



# *SAN MIGUEL* *Synthesis*

*Five friends breathe sophisticated new life into a Spanish Colonial house in the fabled Mexican hill town*

photography by MATTHEW MILLMAN    text by HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP



ne thing that attracted us to the house was that its rooms were large, simple volumes that work well for our artistic interests—Spanish Colonial art, Mexican pottery and contemporary art,” says Christopher Knight, art critic for the *Los Angeles Times*. “We wanted to stay away from a period look, opting instead for something eclectic and comfortable.” Knight and his partner, Fernando Sarthou, bought the eighteenth-century house in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico, with their friends Gaily Beinecke, who is active in various not-for-profit arts organizations, and two prominent Los Angeles artists.

The five friends had traveled extensively together, but they always returned to Mexico, and particularly to the historic hilltop town of San Miguel, with its beautiful public buildings, ornate churches and spacious private homes in the grand baroque style of the Spanish Colonial era. A few blocks from the leafy plaza in the center of town, they found a well-preserved 5,500-square-foot house with most of its rooms arranged around a courtyard. Like a lot of the better homes there, this one had architectural glories that were concealed behind a thick wood door set in an unassuming street facade. The friends pooled their resources, and acting with an alacrity not often seen in San Miguel, they acquired Casa San Francisco, named for the nearby church.

The house needed very few architectural changes, and those were overseen by local architect José Fernando Licéaga Sanchez. Needless to say, each owner was concerned with the appearance of the interiors in the residence. During their travels, the friends had gathered old religious carvings (*santos*) and paintings on tin and canvas (*retablos*), ceramic pots and vases, folk art and tribal rugs. In

**opposite** Pillows covered with striped and botanical fabrics from Schumacher accent the neutral tone of the living room’s upholstered sofa from Evos. The Spanish Colonial-style low table, also from Evos, is topped with orange-hued leather and nailhead trim. **above** The dining room, located next to the living room’s sitting area, features a mid-twentieth-century mesquite table surrounded by sleek chairs from Namuh in San Miguel.



short, they had spent years collectively furnishing their future dream home. But how did the five navigate the process of decision making? “With a group of people sharing one residence, it’s best to let things develop organically,” says Knight. “Whoever happened to be in town at any given time might find a chest or a chair or a lamp, and it would end up in the house. If there was any question, a photo would be e-mailed, but that didn’t happen too often. We have a mutual respect and trust.”

Sarthou co-owns Hospitality Industry Partners, which represents furniture, textiles and accessories to hotel designers. He and his artist friends worked with various design studios in San Miguel on the interior details, providing fabrics from Schumacher and Stroheim & Romann to the designers at Evos for the sofas and chairs in the living room and master bedroom. Throws from Anichini were brought from Los Angeles. Iron furniture for the courtyard, the kitchen patio and roof terrace was purchased from Casa Cohen, and the cushions were covered with Sunbrella fabric. Pieces of Chinese furniture were found at Namuh, a warehouse of offerings on the outskirts of San Miguel. And each of the friends had bought antique and contemporary pottery from such in-town shops as La Calaca, Insh’ala Imports, Cantadora and Sollano 16.

“Some of the Spanish Colonial art has been repatriated,” Knight points out. “Over the fireplace is an eighteenth-century Mexican painting of the Trinity and Holy Family, which went from Mexico City to Los Angeles to San Miguel over the course of about fifteen years.” Nineteenth-century painted-wood cherubs in the study were bought by Sarthou in the Philippines, while antique Bolivian silver figurines in the living room were brought south from Beinecke’s New York apartment.

The artists in the group hung some of their own paintings and collages throughout the house. In the living room, a suite of six paintings by one of them incorporates the initials of the five home owners. The abstract works are rambunctious and spunky, colorful and lush, but they hang together as a unified composition. A perfect metaphor, in fact, for the relationships among the five friends. +

**opposite** Upholstered sofas from Evos face each other in the study, which looks out to a courtyard through arched windows and a door. The red-tile floors are original to the house. **above** A door within a large glassed-in archway leads from the kitchen to a small patio and the central courtyard beyond. Blue-and-white ceramic tiles, made in the town of Dolores Hidalgo, display a traditional Mexican motif.