

mt. diablo



an educated
PALETTE

IN THE HILLS NEAR MT. DIABLO, DESIGNER LAURIE GHIEMMETTI HELPED A WORLDLY COUPLE CREATE A SUITABLE SETTING FOR THEIR VARIED ART COLLECTION. BY JULIE CARLSON PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVID DUNCAN LIVINGSTON



Northern Californians have a special affinity for Tuscany. Something about the storied Italian region resonates powerfully with denizens of the Bay Area—perhaps it's the familiar rolling hills, the vineyards or the appreciation for *la dolce vita*. So when Laurie Ghielmetti was enlisted to furnish a newly built, grandly scaled stucco-and-brick home overlooking the foothills of Mt. Diablo, she looked to the Old World for inspiration.

"The couple has traveled extensively in Tuscany, and they adore the Italian countryside," says the Pleasanton-based Ghielmetti. The recent retirees also have a European sense of extended family: Their three grown children frequently bring their own families to stay for large holiday celebrations and vacations, so the house needed to be warm and welcoming for groups both large and small.

As seasoned art collectors, Ghielmetti's clients also wanted a showcase for their growing collection of paintings, which includes several works by artists of the Bay Area figurative movement. For almost 20 years, Ghielmetti—who is not only an experienced designer but also a veteran art consultant—has worked with the clients, designing their Pebble Beach getaway with her partner, Doug McDonald, and helping them refine their art collection.

A vignette in the entryway of the East Bay home sets the tone for the mix of old and new that animates the house. A pair of 19th-century French barrel chairs with original leather upholstery and an antique Persian camel-hair runner add a sense of timelessness, while a yellow Peking glass vase by Robert Kuo is a modern interpretation of a classic. But it's the richly hued

ABOVE: In the entry hall, a pair of antique leather chairs is arranged beneath a contemporary canvas by Tony Scherman. OPPOSITE: Painted stripes in the dining room help frame a varied collection of artwork, including Michal Rovner's abstract photograph.

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LEFT: A colorful piece by abstract impressionist painter and teacher Hans Hofmann hangs over the dining room's antique fireplace. ABOVE: The work of Hofmann student Roland Peterson enlivens the end of a hallway with a leather campaign chair.

painting of blowsy roses by Canadian artist Tony Scherman that bridges the old and new. “Using very thick impasto and encaustic, he creates the illusion that this is the work of an old master,” Ghielmetti says. “But it’s actually very modern in sensibility.”

Although the house is large—8,000 square feet—Ghielmetti created a sense of intimacy by carving out discrete living zones. In the great room, which features soaring timbered ceilings, she placed two sofas back-to-back to make two distinct seating areas. Over the fireplace, an antique English mirror from Sloan Miyasato reflects light back into the room, and to the right, a 1967 oil painting by Robert De Niro Sr. draws the eye. Antique Italian architectural etchings from Ed Hardy Antiques and a Spanish table by Therien & Co. add to the room’s stateliness. For the fabrics, rugs and drapes, Ghielmetti chose a palette of warm, earthy colors evocative of the Italian countryside: burnt umber, ochre and deep reds.

“The wife really responds to strong color,” Ghielmetti says. “And from the beginning, the couple has gravitated toward art with a figurative bent.” As in most good collections, an aesthetic continuum links many of the couple’s pieces. For instance, over the fireplace in the dining room hangs a large painting by Hans Hofmann, the influential abstract expressionist with whom Robert De Niro Sr. studied in the 1940s at Hofmann’s School of Fine Arts in New York. The work of another Hofmann student, New York painter Paul Resika, is featured in one of the house’s long, arched hallways.

By the early 1950s, during the same period when Hofmann was painting and teaching abstract impressionism on the East Coast, the Bay Area figurative movement was percolating,



Ghielmetti furnished the great room using warm colors and inviting textures. The focal point of the lofty space is an antique limestone fireplace from Jan de Luz. The portrait to the right of the mantel is by Robert De Niro Sr.

Over the Gregorius Pineo bed in the master bedroom hangs a bold self-portrait by Joan Brown—one of the few female artists involved in the Bay Area figurative movement.





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led by Elmer Bischoff at the California School of Fine Arts (now the San Francisco Art Institute). The couple's collection includes several works from the school: In the master bedroom, a charcoal-and-ink nude by Bischoff hangs in the far corner, while an oil self-portrait by Bischoff's student Joan Brown is displayed above the bed. In the passageway between the living and dining rooms hangs a small watercolor by Richard Diebenkorn, who also taught at the California School of the Fine Arts before establishing himself in Southern California and beyond.

ABOVE: A dining set by Rose Tarlow completes the scene on the bucolic back patio, where the homeowners often spot a family of quail strutting by in the mornings. RIGHT: Designer Laurie Ghielmetti has collaborated with these clients for almost 20 years.

The couple has also collected works by contemporary artists. In the dining room, a dramatic photo by Israeli artist Michal Rovner adds a dash of modernity. "We liked the simplicity of this image," says Ghielmetti. "The crimson color of the hawk provides a pure shot of color to the room. And because there are so many hawks soaring overhead, it had particular resonance." A vibrant 2003 landscape by celebrated San Francisco painter Christopher Brown occupies another spot across the room.

Instead of furnishing the large room with one vast dining table, Ghielmetti commissioned San Francisco artisan Luis Norori to craft two square tables inspired by a French antique. The pieces can be pushed together to accommodate holiday gatherings and pulled apart when the couple is dining alone. Ghielmetti employed an artistic technique of her own for the dining room walls, painting wide vertical bands of contrasting Pompeian reds, ochres and cream. "I wanted to define the room and make it welcoming," she says.

"The owners absolutely adore this house," says Ghielmetti. "They love traveling, but they love coming home. This is their castle." ■