



# Ashley Gilbreath

THE DESIGNER MAY BE FREQUENTLY ON THE MOVE—LATELY FROM THE GULF COAST OF FLORIDA TO MONTGOMERY—BUT SHE’LL NEVER LEAVE BEHIND HER APPRECIATION FOR TRADITIONAL ANTIQUES, A KNACK FOR ADDING IN A DASH OF THE FRESH AND UNEXPECTED, OR HER LOVE FOR STRIPES OF ALL KINDS. TEXT KAREN CARROLL

**Southern Home (SH):** What is your earliest memory of beauty?  
**Ashley Gilbreath (AG):** I grew up in Baton Rouge, and my parents still live in the same house. My mom didn’t work with a designer, and it was by no means perfectly done, but she had pieces inherited from family and could tell you the story behind almost everything. To this day she has a wonderful way of making sure anyone who walks in that house feels like the most important person on the planet. There’s always something to eat on the table or kitchen counter and a flower by the bed. Now in my own work, it’s as much about creating a feeling as it is designing a beautiful environment. We get to do this little life one time. Why not be intentional with

what you surround yourself with? Everyone interprets the word “beautiful” differently, and the joy is in figuring out what that is for the client.

**SH: When did you realize design would be your calling?**  
**AG:** When my sister and I were little, she’d line up the baby dolls and want to play house, and I’d say, “I’m going to go draw a house plan.” I’m certain I wasn’t aware of what a designer was or that I could do anything with that. When the time came for college at Auburn, my parents encouraged me to study architecture, probably because they didn’t know what to do with me! I kept on

wondering why nobody ever talked about the inside. Those courses may have come later, but by then I’d switched my major to interior design. I also took classes at the New York School of Interior Design and interned for Keith Langham in the summer. Between Auburn and New York, I realized how exciting the decorating world could be.

**SH: Interning with Keith Langham must have been its own education.**  
**AG:** It’s funny, looking back on those days, I was in the presence of greatness, not just with Keith, but also with those he surrounded himself with. Had I known what I was getting into, I would have been totally starstruck. I remember being in the elevator at the D&D building and being introduced to Bunny Williams, and thinking, “That’s a cool name; I’m sure I’ve heard of you.” Now I consider her to be one of my biggest creative influences.

**SH: In a few words, describe your style.**  
**AG:** Casual, elegant, timeless.

**SH: What are some of your decorating constants?**

**AG:** I always bring in an element of something antique or vintage that shows age, because it’s mixing those in that keeps a room timeless. My go-to colors are blues and greens; I consider them bringing nature’s colors inside. And then stripes. I don’t think I’ve ever designed a house without them.

**SH: Where is your favorite place to use stripes?**  
**AG:** Anywhere, all day long—drapery, upholstery, bed linens, backing to a pillow. Depending on the scale, they can be bold or almost serve as a solid. If you have a tight shirting stripe, it adds great texture without literally being texture, and movement without being too much pattern.

**SH: Regarding antiques, what are you drawn to?**  
**AG:** More and more I appreciate classic, very traditional pieces. I’m not afraid of brown furniture. I like to mix in a painted piece with patina, or every now and then, something bleached. I tend to avoid the overly polished “don’t touch me” kind. What I appreciate most about antiques is the feeling that you can’t hurt them. I can have a 5-year-old color on a dining room table and if gets scratched, so be it. I never want to design a room where someone

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is going to be afraid to have their grandchildren walk in. If the dog jumps on the table, well, that's a problem, but it will be ok, because that table has seen a lot of things. It will survive.

**SH:** What takes a room that's pretty to one that really catches your eye?

**AG:** The unexpected, whether it's a very overscale light fixture or an unusual arrangement of a collection. I lean toward balance, but if everything is symmetrical, it can become too regimented.

**SH:** What is often overlooked that can make a tremendous impact?

**AG:** Upholstery details. Being thoughtful with buttons or the welt on a chair. There's so much that you can do (or overdo) that goes beyond just throwing a fabric on a sofa.

**SH:** How has your aesthetic evolved—what did you gravitate to early on that maybe makes you cringe in retrospect or something you love now that you wouldn't have at the beginning of your career? We know you're still young, by the way!

**AG:** I think I've turned into a bit of an old lady. I want the old and the traditional—all of it—but I've also learned to appreciate more the importance of editing. Before, I could get caught up in a trendy fabric or the "latest" color. That can be a lot of fun, but I also want you to love your home 20 years from now.

**SH:** You seem to always be in the midst of a renovation, not only for clients, but also for your own family. Now you're returning to Montgomery after several years—and several houses—on the Florida Gulf Coast.

**AG:** My husband and I have been married 17 years, we're on our 20th house, and we've lived in all but two of them. I don't think we're intentionally serial movers, but it probably has been a byproduct of always looking for the next challenge as well as life just taking us different places. I often compare it to childbirth—you forget how miserable the process can be, and somehow, you think, "I'll do that again." Living at the beach requires a very different mentality, because you sell the house furnished. Now that we're moving back to Montgomery, the cobbler's children have no shoes...we don't have any furniture left, so we start again.

**SH:** Besides the latest move, what's next on your horizon?

**AG:** I'm excited to have a book coming out next spring [*The Joy of Home*, Gibbs Smith, 2023]. It features a range of our work, from traditional to modern, beach to the mountains. We've also included little tricks of the trade—why we've done what we've done and ways to pull it off in your own home.

**SH:** With the holiday season upon us, tell us how you decorate for Christmas. Are you an all-over-the-house person, or do you prefer to concentrate on key focal points?



**AG:** The more the merrier, but it depends on my energy level. I use as much fresh material as I can because I love the smell. I'll weave orange-and-clove pomanders into the wreath on the front door, and garland is my favorite—I can never have enough of it. I'll walk around with my little water bottle and spray to keep things alive. But I've been known to take down the tree three days before Christmas and put up another, because the first one was in needles and my whole family was coming. I was pregnant with our second child, and he was born December 31; so that tells you how large and in charge I was.

**SH:** What's your family's favorite holiday tradition?

**AG:** Having breakfast or hot chocolate on the floor by the fire. We'll even crank up the air conditioner if we have to. And then last year we couldn't find the box with our Nativity scene—too many moves, I guess—so we walked along the beach to find shells, bits of wood, and things to make one. I have to say we had a great time creating a makeshift Nativity. Hopefully that will become an ongoing tradition. This Christmas we'll be in a new house in Montgomery, and maybe the manger will be made with magnolia leaves rather than seashells.

## 10 THINGS ABOUT Ashley Gilbreath

**If not a designer I'd be:** A veterinarian.

**Tried-and-true paint color:** Veranda by Ralph Lauren. It's a chameleon and interprets what's going on around it. Unfortunately, they don't make it anymore, but you can have it mixed.

**Every room needs a touch of:** Something fresh. A little flower by the bed or a quick snip of a branch from the yard.

**The hotel I could move right in to:** The St. Regis in New York.

**Where I travel for creative inspiration:** The Cotswolds.

**The object I'd never part with:** My children's portraits and my special silver pieces, because they'll always remind me of home.

**If I won the lottery:** I'd take the family to a private island where my children would have to play with me forever and never grow up.

**Little luxury I can't live without:** My slippers, 10 minutes of silence, and perhaps a glass of Clase Azul Reposado tequila, and I'm ready to face the world again.

**My happy place:** The beach.

**No Southern home should be without:** A beautiful, gilded mirror and a few pieces of polished silver.