

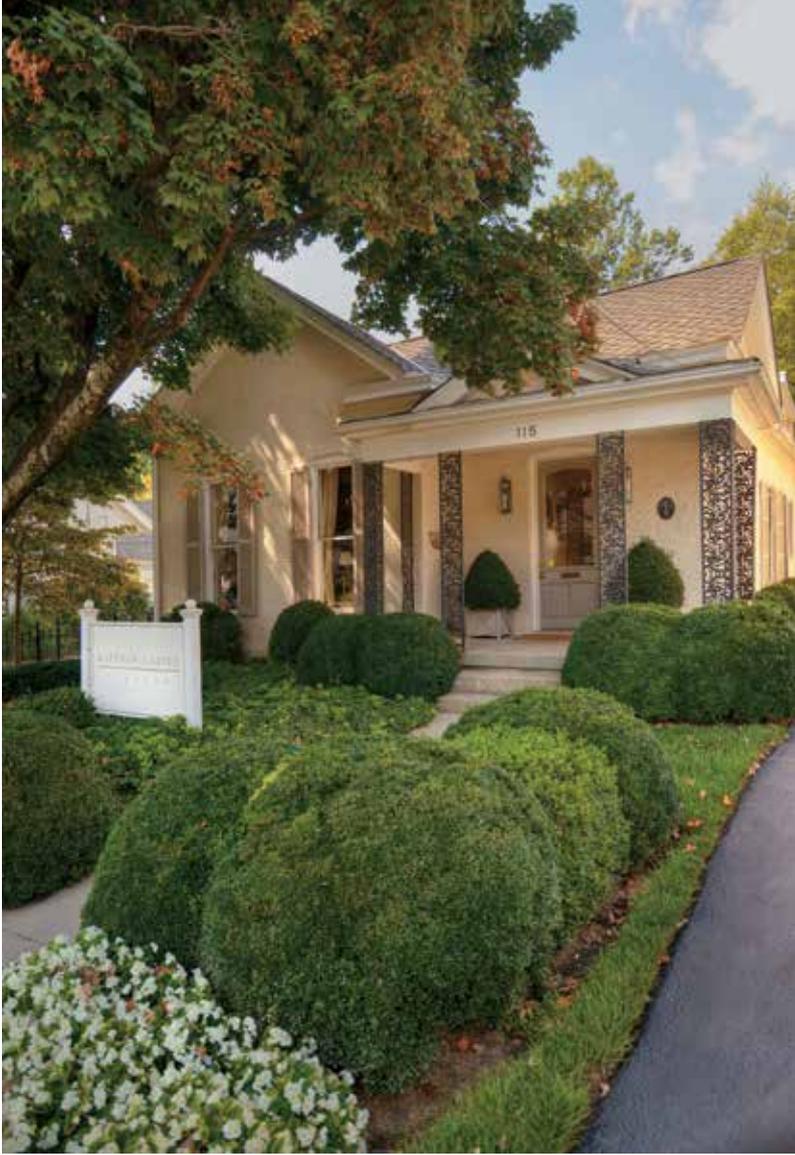


Unmistakable *Style*

Lexington's Matt Carter is the interior designer of choice among discriminating Thoroughbred horse people

By Sue Wylie | Photos by Lee Thomas

*O*ne day when Matt Carter was 16 years old, he looked around his family's living room and decided that the rug had to go. And, come to think of it, the sofa bothered him too. It would look so much better over *there*, and that table should go over *here* and that painting positively *screamed* to be hung somewhere else. What luck his family was out of town! Picking up the phone, he summoned some of his Henry Clay High School buddies, and under his very self-assured directions, the offensive rug was rolled up and exiled to the basement and all the furniture rearranged. When his family returned ... surprise! They walked into a dramatically different living room than the one they had left.



