

THE
OBSESSION
AROUND THE
CORNER

THE CRAFTSMAN CRAZE
CONSUMES A
LAFAYETTE COUPLE

BY LEEANNE CARSON

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANTHONY PIDGEON





ELLEN DOBIN GRABS A COPY of *American Bungalow* off the table and flips through the magazine's pages. "Ooh, look at this," she says, pointing to a comfy, oak-framed armchair. "This would look so great in our house!" Her smile widens and the "oohs" and "aahs" gush more quickly with each end table and lamp she considers. Suddenly, she slaps the magazine shut. "Sometimes you just can't look," she says.

Sitting in her family room under a finely wrought cherrywood ceiling straight out of

her dreams, Ellen chuckles at how in only five years she and her husband, David, became addicted to Craftsman style.

It all started with a porch—a sketch of one, actually. The Dobins had been searching for a larger house that had room for their two sons when they came across a Lafayette cul-de-sac where five homes were being built in five different styles. And while the colonial and the Cape Cod under construction were nice, the builder's plans for a four-bedroom bungalow—complete with a spacious and homey front porch nestled among tall oak trees—hooked them.

Of course, fantasizing about spending summer evenings on the porch was one thing; coming up with ideas for finishing the house, which was to be delivered with an interior that was essentially a blank slate, was another. Although Ellen and David grew up in the Chicago area, a Craftsman hotbed dotted with Frank Lloyd Wright houses and bungalow communities, they knew little about the style. To catch its spirit, the Dobins purchased books and subscribed to magazines such as *Old House Interiors* and *American Bungalow*. And the more they learned, the more they liked.



Pioneered by William Morris and Gustav Stickley in the late 1800s and part of the Arts and Crafts movement, Craftsman was an architectural reaction to the Industrial Revolution that valued individual handiwork over machine-produced designs.

The enduring quality of the movement's organic designs prompted a rebirth of the style in the '60s, a trend that continues today with restorations and Stickley-esque chairs at Pottery Barn. Robert Winter, author of *Craftsman Style*, says, "The present great interest in the Arts and Crafts style has now lasted longer than the original movement."



WELCOME HOME: A stone-pillared porch (opening page) is just one of this 21st-century bungalow's many comforts. **BACK TO THE FUTURE:** Period pieces and a custom chandelier bring the early 1900s into the dining room (above left). A stone fireplace and stained-glass cabinets give the family room Craftsman credibility (above).



The Dobins became obsessed. Today, their house does not merely pay homage to Craftsman-style ideals, it has the soul of such homes, right down to its handsome woodwork, which would make anyone who has ever picked up a hammer drool.

“The Dobins really appreciate Craftsman style and wanted to stay true to it,” says Robert Diaz, owner of Architectural Trim and Custom Cabinetry in Pleasant Hill. He designed and installed the home’s molding, colonnades, built-in shelving, and criss-crossed ceiling beams, elements most houses lack because building them takes too long or costs too much. “The design has a lot of detail—and requires a lot of time,” he says.

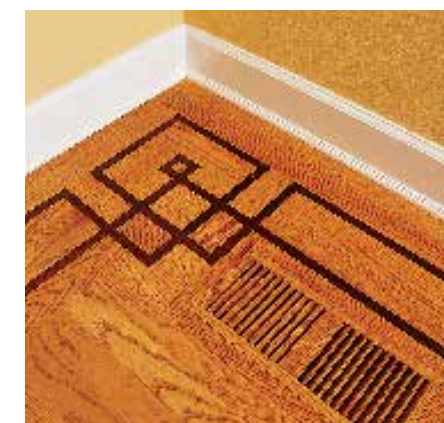
And the house’s look is not just fancy cabinetry, full-wood window jambs, and inlaid oak floors. Every time the Dobins visit family and friends in Chicago, they take side trips to antiques stores and folk art galleries. A period Handel lamp and tiles by Ephraim Pottery are just some of the goodies they bought to enhance the home’s authenticity.

They even brought in one of America’s experts in Craftsman- and Prairie School-style art glass, Benicia artist Arthur Stern, to create the colorful panes that beam out of all the woodwork. He made several pieces for the Dobins, including geometric cabinet fronts, a series of Frank Lloyd Wright-ish tulip-inspired windows, and a tree of life design for the wine cellar door.

Despite the time—and money—the Dobins have spent completing their neo-Craftsman dream house, it remains very much a *home*. “I try to keep it simple,” says Ellen, “a house to live in—not a museum.”

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the family room. Glass, wood, and stone combine to create an inviting space in which you instantly feel like plopping down. The Dobins may still be tinkering with the rest of the house (a kitchen nook and a new living room fireplace top the list), but this room is pretty much perfect. It’s their favorite, where the boys play and read, and a large, stone fireplace keeps the Dobins cozy while they watch television on weekends.

“When we moved in, this was one giant white room,” says Ellen, looking around at a space that would do Morris and Stickley proud. “I wanted to sit down and feel warmth, and now I do.” ■



WARMTH: The Dobins’ sons love this window seat (opposite page), another reason the family room is never empty. **DETAILS:** (this page, clockwise from top) The Dobins’ current work-in-progress is the front room, which is bit-by-bit getting touches like the stained-glass clerestory windows; the home’s exquisite joinery showcases Craftsman-worthy workmanship; Morris and Stickley would fancy the dining room’s stained glass; the entryway’s inlaid oak flooring.