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House Beautiful

WHAT
MAKES A
ROOM
GREAT?



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I assume by 'layering and depth' you mean more than just arranging the furniture.

Oh, yes. Like depth of color. Things like bringing the painted screen into the living room, using its earthy Tuscan landscape colors to give the room warmth, then placing that pale sateen chaise in front of it. And touches like the wonderful sage green slipper chair in the living room and the bronze dust skirt in the master. You can achieve depth of color without making everything chocolate brown, you know. The walls are all champagne, and even though it's a light color, it's got weight, it's got so much presence.

Did you use the same paint color in every room?

No, but they're all very close. They're all by Benjamin Moore: Rich Cream in the entry and center hallway; Putnam Ivory in the living room; Ivory Tusk in the master bedroom and dining room. We used lacquer in the dining room to give it a little sparkle in candlelight.

There's such an old-world feeling here.

We took our cues from the clients, a couple in their mid-thirties with four boys who range in age from four to fifteen. They're Italian-American, and even though they live in Atlanta, they feel very connected to Italy. They built the house four years ago and wanted it to have the feeling of a great old Tuscan villa. The living room mantel must be eight feet high—I'm six foot six, and it's way over my head. We needed to play it down. We did it the Italian way—we ignored it!

How did you do that?

We made three seating arrangements without so much as a pair of chairs on either side of the fireplace. Then we slid a sofa into the niche on the other side of the room and hung a big painting over it to make it as strong as the fireplace and balance the room. There was an elaborate frame on the painting that we took off to keep things fresh and young. We upholstered the niche in fabric a few shades darker than the walls. Not high contrast—we wanted it important, but not too important.

How do you make something important but not too important?

The people in my office roll their eyes at this, but there's a little exercise I go through when I'm trying to create balance in a room. In my head, I tag things an A, a B, or a C. The things that are most important are A's. And there



can't be too many A's competing against each other in a room.

Examples, please?

Well, the giant crystal chandelier in the dining room is clearly an A, and that big mirror is an A, so the chairs had to be B's. They're very soft, with pale sage-green striped silk on the seats and caned backs that bring down the formality of those A's just a notch. If we'd used a carved table and dark wood chairs, then everything would be an A and you wouldn't care for the room. It's a layering process. The bed in the master might be an A+! We mounted a painted folding screen

onto the open-iron headboard, which was too understated—not enough of a statement to carry the room. And now it wows you. I think beds should always be an A+.

And what got your focus when you weren't re-creating the furniture?

I probably spend more time on fabric than most designers do. I was 20 years in the fashion business until I had my midlife crisis and became an interior designer, so working with fabric is ingrained in my heart. We made the bed skirt out of silk charmeuse—as if it might be the same fabric as your dressing gown, so sexy and romantic. I always do dressmaker details. Those sheers on the veranda have a small chain sewn into the hems, like the ones Chanel sews into jackets so they'll hang properly. It makes the sheers fall just so, and they sway perfectly in the breeze.

How else does a garment guy see the interiors world differently?

I'm very interested in the hand—or the touch—of the fabrics. The sofa in the living room niche is wool and cashmere, and it's a wonderful, exquisite surprise to sit on. There are so many strong focal points in these rooms, I didn't want colorful patterns on the furniture. Instead, it's the touch that conveys luxury.

A sofa in a niche—so cozy. You've even got a cozy little place to sit in the central hallway!

There was nothing but art in the hallway, and we asked our client,

'Why didn't you put furniture in here?' She said, 'It's a hallway, it doesn't need furniture,' and we said, 'But you do!' So one night we were hanging around the office at the end of the day—that's when we get some of our best work done—and I opened a bottle of wine and just started drawing up this pretty little curved-back banquette. I was at a party at the house recently, and I wound up sitting there with a friend—our own little throne in the hallway. We had so much fun chatting with everyone who walked by. The clients' only mandate was 'Just make the house feel good.' I think we got it right.

PRODUCED BY DORETTA SPERDUTO

ABOVE: A hand-painted screen frames a small sitting area in the living room and acts as a backdrop to the Edward Ferrell Chiswick chaise. The pair of chairs can move easily from one sitting area to another. Stone Cypress side table from Dennis & Leen. OPPOSITE: An antique mirror "cleverly reflects the architecture of the dining room. And this perfectly square space screamed out for a round table." Murano glass vessels on the table add to the young, modern mix in the house.