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Holding Court

A Pasadena queen reigns again



DETAILS AND OPPOSITE: KARRIN MILLET



Previous pages: A six-year renovation breathed life into a 10,000-square-foot Pasadena house designed in the 1920s by Myron Hunt. "Rumor has it that the front door, which is original to the house, came off a Spanish galleon ship," says interior designer Joan Behnke. Reborn Antiques in Los Angeles created the two sconces.

The travertine floor and mahogany paneling are original, but Behnke softened the foyer with an Italianate-inspired plaster ceiling. "It used to look like an office building," says Behnke. "I wanted it to look like a home." Furnishings include a 19th-century French bench upholstered in red silk, which sits below an 18th-century Irish Tree of Life made of linen with silk embroidery. To the right hang Thai silk draperies.



She knew she was losing her looks.

Still a pedigreed Pasadena grande dame with great bones and enviable position, her rivals down the arroyo were looking fresher, better maintained. It was time for major work. Luckily “she” was a house owned by Tom and Erika Girardi, who sought out interior designer Joan Behnke, architect Peter Kudrave and landscape architect Robert Truskowski for the makeover.

Even so, renovations and redecorations are like business deals—they rarely go as planned. Pitfalls and setbacks can be viewed either as dead ends or opportunities, and the latter was luckily the case with this historic property. The house was designed in the 1920s by Myron Hunt—who, along with Elmer Grey, designed the nearby residence of Henry E. Huntington, now the Huntington Gallery—



DETAILS: KARYN MILET



Highlights of the living room include a Byzantine mosaic, an ornate mirror from the Tony Duquette auction and a red sofa and armchairs by Gregorius Pineo. The handmade coffered wood ceiling with gilt detailing was a collaboration between Behnke and architect Peter Kudrave. Opposite: An 18th-century Italian marble table dominates the front library. Among the room's accessories are a silver plate from Robert Kuo Antiques and a Flemish cabinet that Behnke found to complement the family's collection of Flemish paintings hanging nearby.



"Everything in the kitchen is new, but it was done to look old," says Behnke. Antique Tunisian tiles were placed above the La Cornue stove. Stenciled wood beams merge with the architecture. A teak-covered island doubles as a casual dining space and matches the breakfast table from Lee Stanton.



and the grounds by the Olmsted Brothers, whose commissions included Central Park, Acadia National Park and the White House grounds. "The house has had several lives," says Behnke, whose design work on the Mansion at MGM Grand, a 29-unit deluxe villa-style hotel in Las Vegas modeled on an 18th-century Tuscan villa, prompted the Girardis to seek her out. Unfortunately, those lives had denuded the house of many original elements and details, replacing them with generic fixtures and fittings. "The house felt very corporate," says Behnke. "All the bathrooms were done with granite—the same granite."

Erika Girardi, a Southerner with a love of old houses, became as Behnke says, "the muse and force" behind the residential renaissance. However, despite a mutual adoration and appreciation between the homeowner and designer for architectural masterpieces, the renovation and redecoration process was no quick-and-easy endeavor. "I call this my backward project," Behnke says.



DETAILS: KARYN HILLET

Located on the second story near the master bedroom, the chapel serves as a private spiritual space. Antique carved doors balance the hand-painted frescoes by Los Angeles artist Jeffrey Turner. The religious statues and American Gothic artifact set into the floor and covered with glass were found at Mike Haskel Antiques in Santa Barbara.

Essentially a three-phase endeavor, work began on the first floor in 2000, necessitating that the Girardis move out. Fourteen months later, project complete, they returned and prepared the floor for a long-planned and anticipated party for the National Association of Trial Lawyers (Tom Girardi, a prominent Los Angeles attorney, has the sobriquet “king of the class-action lawsuit” and was a principal litigator in the case upon which the movie *Erin Brockovich* was based). Then, approximately four months later, they moved back out, and 16 months of work commenced on the upper floor. In 2004, with both phases finished, the Girardis were re-ensconced and ready for phase three, the grounds, to get going. This final phase was finished in July 2006. Timelines, however, aren’t stories and often conceal the reasons why a property took, well, however long it took—in this case, six years.

One explanation was the kernel of trust between Behnke and the Girardis, which germinated during Behnke’s initial presentation and flowered after phase one. “I understood immediately that Erika wanted to restore the beauty and glamour of the house,” says Behnke. Additionally, she and Erika Girardi had both studied dance extensively, which was, according to Behnke, a wonderful way to connect, not simply in a casual or conversational way, but on a deeper level. “Dance equals discipline,” Behnke explains. It also develops a deep understanding, yearning and quest for perfection, as well as an appreciation for subtlety and a respect for form. As Behnke says: “To watch Baryshnikov do a plié is to see an entire dance; to watch a novice plié is to see bent knees.” Not that either woman was serious to the exclusion of fun. Erika Girardi’s bathroom, for example, could, with its profusion of red, dark-stained woodwork and exotic lighting fixture, call to mind Napoleon III and the Second Empire style. Or it could conjure its more immediate influence and inspiration. “Suzie Wong,” says Behnke with a laugh, referencing the 1960 movie *The World of Suzie Wong*, starring William Holden and Nancy Kwan.

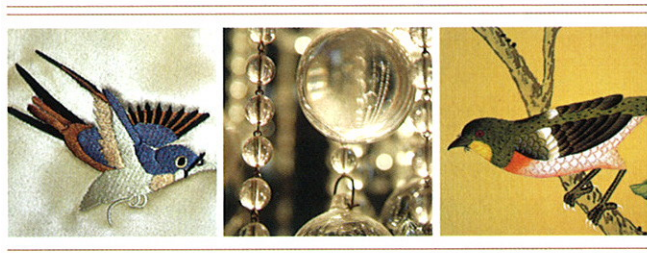
Besides this shared perspective and steely resolve was the physical and aesthetic reinvigoration after the first phase. “We all loved the first floor,” says Behnke, “and that emboldened me to redo my first design for the second floor.” A large aspect of the redesign centered on the inclusion of a disused sun porch into the house proper, a feat of architectural engineering that required a deft touch—exactly the kind that Peter Kudrave, whose previous projects include historical buildings and Los Angeles architectural landmarks such as the Jonathan Club, the Oviatt Building and the Fine Arts Building, regularly exhibits.

The same sensitivity was applied to the grounds by Bob Truskowski. “We had removed a pool and poolhouse that were very close to the residence, then relocated the pool and created a rill set on the long axis of the residence,” Truskowski explains. “I had requested the original plans, and when I received them, saw that there had originally been a reflecting pool and rill in almost the exact location where I had proposed the new ones.” A surprising and highly satisfying discovery that posits the oft-pondered question: While artists, artisans and architects often have innumerable options at their fingertips or on their AutoCads, is, perhaps, one choice best?

The quest for that sort of Platonic ideal hits a resonant chord in Behnke, who sees it as a thread connecting her projects. “I edit. And I edit. Then I edit some more,” she says, “It can frustrate me and my team, but I always want something better, to refine it to its purest form.”

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"The wife wanted something exotic," says Behnke of the master bath and closet area. The bathroom is furnished with red satin wallcoverings and drapes from Rogers & Goffigon and a red mohair and Lucite chair from J. Robert Scott. The woodwork in the closet, inspired by a trip Behnke took to Vietnam, was handcrafted by a local artisan.

