

JOINT VENTURE

A CURATOR AND A DESIGNER CREATE
THE PERFECT BALANCE, MIXING
HER PENCHANT FOR MODERNISM WITH
HIS LOVE OF TRADITION

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In the living room of Susan Harris and Glenn Gissler's Greenwich Village apartment, the French '30 armchairs are from Maisons Gerard, and the table with shelves is vintage Dunbar; the Melhad pillow-back chair, upholstered in Manuel Canovas's Soliman fabric, is by Ronald Jonas Interiors. To the right of the fireplace is a birch and-plywood desk and chair by Donald Judd; the Himalayan wool rug is by Odgaard. See Resources.



If you want a good example of the wild ambivalence many of us have about the way we want to live, just go to the shelf where you keep your back issues of ELLE DECOR, and get out the February/March 1996 issue. The cover boasted a blue-and-white-themed room teeming with patterns and textiles and a table packed with bric-a-brac. The issue's big headline: Goodbye Clutter! It was one of the best-selling issues ever.

The lesson? Everyone wants simplicity, and everyone wants stuff. And in the past decade, Americans have tried desperately to balance the two—often in vain. The answer was not, as all too many people found, buying lots of simple stuff. Less may be more, but more of less is a lot less.

New York art curator Susan Harris learned this lesson for herself, with the help of interior designer Glenn Gissler. When they met, it proved an ideal match, and not merely because the couple fell in love, married, and had a daughter, Siena, now four. Harris, a passionate collector of contemporary and Modernist drawings, had wisely chosen a genre of art suited to the human scale of her prewar apartment, a large and lovely space off Lower Fifth Avenue. But the scale was as human as it got. She may have needed a decorator more than a husband—her place was in desperate need of what's commonly known as a woman's touch.

The aesthetic, both Harris and Gissler agree, took simple to a new look: white walls, bare floors, hard furniture. "The floors were bleached, the walls were bright white, there weren't any curtains, and each chair was more uncomfortable than the next," Gissler recalls. "And in the middle of the living room was what we called 'the couchlike thing.' It was kind of chic, but it was miserable. I tried custom-made cushions, everything. Nothing worked."

And so, over the past eight years, the designer gradually changed the decor into a gracious setting that is eminently simple but very, very com-



Facing page, from top: Gissler and Harris with their daughter, Siena, in their office/playroom. *Untitled (Heart)*, 1987 collage by Kiki Smith, and a charcoal on paper by Willem de Kooning are displayed above a mantelpiece. Danny Alessandro; the Thebes stool, early-1900s American. Gissler designed the kitchen cabinets; the Russel Wright tableware was purchased on eBay. This page: The glass-front bookcase designed by Gissler, is by Subacute Furniture, and the antique bench were bought at auction; the chandelier is by Daniel Berglund. See Resources.





fortable. Soft, pale earth tones replaced the stark white, with occasional punches of color punctuating the neutral scheme. The floors were stained dark, and in the living room, a carpet with the subtle hues of a hay field was rolled out.

Meanwhile, a slow march of Gissler's *objets d'art*—a miscellany that includes Christopher Dresser metal designs and 1930s Just Andersen bronzes—found its way into the apartment, making for a nice counterpoint to Harris's drawings by such masters as Richard Tuttle, Nancy Spero, and Joseph Beuys, as well as newcomers like Do-Ho Suh and Kim Jones.

Over time Gissler created a pastiche that looks curated rather than decorated. At first glance the living room's deep, low English-country-style club chairs, Donald Judd desk and chairs, and French Art Deco armchairs may seem to have little in common. Likewise, the artists' monographs that were given a base in a sleek cabinet in the dining room may appear at odds with the farmhouse table and benches, while in the kitchen, yellow modern tableware by Russel Wright clashes with a collection of regal antique silver pieces. But such quirky juxtapositions lend the place an intense feeling of personality and warmth. These and other details, including mismatched side tables in the master bedroom, suggest that an impassioned amateur with an un-

erring eye—and not two seasoned professionals—put the apartment together.

In fact, the understatement was almost a problem. "I put down the carpet, and Susan was like, 'So?'" says Gissler. "Ultimately, it wasn't about using any 'wow' materials or about coming in and wondering, Who did this place? That was the point. I hate decorator statements; that's not how we live. Susan and I both like restraint."

Harris agrees, even though Gissler's changes initially meant the intrusion of what she thought of as traditional (read: bourgeois) comforts into her ivory tower. She remembers the day when, after long insisting that she didn't want bookshelves in the living room, woodworkers arrived and started installing them. "I was furious," she says. "Furious. But now I see that it had to be, and I love how they look."

What Harris likes about the apartment is, not surprisingly, close to what she says she likes about her husband: "It's very sedate and sophisticated, but there's something provocative about it too." The pair's real achievement, though, is the unlikely union that they have created—a formal yet comfortable home that embraces art and objects without ever feeling cluttered or too carefully edited. And with an interior, like a marriage, the most important thing is striking the right balance. ■

A circa-1910 American ice-cream parlor chair sits in a corner of the master bedroom. The ink on paper is by Louise Bourgeois, the colored-pencil drawing above the bed is by Alan Saret, and the antique bronze table lamp is from Remains Lighting. Facing page: whitewashed wood bed in Siena's room; armchair is covered in a vintage Alexander Girard fabric from Maximo. See Resources.

