

VERANDA – July/August 2008

Interior Design by Madeline Stuart/ Architecture by Stephen Giannetti/ Landscape design by James Yoch

Produced by Mary Jane Ryburn/ Photographed by Dominique Vorillon

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Leading with Style

Oceanside in Malibu.

One unshakable image spurred the creation of this heart-stirring Malibu Coast home: “When I first met the owner, she showed me a picture of horses grazing in a pasture with the ocean in the background,” recalls interior designer Madeline Stuart. “Everything we did from that point on was about realizing the purity of that image.”

Owners Dan and Luana Romanelli—he’s former Warner Bros. executive, and she’s a dressage enthusiast—began with a rare find: six acres of land overlooking the Pacific Ocean. “It was such a phenomenon to find an undeveloped piece of property out here,” says Luana. But despite their initial luck, the project barely got off to a trot. It took five years to prepare the land and complete the four-bedroom home, inspired by traditional residences in the south of France and complemented by stables for six horses, riding trails that lead down to the Pacific Coast Highway and yes, those verdant pastures. “There are so many problems when you acquire a raw piece of land,” says Dan. “But we made something we are all proud of. It’s a jewel that was honed and shaped.”

Almost every room features French doors that open to blue infinity. Accordingly, the colors are subdued. Throughout, a warm neutral suffuses the plaster walls. “Let’s face it,” says Stuart. “What are you going to do to interiors that’s more compelling than the majestic beauty of nature outside of the house? The décor defers to the oceanfront site.”

The home’s interiors speak to the rustic and refined qualities of equestrianism. Coarse linens and hemp cloth, fibrous abaca rugs and hand-scraped oak floors add raw elements, as do pieces such as a French cowhide chair, an Italian eighteenth-century carpenter’s table used as a sideboard and a pair of somewhat rusted French antique doors. Originally created for exterior use, the doors now lead into the master bedroom.

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“The doors still have a mail slot in them,” says Stuart. “The contractors wanted to spiff them up, and the men we so convinced the doors were going to be repainted that they started writing directions on them about how to hang them. We had to have an artist come in and carefully erase all those markings.”

Stuart’s choices in lighting are just as playful. An Italian antique bed crown was fashioned into an eight-arm chandelier for the living room, while one of the two breezeways—architectural touches that marry the ocean and ranch sides of the property—has a ceiling fixture resembling a vintage umbrella frame. “Much of the house is animated by the lighting—interesting and unusual pieces that add a not of humor or drama,” Stuart says.

In the master bedroom, a side table with a chunky limestone top and a gracefully carved and gilded wooden base captures the home’s interplay of roughness and beauty. But then again, so do the horses. Two works by a Malibu artist depicting horses hang above antique limestone fireplaces, while a panel in a triptych of horses, inspired by a Chinese artist’s work, conceals a door leading downstairs to the home’s big surprise: a bowling alley.

Says Stuart with a sense of satisfaction, “I’ve never seen two homeowners, four dogs and six horses so happy in one place.”

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Photographed by Dominique Vorillon/ Text by Linda Sherbert

The Last Word: Striking Room to Spare

Autobiography can play a major role in the decoration of home interiors, reflecting not only the owners' personal interests but also the family history. That was what Dan and Luana Romanelli had in mind when they hired designer Madeline Stuart to help them create a new home in Malibu.

While Luana's horse-riding would inform the décor upstairs, Dan wanted an entertainment area downstairs. He also envisioned a mural showing his parents' native Venice, Italy, and his path from Brooklyn boyhood to Burbank career—Dan was founder and president of Warner Bros. Worldwide Consumer Products. Now semi-retired, the former merchandiser of Bugs Bunny, Batman, Harry Potter and other Hollywood icons says, "I'm just a big kid at heart."

These days, Dan enjoys his home theater's 108-inch screen, Super Shot basketball games and the piece de resistance: a two-lane bowling alley. "Many home bowling lanes look too Jetsons," Stuart says. "We wanted it to look like a '40s bowling alley."

Architect Stephen Giannetti located maple lanes from an old bowling alley that had been torn down. Stuart adds, "We used board and batten to accommodate acoustical panels. And someone in my office found a beat-up sign in a funky store in Santa Barbara that says 'BOWL.' We hired a neon artist to relight it. We were thrilled." The sign now blazes, its neon brilliance reflected in polished wooden lanes. Looney Tunes critters appear on most of the bowling balls.

A mural by Ed Strang of Warner Bros. Studios is painted in the style of a 1940s WPA mural, Stuart says. "It starts in Venice and follows Dan from New York to Arizona, where Luana lived, then travels to Warner Bros. and finally to this house in Malibu."

Recalls Dan, "When I was a boy in Venice, we went down to the lower level of my uncle's palazzo on the Grand Canal and played foosball. When I go downstairs now, I think of my youth." Says Stuart, "It's a different universe and goofily charming. It's fun without being kitschy."

Any future grandkids may find Dan downstairs or in his home office, where they can rap on the door with his Bugs Bunny brass knocker.