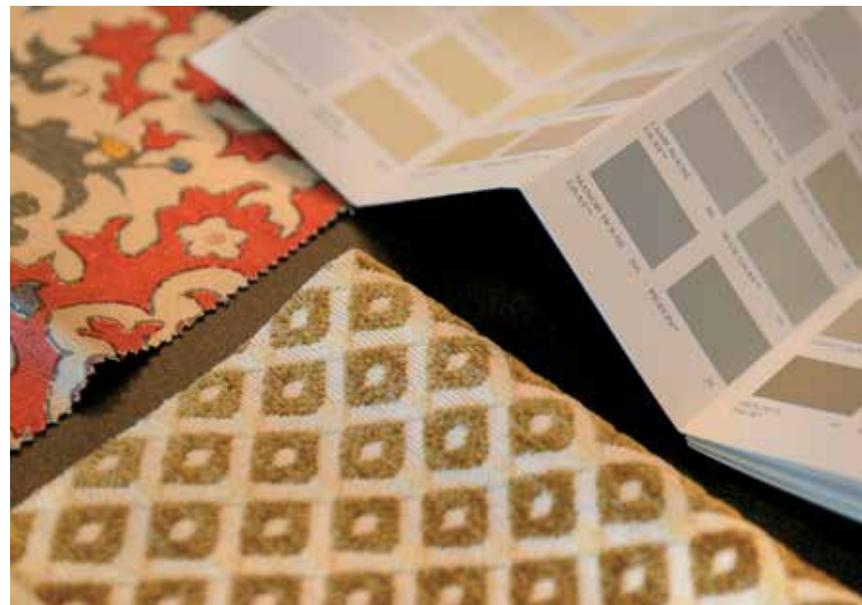
“They loved it!” Carter said with a laugh. “They didn’t change one thing. They were completely pleased.”

Since then, Carter has “completely pleased” legions of people with his taste and imagination.

Early on in his career, the prestigious *House Beautiful* magazine recognized his talent and named Carter as one of the nation’s “Young Decorators to Watch,” and for the past eight years he has had his own stunningly successful, ever-growing Lexington-based business. What’s more, he has become the premier, sought-after designer-in-demand among members of the Thoroughbred horse world, many of them with the wealth and connections to bring in the world’s best-known designers. But, it is “Matt” they trust with their private spaces.

“The horse business has been wonderfully good to me,” Carter said with a smile. “There has been so much repeat business, and so many of my clients have become good friends. After all, it’s quite a personal relationship, designing someone’s intimate spaces.”

We are talking with him in the charming Victorian cottage nestled away on Clay Avenue that is home to



At Matthew Carter Interiors, the designer’s shop on Clay Avenue, tranquil colors create a harmonious setting.



Matthew Carter Interiors. We've come to ask the secret of his enormous success.

Seated at his massive work table, slim and trim in his immaculately crisp white shirt, and with his boyish brown hair, Carter looks much younger than his 39 years (picture a less boisterous Tom Cruise). He wears the calm confidence of a man whose life is a perfect fit. In fact, he is one of those fortunate few people for whom a single moment clicked the future into place as neatly as the last piece of a Rubik's Cube.

"I always knew that I wanted to grow up and do something in art or architecture or houses or gardens, but I didn't know what or how to do it," he said. "Then, one day when I was about 14, I was at a friend's house and I casually picked up his parents' copy of *Architectural Digest*. It was like a thunderbolt hit me. For the first time it registered on me that creating beautiful rooms could be a real career, a true profession. That people actually could do this for a livelihood. That was the moment when I made my mind up to become an interior designer. I began reading every design magazine I could get my hands on. While all my friends were reading *Sports Illustrated* or *Playboy*, I was reading *House and Garden* and *House Beautiful*."

That was no surprise to his family or friends.

Carter reviews samples with client Greg Goodman, owner of Mt. Brilliant Farm. Goodman praises the designer for his ability to listen.

his wife, Josefine, are among Carter's delighted clients in the Thoroughbred industry. Recently, Carter did the complete decoration of their Chevy Chase home.

"All Matt's buddies knew he was crazy about houses and how he insisted that everything had to look just right. In fact, we went through a lot of phases with him," Young said with a chuckle. "One year his mom gave him permission to redecorate his bedroom and everything had to be gilded. There was gold leaf everywhere. Next, there was his "bare floor" phase, and then his English Country phase. We kidded him a lot, but whatever he did always looked great. You could always trust his taste."

