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DALLAS/FORT WORTH'S HOME AND GARDEN MAGAZINE • APRIL 2004

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SECOND LOOK

Decorator Cathy Kincaid adds her own touch to Dallas design legend Nina Claiborne's hidden gem.

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OPEN INVITATION: (Opposite) The front exterior and expansive courtyard of decorator Cathy Kincaid's Highland Park house is a sight few people get to enjoy. Kincaid's house sits sideways on its lot, showing only a sliver of the southern façade to the outside world. (This page) To Kincaid, the living room walls, covered in antique Chinese panels depicting birds resting on bamboo branches, are merely a backdrop. With a decorator's confidence, she groups several pieces from her collection of still life paintings, brings in a large-scale walnut French Restoration chest, and introduces even more pattern into the room with these painted Louis XVI-style chairs with Aubusson upholstery.

THE GEORGIA O'KEEFFE MUSEUM

SEVEN YEARS AGO, DALLAS DECORATOR Cathy Kincaid Hudson, husband Bill, and their four children needed to find a new house, and only three on the market fit their needs. Each of the prospects sounded sketchy—especially the one that her Realtor was pushing the hardest. "If I tell you where it is, you won't want it," the agent warned her.

But once she'd learned the location, Kincaid remembered that she'd always been intrigued as she drove by the 1930s house on Mockingbird Lane. Only a slip of the two-story brick house is visible from the street because it's sited sideways on the lot. To Kincaid, this house was less about curb appeal than the mystery within.

On her first visit, standing on the oversize, New Orleans-style brick patio neatly outlined with cyclamens and ornamental cabbages, listening to the history of the building, Kincaid realized that this was not just a piece of real estate—it was a legacy. The house was previously owned by Nina Claiborne, one of Dallas' most respected interior designers. Because of this, though the home's 4,500 square feet are carved up into dollhouse-sized rooms with low ceilings, Kincaid was loath to change much. She simply added wallpaper in a few areas and made her furniture work with Claiborne's vision for the house. Kincaid's favorite things are lovingly displayed wherever there's an empty inch or two of space. The result of this "collaboration" is what everyone wants their place to feel like—home.

JUST INSIDE THE DARK-WOOD FRONT door is a small foyer and stairwell leading up to the second floor. The walls are covered in a soft blue and cream Nina Campbell paper that lends the feeling of being inside a place where special things reside. "It's kind of romantic," says Kincaid, pressing her palm along the wall, feeling its smoothness.

She steps to the left and moves the baby gate, which keeps the four family dogs—Eloise, the black-and-white mixed breed; Maggie, the Labrador; Annabelle,

WALLFLOWER: (Opposite) With plaid draperies, toile upholstery, and an eye-catching wall covering, Kincaid's living room design is not timid. But consistent use of beige and green ties the patterns together. Overhead, silver teapaper creates soft reflections of light and seems to raise the low ceiling a bit. (Above) Kincaid calls an antique wine tasting table back into service in the living room. The back wall is actually antique boiserie recovered from a French country house. Kincaid collected the blue-and-white porcelain over many years. The daybed, upholstered in a Scalamandre green-and-white toile, is a piece close to Kincaid's heart; it served for many years in her daughter's childhood bedroom. (Right) Homeowner and decorator Cathy Kincaid Hudson (seated) with colleague and friend Charles Birdsong, associate Betsy Massey, and three of the four family dogs in a corner of the front courtyard.

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"There are local legends that go along with this house, particularly Nina Claiborne's seascape in the dining room," Kincaid says. "How can you ignore that? Or cover it?"

DINING AL FRESCO: (This page and opposite) Previous owner and design doyenne Nina Claiborne wrapped the dining room walls in a hand-painted seascape. Many homeowners would hesitate to block the scene with furniture or accessories, creating awkward design problems and a too-empty room. Here, as in the living room, Kincaid treats the wall covering as background to the furniture, art, and accessories that complete the space.

the black Tibetan terrier; and Daisy, the blonde cockapoo puppy—out of the living room.

"If I'm not careful, the living room can be too grandmotherly," she says, waving at the room in question. Grandmotherly? Try grand dame. Eighteenth-century Chinese panels are painted in a warm—and now worn—lemon chiffon, depicting birds perched on branches of bamboo. The panels wrap around this tiny room like a child's favorite blanket. But to Kincaid the wall art isn't especially precious. "I like it old and crusty," she says. "To me, it's just the background."

