Chris Madden: First rule of style is comfort

by Cathy Lubenski

The biggest trend in the new year?

Comfort.

"Comfort is always in style because if it ain't comfortable, it ain't going to work in anybody's home," said Chris Madden, designer, author of 16 books, TV star and the power behind Chris Madden for J.C. Penney Home Collection.

MADDEN'S MANTRA - Designer Chris Madden believes comfort never goes out of style, but the creator of a home collection for J.C. Penney sees several trends emerging in the new year. CNS Photo courtesy of J.C. Penney. DINING IN - Comfort, elegance and classic style mix in Chris Madden's Country Squire dining table and padded chairs with curved backs. CNS Photo courtesy of J.C. Penney. BEAUTIFUL WINDOWS - Window treatments like the Perla panel and valance are simple and airy, unlike overdone looks of the past. CNS Photo courtesy of J.C. Penney. BATHROOM BEAUTY - Madden's Velvet Damask Shower Curtain is a dramatic use of the season's favorite patterns and color combos. CNS Photo courtesy of J.C. Penney. TIME FOR CHANGE - The Gardenia comforter combines soothing shades of green with perky red for a bedroom accent that's both practical and beautiful. CNS Photo courtesy of J.C. Penney.Interviewed recently during a charity event at a Southern California J.C. Penney store, where her smiling face beamed down from banners bearing her catchphrase, "Turn Your Home Into a Haven." Customers did double-takes, asked her to pose with them for pictures, and requested autographs on their purchases.

Kevin Madden, former publisher of House & Garden and Bon Appetit, took the Penney's tour with his wife. The Maddens have been married more than 30 years, and family is important to them. The California stop was the second extended leg of a trip to Paris.

As with many of her personal experiences, Madden will use the trip as inspiration for future collections.

"You can see how Europeans live in a very different way than Americans. Travel is so good for us because we see how the pace of their lives is so different and, consequently, their homes are different. I like to bring that knowledge to my designs," she said.

The Maddens' sons, Nick and Patrick, visit frequently, and at Thanksgiving, dinner was a laughter-filled event with more than 30 relatives and friends. "I wanted them to enjoy themselves and being comfortable is a big part of that," Madden said.

Even the Madden family's three Westies (West Highland white terriers), figure into the Madden design philosophy. "Westies love to perch, so the back of the sofa has to be the right height for them," she said.

Madden and much of her staff have her furniture in their homes. "You have to live with it and see if it's comfortable, not just for you, but your husband, and your kids and your dogs. It's so important for us to live with our furniture to test it out."

TIME FOR CHANGE

It's that attention to detail that's helped make the Madden line, launched in May 2004, a success. Her insistence on comfort - her mantra - and her insider's knowledge of changing trends have been a hit with Penney's customers.

Comfort will never change, but her 2007 "ins" include:

- Paisley: "I love paisley, and it's coming back with a vengeance. You'll see paisley everywhere."

- Black-and-white photography: "This is a holdover from last year, but it's timeless."

- The antique look: "Look for old finishes on new shapes, like our ginger jar and matching chest with a black-and-gold toile design."

- Smaller pieces: "After all the oversize pieces that were being made for the McMansions, we're getting back to human scale again."

- Going green: "Everyone is so much more aware of our planet; look for sustainable woods."

- Damask: "It's such a rich, old-fashioned look that's contemporary at the same time."

- More kid- and pet-friendly materials: "Durable fabrics are in. Consumers are demanding it."

- Design that's compatible with technology: "The entertainment units that I was designing years ago don't work today; they have to be built with flat-screen TVs in mind. And, if you're going to sit on the sofa with your laptop, or curl up with your cell phone, you want to be comfortable."

- Oversized prints: "Look for designs (and colors) that make a bold statement."

- Plaids and stripes: "They're colorful, and an easy way to add some energy to a room."

LOOK FOR IT

Madden's spring line is a showcase for comfort and the latest trends.

In her bed and bath line, the adventurous will enjoy the nine-piece Embassy Hotel comforter in bold purple with lilac borders ($500, queen size). Other plush comforters come in leaf greens with floral inserts (Gardenia, $375), and cottage blue with inlays of cream white and blue floral strips (Belmont, $250).

Strong colors are continued in her line of cotton sheets with shades of Cinnamon Red, Blue Rain and Purple Haze, as well as softer hues like Mushroom, Soft Sand and others ($140, queen size).

Madden's home collection is awash in one of this year's biggest patterns: damask. Her Velvet Damask Shower Curtain ($45) makes a dramatic statement in black and white with deep black edging.

Window coverings for spring get correspondingly lighter as the days lengthen. Perla ($50 for an 84-inch panel) starts lacy at the top and then drops into a sheer panel in seaside blue, soft platinum or ivory. A draped valance ends in the same Victorian petticoat lace.

The look is beautifully elegant, but far from the overdone styles of decades past.

"We're certainly taking a sharp turn away from the '80s and certainly the beginning of the '90s, when it was all about swags and jabots and as much trim as you could get on that window treatment," she said.

Plaids are another hot trend for the new year and can be found in Madden's Carlisle curtains ($120 for 84-inch panels). Plaids in Amethyst Multi, Aqua Mist, Cinnamon Multi and Vanilla Multi are lively additions to the windows in any room. A broader plaid can be found in the Wales style. (Both: $120 for 84-inch panels).

Furniture for the spring continues Madden's traditional design with some fresh twists.

"We love the look that wouldn't be out of place in Grandma's house, but with updated features that bring it into the 21st century," Madden said.

"There's such an appreciation of history these days. Even if younger people aren't aware of the background, they look at the turn of the leg here, or the empire columns on an armoire for the TV set. I think we've been able to take the best from the past and put our touch on it."

The Country Squire Dining Room set combines elegance with comfort - Madden's mantra. The table has carved finial legs with a rich, wood-grain tabletop, while the chairs have slightly curved backs, arched legs, and cream-colored padded seats.

This classic look gets a startling update with a black matte finish. (Leg table, $499; two armchairs, $449; two side chairs, $375.)

A matching sideboard ($529) and china hutch ($1,199) complete a look that's familiar, yet exciting at the same time.

Madden's furniture is nongender-specific, making it a good fit in most homes. "It's not girly-girl furniture," she said. "I think men or women could be comfortable with this furniture."

New this year to the Madden collection is a line of three salon chairs ($399 each). You want bold? The leopard print and zebra print chairs represent a sharp departure from Madden's customary muted prints. The third chair, the Jacobean, comes in a damask pattern of chocolate, blue and muted gold. Even more eye-catching are the leopard print chair's ornate wooden legs and arms, an old-fashioned look on an '07 stunner.

Madden feels that slowing down should be the most important new year trend.

"It's not so much about creating a showcase home anymore, it's about having a place with comfort and soul - a place to sit down and enjoy our family and friends."

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