

VINEYARD

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Interior Designer

**Gil
Walsh**

Brings Signature
Flair To Her Own
Vineyard Home

ARTIST FEATURE

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Portrait of
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Redesign

“I Love What I Do”

Designer
Gil Walsh
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If you love fine home design and decorating, there's nothing more exciting than taking a peek inside a top interior designer's own home. And when that home is perched along a gentle slope overlooking the Vineyard's sweeping south shore, it doesn't get any better.

While she made a name for herself as a savvy, award-winning interior designer in Palm Beach, Florida, and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Gil Walsh has been quietly adding her inimitable touches to clients' homes here on the Vineyard for the past decade as well. Now she throws open the doors to her own



Chilmark haven, a classic shingle style seaside house, designed and built over a period of three years and completed several years ago.

With a new office in Edgartown's Nevin Square, Gil Walsh Interiors is poised to make its mark in New England, bringing its principal's timeless sense of style to a wider audience.

How Gil arrived on the Island and what compelled her to stay is a classic Vineyard love story. After spending many years vacationing on Block Island, RI, with her family, she felt eager to try a new destination.

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Profile by Karla Araujo Photography by Michael Partenio

A view of the family room reflects Gil's Walsh's adept layering of color, texture and beloved collectibles. The wood-burning fireplace with black slate surround is topped by a custom, Island-crafted Tuck & Holland weathervane memorializing husband Mason's late hunting dog, Holly, an English setter. Finely detailed woodworking and interesting ceiling angles all satisfy Gil's requirement for architectural interest.



The Walshes' love of books is reflected in their abundant bookshelves (opposite), these lining the walls in the hallway leading to their library. An old country washstand-turned-chest provides a splash of hand-painted color while, in a former life, an English hall chair would have provided a resting spot for a manservant waiting to spring into service. Wide granite slab stairs (above) lead to the front entrance and a deck overlooking the ocean wraps around the house from the living area to the master suite. Flowering hydrangeas and roses soften an appealing blend of natural textures (wood, stone, metal).

Her sister owned a home on the Vineyard and generously offered her a week's visit. It was, Gil recalls, love at first sight. She felt an instant connection to the beauty of the landscape, the rich array of cultural offerings, and, eventually, to a small cottage in South Abel's Hill, Chilmark.

"There's nothing I don't love about the Island," Gil says emphatically. "The setting is beautiful, the people are great and it's unpretentious — everyone is just who they are."

She and Mason, her husband, bought the simple up-Island cottage & enjoyed it for years, then purchased the lot in front of it to build a larger home. Their plan: keep the smaller cottage for their now-adult children and grandchildren, creating a family compound.

Situated on a three-quarter-acre lot overlooking Chilmark Pond and South Beach, the new house stands as a testament to Gil's love for classic design and architecture and serves as a



Designer Gil Walsh in her Edgartown office

showcase for her passion for collecting all things decorative. From unusual textiles to heirloom furniture, the house, designed by architect Joseph W. Dick of Yarmouthport, MA, provides a perfect backdrop for a life well lived.

The five-thousand-square-foot home also reflects a blueprint for Gil's individualized yet systematic approach to interior design and architecture. "With my own home, I was the client," she says. "First we sat down and decided what was most important to us."

She and Mason knew they wanted a classic shingle-style home with views of the water from all primary living areas. To maximize the exposure, they agreed with their architect that the

master suite, library included, and all common space (family room, dining room and kitchen) should be on the main level of the house, with the guest spaces — three bedrooms, a sitting room, bathrooms, and laundry — on the lower level. The result:

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panoramic coastal views from the main level interiors and tiered deck, along with generous but non-water-view guest spaces below.

Another tenet Gil insisted upon: Every room had to include an architectural feature. “When you have good architecture, you have good design,” she asserts. “And you can’t do good design without good architecture.” She adds, less categorically, “In my opinion.”

After a lifetime of collecting furnishings and accessories, Gil says she needed few items to complete the new house. But forays around the Island yielded some irresistible finds. She haunted the flea markets, antique stores and galleries, picking up textiles and accent pieces to give the house some local flavor.

“I like to shop for accessories locally to make a house a home,” she says. “Thrift stores, flea markets, I love to translate castaway items into a new environment.” While she did design new carpet specifically for the house, she pulled collections of furnishings from, as she put it, “previous lives,” and reupholstered a number of pieces.

As for the interior design process, Gil says she treated herself exactly as she does all of her clients, working through her firm’s trademark steps. First, in the schematic design phase, she assesses her clients’ likes and dislikes, creating a rough scheme as she learns what colors, fabrics and furniture will match their aesthetic. Then, in design development, she focuses on the details of her proposed design, including the hardware, fabrics, wood finishes and drapery styles. Finally, she assembles a written proposal with prices for client review. With approval in hand, Gil orders all the materials specified and, finally, supervises the installation.

Spending up to four months in her own planning phase, Gil set out to create her Island dream home. Her goal: a bright, light, open, comfortable and family-friendly environment with eye-catching architectural elements and a layering of colors and accessories.

