, are coarse to the touch. The mixture of cultures, Elisabeth says, is entirely coincidental. 'Neither ethnological nor historical considerations are important for my decoration. What matters is the functional and aesthetic statement an object makes.' She has applied this principle throughout her house, which she sees as 'a family centre for an active artistic life'.

The kitchen, relatively small but spacious enough to eat in comfortably, is the centre of the house. Dark, dingy and impractical when Elisabeth moved in, it has been completely remodelled. The floor was replaced with pale ash boards (which continue throughout the ground floor) to capture the warm Burgundian light. The cheerful blue-and-white colour scheme, featuring a decorative mixture of china from all over the world – old and new, rare and inexpensive – creates a welcoming atmosphere in which family members and Elisabeth's many guests can congregate.

Upstairs, the almost ascetic decorative philosophy of the two reception rooms yields to a cosier, more light-hearted style. Sobriety reigns in the simple first-floor bathroom, but not without a quirky intellectual touch. The plaster-of-Paris busts and bas-relief medallions depict German literary luminaries such as Goethe and Schiller, and were brought back from Weimar, originally home to Elisabeth's family, who were closely involved with the Weimar Court. (One ancestor even organised the decoration of one of the city's palaces.)

The Central European mood continues in the cheerful red and green guest bedroom, inspired by the early 19th-century Bavarian wardrobe. The 18th-century screen depicting peasant scenes is a family heirloom. 'It's hideous – the painting is poor-quality and somewhere down the line a child made a hole in it – but I'm very fond of it. After the war we had to leave Germany. My mother had to buy the screen off her sister-in-law, who was completely broke, and we took it with us on a horse-drawn cart as we fled the country. So it has a great deal of sentimental value.'

All is not what it seems in this house, and that is what makes it so attractive. What at first glance may appear to be a curious mixture of periods and cultures, textures and colours, is the result of strict intellectual and aesthetic principles, a constant quest for the perfect combination of function and form. Which is why it may soon look quite different ■

