

Makeover leaves bones alone

S.F. Designer Showcase augments mansion without structural alterations

By Kathryn Loosli Pritchett

TIMES CORRESPONDENT

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THIRTY YEARS ago at the first San Francisco Decorator Showcase, everyone who participated would have been known as an interior "decorator." Today, these design professionals are more likely to be called interior "designers" who transform rooms of faded glory into hip showcases.

However, this year the word "decorator" seems appropriate in the title of the Bay Area's premiere showcase event, given that the talented designers involved were not allowed to do much more than provide window-dressing to the beautiful 1920s Italian Renaissance-style mansion at the top of Pacific Heights.

At the owner's request, there would be no moving of walls, no laying of tiles and no running of wires to showcase the latest trends in home design. And yet, with only paint, fabric, furniture and fine art at their disposal, the star-studded cast of interior designers -- many of them previous participants who were invited back for the 30th anniversary of the showcase -- did a dandy job of dressing up the grand old home built on land acquired in 1925 from future president Herbert Hoover and his wife, Lou Henry Hoover.

Two elegant rooms flank the main entrance with its grand staircase and velvet-covered handrail. To the right, a lyrical dining room by Steven Miller features beautiful wall murals painted by Christel Heinelt and Thad Warren of Lushart Decorative Painting and Murals. Images of Italian ornamentation, distant landscapes and nearby eucalyptus groves appear in the smoky, tapestry-like wall panels burnished with graphite powder. The talented duo also created the dramatic glass table top using custom stencil work and back paint.

The custom table surrounded by white leather chairs sits beneath a beautiful 19th century French pewter chandelier and on top of a custom area rug in an unusual color of mushroom and kelly green. Inspired by the interiors of San Francisco design luminary John Dickinson -- evidenced in the tent-flap satin drapes and chairs with whimsical animal legs -- Miller's dining room is worthy of the world-class view outside its windows.

Across the entrance hall is a room inspired by another Bay Area design legend, Michael Taylor. Designed by Suzanne Tucker, the gold and white room glows with furnishings -- some from Taylor's own estate -- selected to capture the beautiful light reflecting off the Bay outside its windows.

Fine art, including a rare Manuel Neri sculpture and two works by Nathan Olivera, shines alongside beautiful antiques, including a large 18th century Italian Rococo period chinoiserie secretary valued at \$700,000.

"You can imagine how anxious we were moving that into the space," says Amanda Ahlgren, the junior designer from Tucker's studio who headed the design team for this project.

Continuing the Bay Area art show, a large Elmer Bischoff painting hangs in the bonbon-hued music room next door.

"I wanted to hide a clunky built-in and when I saw the painting, I knew it was just perfect for

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the room," says veteran showcase designer Diane L. Chapman. Chapman painted the walls in a custom chocolate brown stain, then chose accent furnishings in a lively raspberry red.

Luscious colors show up throughout the house, including a tart lemon-lime in the charming tea room at the front corner of the home. Designed to complement the adjoining kitchen and butler's pantry by Tish Key, the room features voluminous curtains in a lush fabric by design maven (and "Top Design" judge) Kelly Wearstler; a large gilded lantern-like fixture from Charles Edward of London; and a custom table designed by Berkeley's Oly. Topped with whimsical pink Missoni china, this black and white tiled room could easily be the toast of the showcase house.

Key showed a lot of moxie when she took on the dismal, outdated kitchen and butler's pantry knowing that a major remodel was not part of the deal. "This room wasn't going to get any bigger and we couldn't move anything," says Key. "But we could liven things up by making it seem more elegant and current."

Her sophisticated makeover started with painting the existing cabinets black and then replacing the glass fronts with mirrored glass. Adding high-end appliances such as the La Cornue range and Thermador refrigerator also elevated the room's appearance, as did an elegant crystal light fixture in the butler's pantry. However, it's the witty central light fixture by Droog made of 85 exposed light bulbs that gives a witty nod to the original kitchen, "which looked like it should have had a single light bulb swaying from the ceiling when we got here," says Key.