“Every room should be a surprise in a well-designed home,” she says. “A special piece of furniture, art, architectural elements, color – something unexpected. When first-time guests walk through, they should want to pause to take it all in.”

Although she is classically trained,

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The lower level sitting room offers an intimate retreat for guests. Much of the furnishings date from the 1930s and were passed on to Gil by family members.

Many of the decorative accessories came from Island shops and galleries, including *PIKNIK Art & Apparel* (Edgartown), *Bananas Gallery* (West Tisbury and Vineyard Haven), and the former *All Things Oriental* antiques shop (Vineyard Haven). Gil chose a neutral fabric for the upholstered pieces to keep the focus on the colorful accents.



The main level library (opposite), adjacent to the master bedroom, serves as a private haven for Gil and Mason. His and her desks allow them to work in quiet companionship, with ample room for reading and relaxing. The blue-gray stained paneling and eye-catching red ceiling provide a visual surprise and a distinctive departure from the white walls of the remaining house. The throw pillows with colorful flowers were hand-painted many years ago by Gil's mother. A lower level guest bedroom (above left) offers the perfect blend of modern comfort and vintage charm. Gil derived the cheerful palette from a pair of treasured antique quilts hand-sewn by her great grandmother in the late 1800s and handed down. Original Sears and Roebuck twin spool beds are courtesy of Mason's family while the oak secretary, circa early nineteenth century, came from a farmhouse estate in the Carolinas. Serene and simple, the lower level guest bath (above right) features a handsome Italian Carrara marble counter atop an open vanity chosen by Gil to permit easy airflow.

Gil's approach to interior design translates into any genre. In fact, she worked with the late Edgar J. Kaufman, Jr., heir to the award-winning Frank Lloyd Wright-designed home Fallingwater in southwestern Pennsylvania, to refurbish the interior of this landmark property. Today, after twenty years, Gil continues to serve on the estate's Advisory Committee, assisting the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy in its preservation.

"I can apply classical principles to any setting," she says, "from traditional French to Italian contemporary." Making the transition from Florida's West Indies/tropical influences to a New England coastal environment is easy, she insists. "Martha's Vineyard is Americana, English, contemporary and clean lines. The furnishings can be the same. It's in the accessories and textiles. But my home on the Vineyard would be perfect in Florida," she concludes. "It's classic."

Gil's process has been honed over decades of experience with large design firms. Having worked on residential jobs of all sizes, along with corporate, country club and hospital projects, she has crisscrossed the country, becoming what she calls "a walking encyclopedia" of design. As the economy nosedived,

Gil decided six years ago that the best way to serve her clients' needs would be to create her own boutique firm, partnering with fellow designer Holly Stephen, and a day-to-day staff of six that expands with specialists on call as needed.

"A small firm can give clients what they need and keep the overhead reasonable," she explains. A registered Interior Designer and member of the American Society of Interior Designers and the Society of Classical Architecture, Gil is also certified by several nationally recognized green building and design organizations. "Credentials are important," she stresses. "And behind me, I have a team of skilled designers."

Gil's Chilmark house is a perfect example of function and form, reflecting her affinity for crisp, clean design softened by heirloom quilts and other personal touches. The house works as both a handsome statement and as a comfortable sanctuary for gatherings of friends and family. This is accomplished for clients, she explains, during the schematic design process.

"We ask questions," she says. "How do you want to function in the home? How will you use it? How do you use the

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living room? Only at night? Do you need good lighting for reading? How do you sit on the sofa? How do you get in and out of it?"

A classic home doesn't mean a boring home. Inside, Gil incorporates strong architectural elements such as detailed custom cabinetry in the kitchen, a coffered ceiling, moldings and fireplace in the family room, blue-gray stained paneling with a vivid red ceiling in the library, and a unique ceiling design and woodwork in the master bedroom. Outside, columns, a decorative oval window, gambrel bays and an octagonal turret provide visual counterpoints to the long sweep of the south-facing house.

Aside from the library, Gil chose a white palette for the walls, in part, she speculates, because she lives with so much color in her work every day. Neutral upholstery and white walls allow the carefully selected art, textiles and accessories to take center stage.

