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Lauren Bannack
at home
Heavenly

A Historic Estate in Montecito Carries Out George Washington Smith's Vision with a View to Contemporary Life

by JOAN TAPPER photographs by LISA ROMEREIN styled by KYLE IRWIN
novation and restoration are like two kids on a teeter-totter. It’s so easy to bounce too hard toward exacting, difficult-to-live-in historic recreation or toward radical changes that sweep away all vestiges of the past. Finding the perfect balance can be an elusive game, but when it’s achieved, the results are so graceful, so delicate, they can seem utterly effortless.

So it’s a delight to step up to the front door of this historic home, where the limbs of a majestic fig tree veil part of a stepped-back wall. You know at once you’re about to walk into a George Washington Smith house. The elegantly unpretentious rectangular entranceway is crowned by a wrought-iron balcony and set into a signature white plaster, red-roof façade that immediately evokes images of a country house in Andalusia. Inside, the original architectural details have been complemented by imaginative Moorish-inspired furnishings and decor, but even more amazing are the additions that seamlessly and luxuriously marry old and new.

Like many Montecito estates, this one carries with it an almost century-long story. In 1920, painter DeWitt Panhali was living in a late 19th-century house on the property, when he asked Smith, his friend and neighbor, to transform it into the kind of Spanish-style residence for which the architect was becoming famous. The grounds were extensive—much larger than the property’s four-plus acres today—and Smith oriented the residence on four axes so that views stretched south to the ocean, with gardens to the east and west and an oval driveway to the north. That plan accounted for the home’s original name, Cuatro Vistas, or “four views.”

The present owners, who already possessed homes in Europe, were eager to have a place in Santa Barbara when they bought the estate a little more than a decade ago. “It was a classic G.W. Smith,” the lady of the house remembers, “and we wanted a historic home. We were happy to bring it back to its splendor.” Though the bones of the dwelling had remained unchanged, the interior had taken on a “south of France look, very Provençal, with bleached floors. I wanted to return it to the Spanish-Moorish feel. New houses don’t have a soul,” she adds. “I love the old architecture—the old curved doors and the old glass.”

A quick renovation got rid of certain extraneous touches. But for the long-term, the owners had something more substantial in mind—the addition of a family room, space for guests, and an improved traffic flow that eliminated a cramped back stairway and the need to pass through certain rooms to reach others. “Smith’s floor plans create interesting rooms,” says Don Nulty, a Santa Barbara architect who has overseen many historic restorations, “but sometimes they aren’t smooth.
A striking antique console and mirror by Carlo Bugatti shows off the Italian designer’s penchant for exotic materials. Camel-hair chairs find a firm footing in the living room, whose color scheme is livened by a tribal rug.

flowing. They can seem chopped up. “The owners hired Nulty to adapt the home for 21st-century living, which meant upgrading electrical and other systems, enlarging the baths, updating the kitchen, and creating a portico that linked the wings. “We added about one third to the house,” says Nulty. “But we were careful not to disrupt the original intimate scale of Smith’s work.” The owners also asked interior designer Joan Behnke to assist with carrying out their vision for decor, and they brought on landscape architect Dennis Hilkok to enhance the existing garden.

Two principles guided the team every step of the way, notes Behnke: First of all, the owners wanted to make it seem as if nothing had been renovated or changed—to convey the feeling that the house had always looked this way. Second, they wanted to embrace the Andalusian flavor of the residence. “They had recently been in Morocco and were inspired by the sexy, mysterious exotica of the country,” she adds.

That theme was driven by the husband’s collection of Orientalist art, largely 19th-century French paintings that depict colorful scenes in North Africa and the Middle East. “They were the inspiration for the colors of the decor,” his wife says. “There are lots of jewel tones, which lend a Moorish feel and gave me

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In the formal dining room, a naive Italian scene (by the Pincioni, dated 1717) in the house’s entryway. Hand-carved Syrian chairs flank the round table, imported Italian taste with equally intricate craftsmanship.
CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: A Moorish lamp; a welcoming settle in the front hall; an antique Syrian carved chair in the new family room.

Opposite: Moroccan-style Mashrabiyas help illuminate the intimate bar just off the living room.

The palette for the furnishings. The artworks show souks, warrios, rug merchants, and domestic scenes and are full of exquisite detail. In them "you see the Berber carpets, and tiles, and Mashrabiyas," as latticework Moroccan shutters are known. Those elements ultimately found a place in this house, too, blending both with its existing appointments and one-of-a-kind accents.

The vivid paintings set the mood from the moment one walks into the front hall, where a perissoom-hue settle anchors a corner. A striking antique console and mirror—made of wood inlaid with copper, bone, and ivory—dominates the opposite wall. It's the work of Carlo Bugatti (father of the famed automotive engineer), an innovative, turn-of-the-century furniture designer who mixed ethnic, art deco, and Italian influences in his creations. Underfoot, the original terra-cotta floor tiles have been restored and duplicated so exactly for other rooms that it's impossible to tell which are which. An adjoining powder room carries out the Moroccan theme with
handmade geometric mosaic zellij tiles on the walls and custom-
made mashrabiya on the windows.

Beyond the ball, a glass door reveals a breathtaking green
lawn extending to the sides and unrolling back to two giant
Canary Island date palms that flanks the beginning of one of
two serenely long reflecting pools. It's a tantalizing enticement
to step outside, but first the rest of the house beckons.

A few steps lead down to the living room, whose dark beams
are decorated with a stenciled Moorish pattern. The imposing
fireplace—one of seven in the house—has been there since
the beginning, along with the intricately carved wooden doors
of its built-in wood box. Antique Syrian tiles are on display,
while authentic camel seats invite conversation. In the center
of the room, a superb wrought iron, candle-lit chandelier with
an Adam and Eve theme hangs from a beam—"the work of a
formidable French ironmonger," notes Behnke.

Adam and Eve resurface in the dining room and are por-
trayed in inlay on a table top, and there are other playful refer-
ences to alluring women in art, including the odalisque paint-
ing that is a highlight of the intimate library.

From there, a butler's pantry leads into the light, airy kitchen,
whose simple cabinets were copied from the few that Smith
had built in. "All I wanted to do was repeat, repeat, repeat" what
was part of the house, the owner's wife notes, whether
that meant cabinets, fireplace grates, tiles, or wrought iron
sconces. Or the family room, which echoes the living room not
only in size and shape but also with its fireplace and beamed
ceiling. And the staircase that leads up to the guest rooms on
the second floor, where a graceful gallery offers a garden view,
was the solution to Smith's odd traffic pattern.

Meanwhile, the master suite occupies the original wing's
second floor, with a commanding view of the grounds and
mountains. If the bedroom itself is restrained and elegant, the
all-ivory master bath is both sumptuous and sensuous, with lu-
minescent taupe and cream zellij tiles in an arched niche be-
hind the tub. In contrast, the gentleman's dressing room is pan-
eled in rich dark wood, taking its cue from an elaborate antique
inlaid Syrian mirror.

Finally, where a porch once stood open toward Montecito
Peak, there is now a sitting room, closed in decades ago. From here,
George Washington Smith's exterior staircase angles down to a
side garden, allowing a discreet descent to the swimming pool.

The estate's original isn't landscaping was the work of a Dutch
horticulturist named Peter Rieck, who planted exotic and spec-
imen trees, added an off-center octagonal

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