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A 19TH-CENTURY
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THE WAY OF THE WORLD



In the living room, a mother-of-pearl mirror, tall as a doorway, brings in with an accented metal dining chair. Cushions of Vietnamese silk provide additional seating. A statue of Quan Yin, the Chinese goddess of compassion, presides over the mantel.

In the living room, a mother-of-pearl mirror, tall as a doorway, mingles with an animated metal dining chair. Cushions of Vietnamese silk provide additional seating. A statue of Quan-Yin, the Chinese goddess of compassion, presides over the mantel.



For a family with toddlers, the best environment may be a big old house with nothing precious in it. The owners of this brownstone, on a quiet street in Brooklyn, moved in when their two children were little, and they kept the decor spartan. But by the time the kids were adolescents, the walls were peeling, floors were worn and the

furniture, utilitarian to begin with, had seen better days. "For ten years," says the wife, "we'd used the house—we'd strip-mined it—without giving anything back."

Then, during a walk around TriBeCa, she and her husband stumbled into the store owned by designer Kevin Hart. "The kids were away at camp. It was the first time we had been alone in years," she says. Adds Hart: "It was five o'clock on a Saturday, I shouldn't even have been open."

The shop was filled with a mix of new and old furniture, much of it from Africa and Asia. The couple bought a tile-topped Moroccan table Kevin had purchased in Tangier and saw the lift it gave their threadbare quarters. Soon they were back for more pieces. "The old decor had served us well," says the wife, "but we were ready to add layers."

PRODUCED BY DORETTA SPERDUTO. PHOTOGRAPHS BY PETER MURDOCK. WRITTEN BY FRED A. BERNSTEIN.



ost of the objects in the house—from the Buddha on the mantelpiece (above) to the architectural fragment over the kitchen counter (previous page)—are Asian, which reflects the interests of Hart and his clients. Explains the wife: “My father is Korean; I’ve always been drawn to the East. My husband’s family is British. Our kids are biracial, and as the process of redoing the house unfolded, we realized that we wanted that reflected in the decor.”

Indeed, according to the wife, the redesign of the house “has had a real impact” on the family’s awareness of its roots. As just one example, she relates, “Kevin brought in Sri Lankan chairs, and we got out the map, and we talked about colonialism, and we tried to make sense of that. My son even wrote a paper about Sri Lanka for school.”

Inevitably, some of the items in the house have religious significance. Hart (who brackets his buying trips to India with periods of meditation) says his goal isn’t to promote a particular religion but to use such objects as reminders of important values. At times, he says, he would introduce a piece such as the statue of Quan-Yin, the Chinese goddess of compassion (on the living room fireplace), and the owners would read about it and decide what relevance it had to their lives.

“What they really wanted was a peaceful environment,” he explains, “and they were open to having objects in the house that created that effect.” With the “big picture” in mind, Hart says, he didn’t worry about whether objects “matched”—one room may have brass and aluminum for “a mix of warm and cold that keeps things interesting.”



In the dining room (which overlooks the back garden), Hart’s goal was to “bring nature inside.” He designed the mahogany trestle table. The chairs are based on one he found in a Connecticut antique store and had copied in aluminum with a light coat of paint.



When Hart couldn't find just the right piece, he commissioned it. A desk that he liked for the wife's "corner office" was too small—so he hired a craftsman to make a slightly larger model. The bathroom mixes sleek fixtures with Asian and European antiques. No room in the house is without art.



he couple's bedroom wasn't an afterthought, as it is in many homes. In fact, Hart tackled it first, telling the clients, "It's where you open your eyes each morning, and where you end each day. It ought to be beautiful, and it ought to be a sanctuary."

The headboard, upholstered by Hart in a jacquard (and coupled with a silk coverlet and cushions), sets a gentle tone, which the wavy lines of the teak-and-wicker Anglo-Raj bench at the foot of the bed continue. For the wife, who likes to write soon after waking up, Hart created a bedside office that is practical but not hard-edged. For the husband, an avid reader, he installed bookshelves. But Hart avoided area rugs, which, he says, would have "stopped the eye." Instead, he used wall-to-wall carpeting, which creates a "continuous flow"—and because the floor is nearly the same color as the walls, "the eye moves comfortably between one surface and the other."

The bed looks through a set of curtainless French doors into the bathroom, where Hart (with the help of architect David Moore) created a spa-like haven. That meant miles of soothing white tiles, but it also meant introducing pieces that inspire contemplation. The counter started out as a console table in Hart's store. To turn it into a vanity, he removed the sides (which, cleverly, he used as drawer fronts), and attached a new marble top deep enough for sinks. The mirror is 19th-century French gilt. Lest the whole thing become too serious, Hart designed the sprightly gooseneck sconces. Over the tub is a painting on fabric depicting the story of Krishna and the *gopis* (milkmaids). "It's a love story," says the wife, "and so it reflects my husband and me, and how we feel about this house."