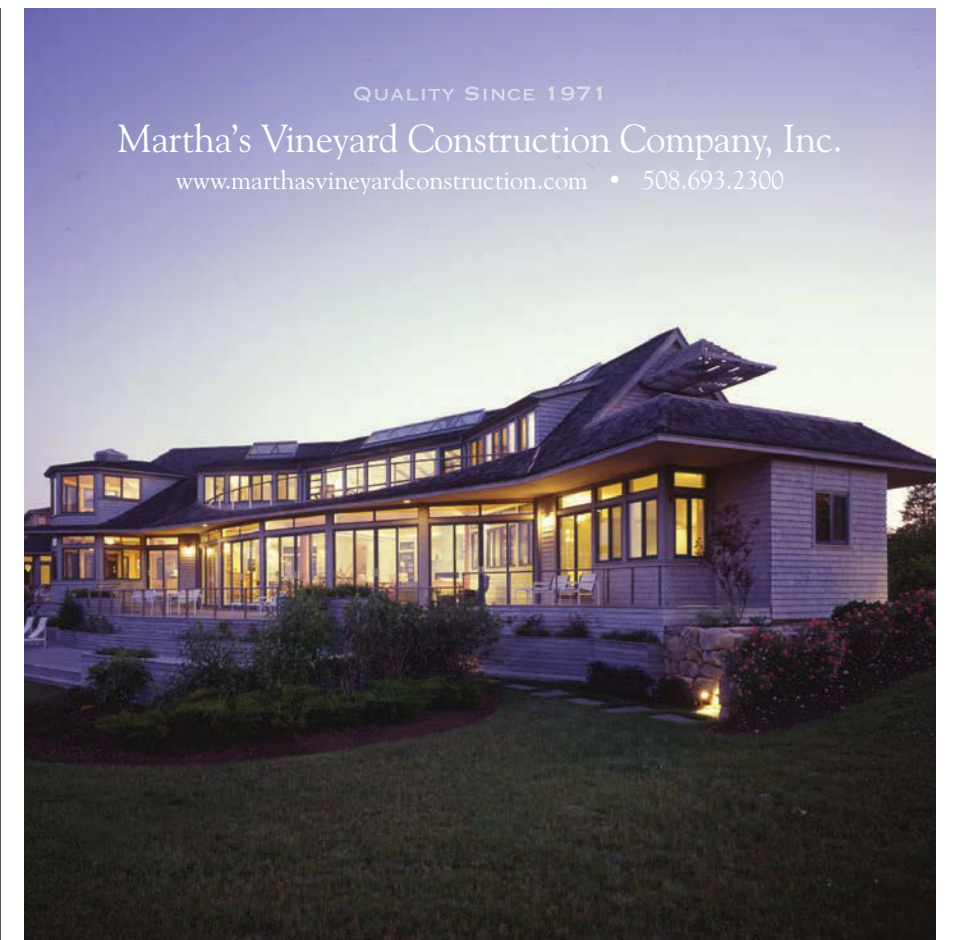
"You have to find a starting point in determining color," she says. "It can come from needs or function, or it can come from art, carpet or a fabulous fabric. But something has to begin the scheme."

Gil points out that she chose the blue-gray stain for the paneling and the unique red ceiling in the library because the colors appeared in the rug she had selected for the room. The palette in the living room was derived from carpet and accent pieces while other color schemes throughout the house came from linens, bedspreads and antique quilts.

"Color is critical," she states unequivocally. "It makes it or breaks it. I'm not afraid of color but clients are often timid. Balance and gradations of color are important in developing an interior." She adds a tip for do-it-yourselfers: Build shades of color and look for at least three shades in a textile or a carpet.

And, because an interior designer may not be in everyone's budget, Gil offers this general advice for amateurs: "Determine your budget first. Look at a lot of magazines to decide what you like. Scale is the tricky part. Furnishings are being geared to large homes today. Everything is designed for big houses and high ceilings. Try resale stores for pieces made a dozen years ago that might be better suited to smaller spaces and consider reupholstering."

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Rich natural woodwork and an eighteenth-century English settle (a bench with a high back to buffer drafts, often used in manorial halls) provide a genteel greeting in the front foyer (left). Gil purchased the settle from influential twentieth-century interior designer Sister Parish, trusted decorator to First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy. The shingle-style home (below left), inspired by the sprawling seacoast cottages popularized by the New York firm McKim, Mead and White in the late 1800s, was thoughtfully adapted by Joseph W. Dick Architecture to maximize water views while retaining its sense of privacy amid mature landscaping. The gambrel roof, natural shingles, bay windows, dormers, and angled pitches are representative of this purely American style of architecture.

Gil and Mason were mindful of their new home's setting within an established neighborhood. "We didn't want it to stand out," she explains. Tucked within a natural shroud of trees and plantings, roses abound, climbing trellises and creating transitions along walkways. A detached two-car garage, visible as you enter the property, masquerades as a charming cottage, its simple lines and design elements mimicking those of the main house.

Now that she has completed her own house as well as the interiors of others on the Island, Gil has assembled a strong cadre Vineyard tradespeople and artisans to carry out her vision. And, unlike other designers who may be known by a signature look, Gil says that the only branding evident in her work is that of her clients. "I don't have a signature style," she says. "All my projects are different and all incorporate my clients' tastes."

Gil tips her hat to the entire team that collaborated to turn the Walsh's dream into what she calls the "perfect home": Joe Dick, architect; Bill Dreyer, West Tisbury-based builder; Kris M. Horichuchi of Falmouth's Horichuchi & Solien Landscape Architects; and Landscape of Edgartown.

Today, with an office in Edgartown as an Island base, she looks forward to expanding her business on the Island. "My father always told me to pick a field I would love," she says. "It was the best advice he ever gave me. I truly love what I do." **VS**

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