The first Carter career step came in high school when he entered Henry Clay's "mentoring program" and began interning at the Design Center, a downtown Lexington decorating showroom and shop. He did "go fer" duty, putting price tags on fabrics, keeping the resource room updated, and shadowing the three designers. "Mostly I just watched, listened, and

Chris Young, who is the general manager of Overbrook Farm, has been one of Carter's closest friends since high school. Today, he and

learned," he said. On the heels of that internship came another, this one at the long-established Hubbuch & Co., where Carter apprenticed not only in high school but also during all of his four years earning his degree in interior design at the University of Kentucky.

While he was a college sophomore Carter first experienced what he calls the "excitement and razzle-dazzle of making an empty house come alive with beautiful furnishings." Although he was only 22 and still far from being a professional designer, he snagged his first big job when his aunt and uncle gave him carte blanche to decorate their big, newly renovated lakeshore home outside Chicago. "They really had a lot of faith in me," Carter recalled with a laugh. "I did it all, the entire house: colors, fabrics, furniture, and all on the budget they gave, and they were very happy with the result."

After Carter graduated from UK, Hubbuch's asked him to stay on as a full-fledged decorator, which he did for several years, taking special pride in designing the store's big, prominent windows, which faced busy High Street in Chevy Chase and caught the admiring attention of thousands of passersby every day. But his dream was to have his own business, and in 2008, he was ready.



Recommending fabrics is just part of Carter's job. He helps clients create interiors that reflect their tastes.

"At first, it was literally a one-man band. I had to do everything myself. All the billing, the ordering, writing the checks, answering the phone, everything," Carter said. He decorated residences, offices, and businesses, including the stunning Dudley's On Short restau-



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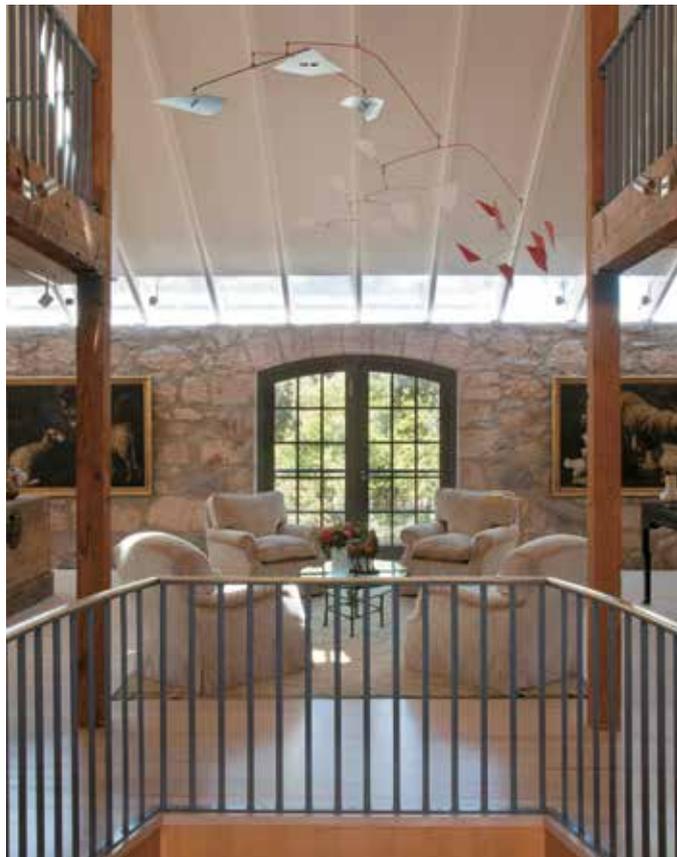
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rant in downtown Lexington. Then, his star began to rise among owners of the great horse farms.

“My first client in the horse world was Josephine Abercrombie. We had met through mutual friends, and one day she just popped into my shop, listened to my ideas, and hired me to decorate her farm office building at Pin Oak Stud. She took a chance on a young guy,” Carter said. “It was a fantastic break for me.”

“He did a *superb* job,” Abercrombie said. “His taste is fabulous. Clean and simple but never severe. I raved about him to my friends in the horse world.”

“Superb” and “fabulous” are very extravagant adjectives but ones Carter’s clients often use lavishly in their verbal valentines to his work.

