

Lightness of Being

Clean Lines and Bright Spaces Distinguish a Southern California House

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"It's a study in black and white and shades of gray," says Craig Wright, the Los Angeles designer who did the interiors of a 1930s James E. Dolena house for Judi and Bruce Stern in Brentwood, California. ABOVE: "The entrance hall is an uncluttered space with a gently curving staircase that acts as sculpture," says Wright. Below the Déco-inspired banister is a 1990 standing figure by Manuel Neri.

BELOW: "We used a combination of Art Déco, Biedermeier and Oriental antiques, juxtaposed with contemporary art," says Wright. David Hockney's *Celia in a Polka Dot Dress*, 1980, hangs above the Dolena-designed chimneypiece. Accenting the room are Syrian ceramics, on the mantel, and Egyptian bronzes, right—all from Craig Wright's shop, Quatrain.

DECORATING IS A discipline of diplomacy. Craig Wright demonstrated his finesse when, over the course of three years, he designed the interior of the same residence for two different clients in two contrasting styles. "It was wonderful but quite a challenge,"

he says. "The clients were friends, and I knew they would compare results. It was very political."

Located in the Brentwood area of Los Angeles, the house is a Georgian Revival that Los Angeles architect James E. Dolena designed for himself



in the 1930s. Dolena is remembered for some splendid residences, including the Conrad Hilton estate, Casa Encantada in Bel-Air (see *Architectural Digest*, February 1987)—now owned by David Murdock—and the Los Angeles landmark Farmers Market.

Mark and Marcie Feldman bought the house in 1987 and encouraged Wright's desire to emphasize its glamour (see *Architectural Digest*, September 1990). When the clients decided to move, their friends Bruce and Judi Stern offered to buy it and asked Wright to redo the interior. Where the Feldmans had wanted coffered mahogany ceilings, patterned rugs and ornate European and Chinese antiques—the trademark style Wright has developed through his antiques showroom, Quatrain, in West Hollywood—the Sterns wanted a more modern look. "I had my own ideas of what the house should look like," recalls Judi Stern. "I thought the architecture spoke a lot, and it didn't need an overabundance of furniture. It needed special pieces."

For Wright, the situation demanded ambassadorial skill. The two couples were not only friends, they were competitors in the clothing manufacturing business. Wright even found himself traveling with both couples on a buying excursion to Paris. "It was very confusing," he says.

Coincidentally, the Stern project came at a time when Wright himself was changing from a "proper, serious, traditional" style to one that was "younger and more fun." "Although he hadn't done a house like this, I trusted him," explains Judi Stern. "I didn't want a house full of contemporary things, I wanted a contemporary house with antiques and a look that was bright and light."

To accomplish that, Wright modified the palette to white, black and

"They're loose and elegant, with a formality that's good for a public space," Wright says of Cy Twombly's 1970 set of six lithographs, *Roman Notes*, which lines one wall of the living room. The seating area includes a gray-silk-upholstered sofa and an Edwardian lacquered armchair. The Chinese dog is Han Dynasty.





gray. "Judi gravitated toward that," he says. "It's something I wouldn't have done originally, but it fell into place naturally." Wright cleared out the house so that he could work from a clean slate—bleaching the wood floors, painting the ceilings white and removing some walls in the master bedroom.

The Sterns had collected contemporary art for many years and had come to appreciate the spare, open conditions that its presentation often requires. Dolena's twelve-foot-high living room became an ideal background for a series of lithographs

by Cy Twombly. The silk-upholstered furniture, black-lacquered low tables and grand piano support the subtlety of the art. "Everything was chosen for its shape," points out Wright.

In the adjacent entrance hall stands a Manuel Neri figure, around which curves a new Art Déco-style banister that enhances the stairwell. At the far end of the space are a Chinese root-wood armchair and an eighteenth-century Chinese altar table. "I do all the buying for Quatrain, and my clients get the advantage of that," says Wright. "I travel to New York, London, Rome, Paris and elsewhere,

ABOVE: Working with Judi Stern, the designer uncovered furnishings that would complement the residents' contemporary art. "I like to stir it up a bit," says Wright. "That's where I am at the moment."

BELOW: Opening onto the garden, the club room features an Art Moderne-inspired low table and striped sofas. Jasper Johns's 1978 lithograph *Dutch Wives II* is above a French stone chimneypiece that was added by Wright. An Art Déco vase rests on the table. The chimneypiece and the 19th-century Japanese bronze bull atop it are from Quatrain.



and I take photographs of everything I like. I keep them in a book, and some things, like the altar table, are available for years waiting for the right client. That piece is so rare that without the record book it would have been hard to find."

The entrance hall gives onto the dining room, in which the furnishings are treated as sculpture. The adjacent club room was transformed into a sunny space, with French doors that open onto the garden. French armchairs are set off by an unusual black-lacquered Chinese armoire that conceals the television. The standing lamps are Giacometti reproductions complemented by the Egyptian antiquities on the bar. "The house is all done as counterpoint," says Wright. "But there's an odd thread of continuity, since the contemporary pieces we used were inspired by Art Déco."

Indeed, Oriental and Middle East-

ern art influenced the artists and designers who originated Art Déco, which served as the basis for streamlined modernity. There is a historical as well as a visual link between these disparate styles, and Wright, who studied art history and architecture at USC and UCLA, was certainly aware of the connections. "Early on, I aspired to an academic life, but I like to work with people. Intellectually I felt pulled toward art history, but personally I received so much more joy from decorating and working with people. I'm having more fun."

Outside, the prevailing colors have been extended to the flowers: White roses border the pool, white gardenias bloom in the window boxes. Dolena's original garden shed, which has the same quirky Regency-style copper roof used at Farmers Market, was remodeled as a poolhouse.

Wright made additional modifica-

BELOW: In the master bedroom, a Biedermeier commode and table flank the ebonized bentwood bed designed by Wright. "We wanted a 1930s king-size version of a Ruhlmann-like bed, but none were ever made," he notes. Over the stone fireplace is *Celia Smoking*, 1973, by David Hockney; on the table are Chinese tomb figures. Reading lamps are from Cassella.



ABOVE: "We put in black granite and hardwood floors to give it a cleaner look," says Wright of the light-filled master bath. *Hyena: The Waves II* is by Frank Stella. "We worked around the existing windows to increase the feeling of a garden."



tions upstairs in the master bedroom, where he removed bookcases and put in windows on either side of a stone fireplace. A seldom-used balcony was converted into a walk-in closet. He also designed the bentwood bed and found a craftsman in New York who still had the presses to produce it. "I

wanted a good bed. You can always tell the difference between wood and lacquer. Whenever you cheat, you can feel it," Wright explains. "It's difficult to make furniture that doesn't look tricky. It's hard to get it neutral enough." A Chinese cabinet is another triumph of his organized system of

buying. "It was on the market for five years when we got it."

Reflecting on the past year of negotiations with his new and old clients, Wright sighs with relief, but he's noticeably pleased with the results. Shaking his head, he marvels, "How it all worked out, I don't know." □