Beyond the kitchen sits a delightful confectionery of a space. "The Cake Baker's Lair" is covered with charming wall murals of cakes scattered around the room on an assortment of plates. The murals are painted by Willem Racke and look almost as tasty as the real cakes from San Francisco's Cakework.

Frothy pink curtains by Susan Lind Chastain and a custom light fixture made from nickel-plated brioche pans finish off the room in scrumptious style.

Next door, a graceful study by Angela Free features furniture inspired by Jean-Michel Frank designs, including a marvelous wooden desk covered with a hand-tooled orange leather top. Referring to the clever little digital projector on the desk top, Free noted that this would be "a perfect spot to organize photos from your many travels."

The private rooms upstairs include a magical girl's bedroom designed by Brad Huntzinger and Kate McIntyre. Filled with luminescent furniture from their Berkeley-based company, Ironies, the room represents a young girl's vivid imagination. To that end, the designers covered the walls with dreamy images of overscaled forest creatures, and draped the beds and windows with ethereal beige and lavender-hued linens. The custom hand-sewn cowhide rug was especially lovely in cloudlike shades of pink and purple-tinged neutrals.

By contrast, the vivid teal color on the walls of Kendall Wilkinson's master bedroom jolt the visitor back to the here and now. Combined with the tangerine pagoda-printed window-treatments, this room color palette ties directly to the views of the Bay, Golden Gate Bridge and the Palace of Fine Arts outside its windows.

"I love dressing up old things," says Wilkinson, who combined antiques with contemporary pieces such as her own Lucite table and headboard that allows you to see a graceful floral stencil on the wall behind the bed.

The gentleman's bedroom at the end of the hall features Jay Jeffers' clever mix of color and pattern. Meant to represent a modern young dandy, the furnishings turn traditional menswear patterns on end by featuring chalk stripe and plaid patterns in jolly shades of periwinkle and creamsicle. The comical curves of a Gio Ponti ETR chair pairs nicely with a

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French art deco settee and a rare blue ormolu-mounted blue glass chest -- nothing is to be taken too seriously in this room.

Across the way, Victoria Foster Gwin takes a bold approach to the guest bedroom with strong black and white elements such as the woven leather headboards and checked wall-to-wall carpet. Apple green accents, inspired by the background of a Joan Brown painting on the far wall, give this "Wicked"-esque decor some zing.

"Though this is a strong statement, I think the clean, ordered feeling of a black and white room filled with interesting artwork is very restful," says Gwin.

Family gathering spaces include a playful study designed by Barbara Scavullo and Katherine North on the bedroom level and a basement library designed by Chris Reed.

The study design builds on a bold graphic rug with circles of teal, green and brown with a wide variety of furniture, including sofas upholstered in a cheery orange. At the end of the room sits a three-piece, 18-foot-long custom desk unit built with lots of open storage to showcase family artifacts and provide easy access to books and games.

"This room was meant to be approachable and very livable," says North. "Not too showy."

For the library, Reed and her design team draped the ceiling with fabric and placed a luxurious four-sided sofa in the center. Fine art paintings were commissioned to fit into the rolling track system of panels that slide in front of the bookcases.

Since the fixtures and tiles in the home's many bathrooms had to remain unchanged, the most notable bathroom features were wall coverings like the green miniature leopard print by Stark in Victoria Foster Gwin's guest bedroom suite and the bold black and white graphic paper in Josephine Fisher's charming Entry Powder Room.

Kathryn Loosli Pritchett lives in the East Bay and writes about home and garden design.

2007 san francisco decorator showcase

If You Go

WHAT: The 2007 San Francisco Decorator Showcase.

WHEN: The home is open every day except Monday, now through May 28; 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Tuesdays, Wednesdays, Fridays and Saturdays; 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. Thursdays; 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. Sundays. Open 11 a.m.-4 p.m. on Memorial Day, May 28.

WHERE: 2901 Broadway, at the corner of Baker Street, S.F.

HOW MUCH: Tickets are \$30 for general admission, \$25 for seniors, and are available at the door. Admission price includes free audio tour, and a design lecture is included every Thursday evening.

FOR MORE INFORMATION: 415-447-5830 or <http://www.decoratorshowcase.org>. Reservations are not required, but to schedule group visits, call 415-447-3115.