Greg Goodman and his wife, Becky, moved to Lexington from California and bought the historic Mt. Brilliant horse farm. They expected to bring in a decorator from outside of Kentucky before seeing Carter’s work at a neighboring farm.

“I’ve hired decorators from all over the world,” Goodman said, “but Matt is as good as any internationally known designer. In fact, he is the best that we have ever used, anywhere. We added four guest houses and an entertainment house to the farm. Counting the main house, that’s a total of seven buildings that Matt has done for us. Plus, he did a spectacular job on our house in the Bahamas. The best thing about Matt is that he *listens*,” Goodman said. “Usually, I work with a designer on a project and get so mad at them that I never hire them again. Matt doesn’t try to push his own ego on you. I told him that as much as I love Kentucky, I didn’t want our houses to look too ‘horsey’ or too ‘Old South,’ and he gave us exactly what we wanted — comfort, beauty, sophistication.”



Longtime client Lucy Young Hamilton enlisted Carter to help with the renovation and design of a California home for her and her husband William (top left, top, and center). Bottom left, Carter’s handiwork is reflected in the breakfast room of another client.



Thoroughbred owner Helen Alexander first saw Carter's work in a *Keeneland* magazine article several years ago and was so impressed by pictures of his own living room that she asked him for ideas on updating her Middlebrook horse farm.

"Now, I will admit that I am not the easiest person to please," she said with a laugh. "So I was absolutely amazed when I really liked every single idea, every sketch, every fabric that this young man brought out for me to look at in our first get-together. It was like a meeting of the minds. We just clicked." She was so thrilled with the finished farm that she had Carter work his same magic on her house in Palm Beach.

When Lucy Young Hamilton and husband William Hamilton decided to convert a century-old winery in Napa Valley into their second home, they didn't consider anyone but Carter as their designer. "I can't say enough about him," Lucy said. "I've worked with him for years now. I feel his taste is flawless."

So, what does Matt Carter himself say about his success? What is his secret? Is there a "Matt Carter Signature Look?"

"No," he said firmly. "The only signature look I ever want is that a room is beautiful and comfortable. I don't want it ever to look like a decorator has just been there. I dread anything

'trendy.' I want someone who's 25 years old or 75 years old to walk into the same room and love it. I want some permanence. I want everything to be as beautiful in 10 years as it is now. I love simplicity," he said. "Coco Chanel said a woman should get all dressed to go out and then take one thing off before she heads out the door. I usually take one thing out of a room after it's done."

While there is no locked-in "Matt Carter look," there is, for sure, a "Matt Carter mood" in all of his work — one of sophisticated serenity, of tranquil colors ... creamy golds and ivories, mellow grays, and soft taupes. Choosing the colors is his first, all-important step in decorating any room.

"I don't like color overload, but I do like contrast," he said, "like a beautiful antique that stands out in a contemporary room."

Over time his taste has become more eclectic.

"I'm truly inspired by traveling and visiting museums and little antique shops in great cities and meeting fascinating people. Those all give me fresh ideas. Those are the biggest things

Above, Carter did a top-to-bottom renovation of this Richmond Road home, built in 1924. Pictured are the entrance and the living room.

that make someone a designer. Things that you can't learn in design school."

If there is a secret to his success, other than hard work, he said, "it's making sure my designs always reflect the lives and the personalities of the people who live in the spaces. That's the most important thing. I design to please them, not myself."

Chris Young agrees. "Matt puts his own ego aside and becomes a chameleon for his clients. He doesn't care about getting his own way."

Our conversation with Carter has been a long one. It's time now for him to close up Matthew Carter Interiors for the day and head home to his own house, the charming old Georgian jewel that he and his partner, architect Brett Bruner, bought nine years ago and have lovingly renovated.

The white-columned house and the enchanting garden glow with the sheen of serenity and sophistication. Inside and out, everything is beautiful but comfortable, casual yet elegant. Nothing is pretentious.

Nothing is contrived. It is a shining example of why Matt Carter has become a champion designer in the Bluegrass. 

Left and below left, Carter worked on this house on a farm just outside Lexington, and the rooms reflect both elegance and comfort.

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