



# Patterned Simplicity

A HANDCRAFTED RHINECLIFF FARMHOUSE

by Mary Angeles Armstrong photos by Deborah DeGraffenreid



The 1880 farmhouse sits on five acres of fields and includes a pond of koi and snapping turtles. The process of reimagining the home evolved Von Stoddard's creative aesthetic and helped shape her homeware line. "The house introduced me to Scandinavian design, which has become a big influence on my work."

Opposite: Dunja Von Stoddard and her son Lars in the kitchen. The space was rebuilt from the ground up (including the south facing back wall, which had sustained fire damage and needed to be completely replaced), but the wooden ceiling beams are original. "I wanted to bring it back in a modern way that was still appreciative of an old farmhouse," says Von Stoddard.

From the beginning, life for artist Dunja Von Stoddard has always been a tactile experience. The daughter of a painter and a photographer, Von Stoddard—whose first name is pronounced "Doon-ya"—grew up on a farmstead in rural Vermont surrounded by cornfields and woods. Life on the farm was decidedly "by hand," according to Von Stoddard. Her city-bred parents had moved to their small hamlet hoping to reclaim a simpler way of life, and Von Stoddard grew up with chickens, cows, pigs, and donkeys, helping to grow vegetables in the spring and can them in the fall. Some of Von Stoddard's earliest memories are of having her hands in clay or mud, or on a paintbrush or pencils recreating images from farm life.

The 19th-century farmhouse she shares with her young son was created with a similarly careful touch and eye for detail. Now the base for her 21st-century business, the home's restoration followed the same creative process that has repeated itself throughout her life, work, and art: See something, break it down, and then paste it back together in a fresh way.

## Cutting the Pattern

Von Stoddard's career as a designer is the perfect blend of her parents' distinctive art practices, cut up and reimagined through her own lens and then pasted back together in a totally modern aesthetic. By the age of two, Von Stoddard was painting alongside her mother in their barn-turned-studio, already attempting to capture and recreate the elemental bits and pieces of the world

around her. Even then, Von Stoddard had an eye for pattern, and as she got older the re-creation of imagery that photography enabled began to fascinate her as much as painting. (Her father's darkroom was located in another converted barn on the property.) While the means of expression remained fluid, the idea of creating art was always a given. "Since both my parents were artists and their friends were artists, I don't think I knew there was anything else to do," Von Stoddard says.

During high school, Von Stoddard discovered screen printing and immediately fell in love with the process. "It was the perfect combination of painting and photography for me, of both the tactile and the multiple image." She began using it as a way to experiment with collage, taking the prints she made and cutting them up, then painting or printing over the pieces again. At the School of the Museum of Fine Art at Tufts in Boston, Von Stoddard began cutting up negatives, re-taping them together, and then painting over the final prints. "I could just never leave an image alone," she says. This pattern continued through grad school, where she took full advantage of Bard College's multidisciplinary program to study both painting and photography. However, Bard's serious atmosphere soon pushed her to choose. "There wasn't a lot of room for being lost," Von Stoddard explains of her grad school experience. On the advice of a mentor, she separated the two creative disciplines and focused exclusively on mastering photography. After graduation, she lived briefly in New York, and then up to Portland, Maine, where she spent the next five years.



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Top: The ground level of the 20'-by-16' addition built by Quatrefoil is used as a lounge. One wall, covered with black and white wall paper made from photographed tile and designed by Deborah Bowness, conceals a back staircase leading to the master bedroom.

Bottom: A kitchen wall displays Von Stoddard's collection of wooden spoons. "I'm very intuitive with my work—I know when something's good, but have a hard time justifying my decision on a deeper level. I just want things in certain places because it looks better in that place than it looks in another; there's no other reason."

In 2011, the birth of her son precipitated a turning point in both her life and creative work. Photography's trend toward the digital had shut her down creatively, and, although she'd set up a screen printing press in her garage, she hadn't found a way to bring all the disparate pieces of her creative practice together again. The exhaustion of being a new mother coupled with the remnants of an academic mindset threw her work/life pattern into disarray. She was stuck. "I was so inundated with theory and concept and I felt so much pressure from having to explain what I was doing. I'd gotten way off track, just following, following, following—I didn't know who I was anymore. And everything I was painting was bright hot pink."

### Down to the Studs

Von Stoddard needed to return to her roots. A country girl at heart, she decided relocation to a more bucolic setting was in order. Her native Vermont was too remote, but Rhinecliff, with its rolling hills, access to the Amtrak line, and thriving creative community was ideal. Sitting on five acres of fields, the farmhouse in need of restoration caught her eye. Layers of additions and changes had been imposed on the home's original 1880 design. Just as with her creative work and her life, the house had to be reduced to its bare bones and then completely rebuilt. It needed to be stripped down, cut up, painted over, and then pasted back together. To Von Stoddard, this felt exactly right. Even though the property had no studio space, she bought it in 2013. The home's renovation, and the raising of her son, became her major creative outlet for the next three years.

