

CULTIVATING MALIBU

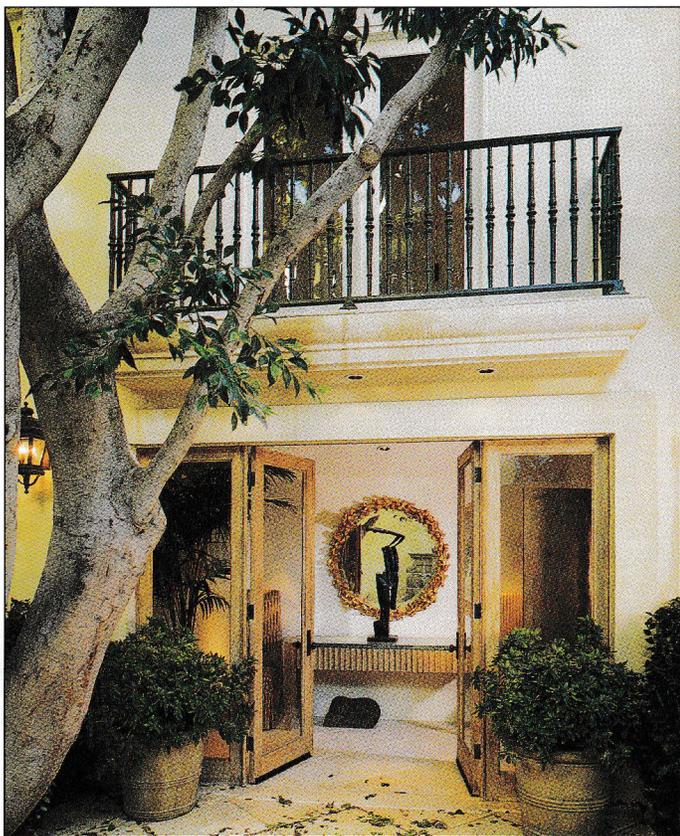
ANTIQUES AND CONTEMPORARY ART ON THE CALIFORNIA BEACH

Architecture by A. Thomas Torres, AIA

Interior Design by Sally Sirkin Lewis

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History has a way of repeating itself. Some twenty-eight years ago Sally Sirkin Lewis designed a Mediterranean-style house in Nogales, Arizona, for businessman Joseph Esformes. Last year Esformes and his wife, Kathryn, asked Lewis to remodel and decorate their new beach house in Malibu, where once again the emphasis was to be on the Mediterranean.

"Sally's interiors and furniture and her use of fabrics and textures have a timeless quality. I never tire of them," says Joseph Esformes. "They

have a romance, elegance and formality that we like, along with a comfort level that's beyond description."

The waterfront house, which had previously belonged to Johnny Carson and John McEnroe, was completely redefined by Lewis, who worked with architect A. Thomas Torres. "I wanted a house at the beach but not a

ABOVE: The courtyard entrance of an Italianate villa in Malibu is "shaded by a great old ficus tree," says designer Sally Sirkin Lewis. **RIGHT:** Lewis used "sunny Mediterranean colors" in the living room. Armchair from Quatrain. Tapestry fabric by Cowtan & Tout.





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ABOVE: "I don't usually use chandeliers," says Lewis. "But I love the eighteenth-century Italian fixture in the dining room. Joseph and Kathryn Esformes didn't want it electrified—they prefer the romance of candles." Table, chairs and leather from J. Robert Scott.

RIGHT: "I aimed for a fresh, contemporary interpretation of the Mediterranean look." Lewis placed a steel-and-marble desk in Joseph Esformes's study. On the desk sits an Art Déco bronze of greyhounds. The pair of fauteuils have fabric from Old World Weavers.



"The sunroom is an extension of the dining room and flows out onto a terrace," says Lewis, who worked with architect A. Thomas Torres in transforming the house. "The Esformeses wanted an intimate area where they could have drinks before dinner and watch the sunset."

beach house," says Esformes. Lewis adds, "We gutted it from the outside in, adding balconies and limestone floors. We stuccoed and did the landscaping, putting in clipped Ligustrum hedges and ficus trees. It now has the look of a Tuscan villa."

Lewis's signature, however, is clean, contemporary interiors. "I thought people would be shocked because they don't connect these soft colors and pretty things with me," she says. "But I love anything that's beautiful. I relate to the Mediterranean style because I like curves and things that are sensuous. My dream has been that someone would hire me to do a villa in Tuscany."

Lewis and Torres established the interior courtyard as the approach to the two-story house to reflect a melding of the classical and the contemporary. In the entrance hall, a circular mirror wreathed in carved gilt hangs behind a bronze sculpture by Thomas Cooney Crawford.

Lewis outfitted the living room with French doors that open to the sand and the Pacific. "The only reason people would associate me with this house is the sparseness of the furnishings," she says. "Even though I used more adornment and more tradi-

tional pieces of furniture, it still has that soft, contemporary edge. It's not cluttered. My kind of sensibility can be seen, but I've added new elements. I put tapestry on the slipper chairs in the living room. The antique Italian chair is covered in raw silk, yet it doesn't deny what I've been doing. I've always loved Giacometti tables and wonderful contemporary art.

"The envelope of the interior blends. It isn't meant to shock but to provide a background," she adds. The mottled eggshell walls and limestone floors bring an unobtrusive texture to the rooms, especially the dining area, with its limestone pedestal table and painted chairs.

A sweeping staircase leads to the second floor, where a guest bedroom is more in keeping with her trademark minimalism. The mottled ivory on the walls is repeated in the linen canopy on the bed. The wood floors are bare. A gold-leaf painting by Wess Dahlberg hangs above the headboard like a religious icon. The fauteuil and ottoman are boldly checked in blue and white. Lewis, who sought out men's suit fabrics when she first began as a designer, admits, "I love checks, stripes and plaids, solids and textures."

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"The master bedroom is a very small space," Lewis says. "We raised the bed so that my clients could get a view of the ocean." Tapestry chair fabric by Brun-schwig & Fils. Desk, chair, bench, fabric for draperies and bed skirt, and bench leather, J. Robert Scott.

It was her inability to find such fabrics that led her to produce her own designs for her company, J. Robert Scott, which is celebrating its twenty-fifth anniversary this year. "I was never the kind of designer who went shopping to get ideas. I saw what I wanted in my head and went out and tried to find it. But nobody had the color of fabric or shape of furniture I wanted, and I'm very firm in what I want to do," she explains.

The sitting room of the master suite doubles as Jo-

seph Esformes's study. After placing tapestry-covered antique French chairs next to the windows, Lewis decided against an antique desk: "It would be too much." Instead, she used a powder-coated black steel base topped with a slab of rose marble. "There's a gorgeous ocean. You don't need a gorgeous desk of real prominence," she pointed out. In the end, her client agreed. "People who want me to do their interiors understand what it is I have to say and like the fact that I'm

strong and I'm going to lead them. My principle of design is to afford my clients more than they had ever expected."

Completing the house for a client she's known for nearly three decades led to some introspection. "I have to be willing to take chances, not to be afraid to grow," Lewis says. "It's my responsibility as a designer to be original, to grow into the future but not deny the past. I'm not here to re-create the eighteenth century, but I'm not here to forget it, either." □