A perfect one, it turns out, for a grouping of Kincaid's still life paintings, a dark and heavy contrast to the whimsical birds. A French daybed, leftover from one of her now-grown daughters' childhood bedrooms, is the focal seating point of the room. It rests comfortably on a sisal rug, a textural contrast to the soft toile fabric on the daybed and the floor-to-ceiling curtains in plaid taffeta. No wonder that it's in this room that Kincaid loves to entertain. "I like to have dinner parties in here because it's quiet," she says.

The dining room, just large enough to accommodate a French Restoration table and early 19th-century Directoire chairs, seats the overflow. But it's hardly formal. Kincaid uses "sailors' Valentines," framed folk-art pieces created with seashells, and a sunburst mirror as a counterpoint to the gravitas of the Normandy-esque seascape, hand-painted by Claiborne herself. "I kept what she did and added my own things," she says. The pairing is, undeniably, successful. >>

Key Elements

The secrets to decorator Cathy Kincaid's warm and elegant design.

Personal collections Surround yourself with things you love and want to see every day—things that have personal meaning, not the "it" collectible of the moment.

Antiques and period pieces Objects with a bit of age lend something to an interior—romance, history, integrity—that reproductions cannot.

Wall coverings There's nothing like hand-painted wallpaper or antique panels for creating a unique interior. Patterns and scenes add more interest than a simple coat of paint.

Textiles Fabric adds softness to a room, whether on the walls, the windows, the furniture, or the floor. Think you can't have beautiful fabrics because of the pets or kids? "Linen velvet is indestructible," Kincaid says. "It's the perfect upholstery choice for parents and pet owners."

Confidence Trust yourself. You might not know if the scale of that print is right for the space, but you'll know when it's wrong. It's okay to work by process of elimination.

Professional help Even a decorator sometimes follows another pro's lead. Kincaid took many of her design cues from previous owner Nina Claiborne. If you're paralyzed and unable to make a decision, bring in a designer. Even a single consultation will help you envision your space in whole new way.

GOOD INSTINCTS: (Opposite) Plaid draperies and painted furniture against a densely patterned wallpaper? Of course. The key is color harmony and consistency of scale. The long legs of the William and Mary highboy minimize the visual weight of the piece by raising it above ground level. The chest almost seems to float in the middle of the wall space, rather than squatting on the floor. (Above) In daughter Maggie's bedroom, blue and white linens—and a monogram—add panache to the custom-crafted caned bed, which Kincaid had made in New Orleans. She specified the paint colors to work with the Farrow & Ball wallpaper. The Leontine linens were also purchased in New Orleans.

Ask Kincaid to define the look she's created in her home and she'll talk about color, pattern, scale, and depth. "If someone really took it into their heads to recreate this," she says, "assuming they also have a small house and small spaces, they'd have to keep color under control. Not that you can't have color in a small house, but you need some continuity, a single thread running throughout. And, contrary to popular opinion, using beige and neutrals is not a sin."

Pattern and scale are also issues in a small house. "It's important that nothing takes over a room," Kincaid says. "If a pattern is too large or too busy, it'll make you claustrophobic. In a house this small, you're right on top of things before you know it, so they must have interest—pattern, texture, or something that draws you in but doesn't overwhelm you."

In interior design, depth comes with layers of elements—wall and floor coverings, furniture, art, accessories—that complement, rather than match, each other. Pieces should create a bit of visual tension: a sisal rug with taffeta curtains, French pieces against Chinese panels, a mix of new with old and older. "I think antiques and period pieces are important elements of a really pleasing design," Kincaid says. "Whatever period you're interested in—Empire or the '60s—having some true period pieces in your design, not just new and reproduction pieces, softens an interior and makes a room more interesting."

But there's more than just a practiced designer's eye behind this décor—there's also history and heart. "There are local legends that go along with this house, particularly Nina Claiborne's seascape in the dining room," she says. "How can you ignore that? Or cover it?"

When Kincaid draws attention to particular pieces of furniture or accessories, she uses words such as "silk," "antique," and "hand-painted," but they're only offered as a means of identification; what's really important is the story she's about to tell, the meaning that object holds for her. Take, for instance, her daughter's daybed, which now takes center stage in the living room. "I could never part with it," she says. "It's something I treasure." Which, in the end, is what great decorating is all about. D

—Please see page 157 for Where to Find It.