The vast scope of the project she'd undertaken quickly became evident. That's when Quatrefoil, a construction and design firm specializing in restoration, stepped in. Based in Staatsburg, New York architect Katheryn Whitman and master contractor Mike Whitman worked closely with Von Stoddard to reimagine the traditional farmhouse within a modern aesthetic.







Top: Previous owners had extended the home's original living room by eight feet. Quatrefoil helped Von Stoddard redesign the space to include built-in bookshelves, a cut out for wood storage, and a wood stove.

Bottom: Von Stoddard expanded the home's original staircase and added an antique newel post from Zaborski's Emporium in Kingston. The team painted the entire staircase black. The wall behind displays two generations of black-and-white photos—memories of her own childhood intermixed with her son's first years.

The team began with the kitchen. Entered through a west-facing mudroom, the space was gutted and the doors and layout were reconfigured. The Quatrefoil team rebuilt the room to include counter-to-ceiling windows and installed stainless steel appliances and open shelving. Expansive granite countertops complete the kitchen's minimalist interior, contrasting the original rough-hewn ceiling beams.

The home's living, dining, and bedrooms all underwent a similar gut renovation. Previous owners had expanded the living area by moving the western wall eight feet out, but hadn't extended the home's foundation, causing the second floor to sag. Quatrefoil repaired the foundation, tore out an ornate fireplace, and then enlarged and rebuilt the home's original staircase. Upstairs, one bedroom features original wide plank pine wood floors. By removing a wall of closets and adding windows, a second bedroom was considerably lightened and partially divided into an office and guest room. One upstairs bathroom includes a soaking tub and steam shower; another had a ceiling removed and a skylight added to the pitched roof. Both are lined with a combination of Italian composite tile floors and white Mexican tile walls.

After remodeling the original farmhouse structure, Quatrefoil built a three story, 16-foot-by-20-foot addition along the home's eastern edge. On the ground floor the dining area was doubled in size and an airy space with a wall of French doors now serves as the home's main lounge. Upstairs, a south-facing master bedroom has a walk-in closet and another full bathroom finished in white marble tile. (A basement TV room rounds out the addition.) Outside, a blue-stone patio overlooks the pond abounding with Koi fish and snapping turtles.



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**Project Team:** Matthew Bialecki, AIA; John Vett IV; Carol Obiso **Structural Engineer:** Paul Gossen, PE.


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Von Stoddard in the studio at her screen printing press. Between caring for her young son and the tasks of daily life, she has little time to waste. She sketches and draws designs at night and then "cranks out" the designs during the day. "Someone asked me 'When are you most creative?' I'm like, 'Whenever I have time.'"

Bottom: A collection of Von Stoddard's current line of pillow designs. "Overall, I am inspired by patterns. I see patterns everywhere; I organize the world in patterns visually. Not just of nature, but really whatever I'm surrounded by."

**Handmade and at Home**

Over the three-year project, Quatrefoil became extended family to Von Stoddard. Not only was the team of expert craftspeople and contractors helping her raise her roof and walls, they lent a hand in raising her son as well. "It was great for Lars," Von Stoddard explains. "The construction crew gave him a little tool belt and a Quatrefoil shirt. They showed him how to use a drill and a hammer, and if they had to go to the hardware store, they'd take him along. He saw them pour the foundation; he knows how every system works—he even knows where the septic tank is."

In her free moments, Von Stoddard's mind often wandered back to her own creative work. "For a couple of years, I was really just raising my son and sketching and thinking, but I didn't really have a way to make anything." She wanted to get her hands dirty again and turned her attention to an abandoned barn at the edge of her property. "It was this little ugly thing that was supposed to get torn down," she remembers. "I took the construction guys down there one day and asked, 'Hey guys, can you fix this up?'" The skilled Quatrefoil team transformed the dilapidated building into an airy, light-filled studio space with two floors. From there, Von Stoddard found her way back to her creative work through touch and intuition.

This autumn, as her son goes off to first grade, Von Stoddard is launching the winter line of Doonyaya—her unique collection of pillows, napkins, and tea towels made of linen and printed with her simple, evocative designs. The downstairs of her studio, now outfitted with a sewing table, screen printing press, and kiln, serves as a production area for her homeware company. Upstairs in her design studio, Von Stoddard has space to paint and sketch. Just as when she was a child, she works in her converted barn recreating the patterns she sees around her, pairing everything down to its essence. "In retrospect, I can see this is exactly what I do and exactly what I am—I Xerox stuff and I cut it up and then I put them back together. I love to have my hands in design." ●

