

# A Look of One's Own

Refining your own take on country style opens you up to looks from countries around the world. BY PATRICIA RAYBON

I ALWAYS SAID I DIDN'T LIKE COUNTRY. TOO MUCH CHINTZ, I argued. Too much kitsch and lace and fuss.

Those were good enough excuses. But they weren't fully true.

What I meant was that I couldn't find myself in country—not at first, anyway. My African-American background was too urban to make a life with country style. Most of the magazines confirmed this. In their pages, country was Finnish or German or French, for example—but rarely African or African-American.

But on a summer day last June, I finally “found myself” in country—and the match seems natural and right.

It started with a visit from a loved one—my oldest daughter, 27—who stopped by my house one day to say hello and to share her latest find: a book on African-inspired decorating style.

I opened the pages of *The Spirit of African Design*, expecting perhaps to find jazzy ethnic themes.

But to my surprise I found my way to country. African-inspired country meant hand-sewn

violets, of course—but also calla lily and hibiscus—even black-eyed Susans!

Altogether, the look was exactly what Emma-Louise O'Reilly honors in her own gorgeous book, *Perfect Country Rooms*—a “respect for simplicity, natural materials, and a sense of place; and, above all, a feeling for home, comfort, and individuality.”

My own country style, in other words, would mean a way to be me, naturally, right in my own home.

In the coming weeks, I toned down the sleek and the modern at my house and brought in the natural and the old: kuba cloth from Zaire, tribal masks, hand-woven baskets, and, for comfort, plenty of blankets and throws and quilts.

This new look is a work in progress, and the end result may never make a magazine's



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textiles. Hand-carved woods. Hammered metals. Quilts with appliqué. Crockery and pottery. All of it hand-wrought in colors from the earth and river and sky. Indigo blue and straw yellow and berry red and milky white and amber orange. There were gourds and stones and kente and khasa cloths. And such flowers—African

photo spread. But this country look is more natural to my African-American heritage than anything urban ever was.

Country is that way for most Americans, it seems. Certainly my own family traveled a country road—settling after slavery in the woods of Tennessee and Mississippi until various family members struck out for cities up North and out West. My great-grandmother's one-room cabin, deep in the Mississippi woods, was its own celebration of country—bare walls draped with her hand-sewn quilts, the bare floor covered with hand-tied rag rugs, jars of canned beans and pickles and corn and carrots and peaches stacked on a rustic wooden shelf, cook pots hanging on iron hooks from the walls and ceiling—and every

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## READER'S CORNER

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corner of her little space always sunshine clean and country quiet.

This was country her way. My way is a mix: both my past and my roots—a way of being and thinking—that I want to revive in my own urban home.

And an added bonus: Finding my own style in country gave me a sweet appreciation for other folks' country styles—those witty blues in Finnish country, the pale colors of Scandinavian country, the cheery warmth of Italian country, even the austere beauty of "Early American" country.

It's *all* country, indeed, and it's all good. Even chintz.

True, not a stitch of chintz can be found in my own home. But I understand chintz better now. A cabbage rose, indeed, can be a beautiful thing. As beautiful as the best in "country"—this look that means home, wherever one's heart is. With every passing year, that makes "country" just right for me. #

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## Explore More

ARMCHAIR TRAVELERS MAY DISCOVER the roots of their own particular approach to decorating in books focusing on international design traditions, including the few volumes mentioned here.

***The Spirit of African Design*** (Clarkson Potter; \$35), by Sharne Algotsson and Denys Davis ♦ ***Perfect Country Rooms*** (Abbeville; \$35), by Emma-Louise O'Reilly ♦ ***Country Living's The Scandinavian Look: Country by Design*** (William Morrow; \$35) ♦ ***Country Living Irish Country*** (Hearst Books; \$25), by Nicholas Mosse.