



# A MEASURE

A COLLECTION OF EASTERN TREASURES FINDS EASY RAPPORT IN

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARK CHEW



The back section of the house was opened up as an all-purpose living space, with kitchen at one end and dining area at the other. In between is a long bench-seat, piled with pillows and cushions covered with antique kimono fabrics and modern textiles in traditional designs. This part of the house is also used as a studio by the owner, whose works are displayed in the background and at left. The coffee table is from Kazari & the Orientalist.

# OF BALANCE

THE GALLERY-LIKE SPACE OF A RENOVATED VICTORIAN RED-BRICK HOUSE.



The view, this picture, from the dining area to the kitchen. Red oak floors blend warmly with the European beech timber units. The cupboard on the right houses television and stereo equipment.



A raised meditation room overlooks the dining area, left. The teak table is set with Japanese lacquer and stoneware; a bamboo bird cage forms a centerpiece, and origami butterflies decorate the place settings. Top left: acute attention to detail is shown in the placement of geta and a miniature Zen garden in the meditation room, and in arrangements throughout the house.



For inveterate collectors, designing a home has its restrictions. An uncompromising list of contents is one thing; preordained colours, shapes and dimensions are others. But the real challenge is to create an interior where treasures rest easily with the trappings of everyday life.

The owners of this house in Melbourne have lived in five different Asian countries over the past 18 years. During this time, the family members have amassed a formidable collection of artefacts, antiques and memorabilia. Two years ago, they arrived in Australia with literally thousands of pieces, ranging from tiny antique silver boxes to rock-solid wooden chests and ancient stone carvings. Not only did the house have to accommodate these myriad pieces, there was also the human factor to consider – teenage sons and the couple's love of entertaining, as well as their personal interests. One paints to relax and needs plenty of

light and space to work on his canvasses, many of which grace the walls of the house. The other meditates, so quiet, light and a peaceful view are a must. She also needs an office from which to run her decorating business.

All these requirements have been met, with, it seems, the ease of a magician pulling rabbits out of a hat. With many moves behind her, the owner/decorator has developed a formula that works for her purposes. Regardless of what type of house she begins with, she creates her ideal – big windows, lots of light, no curtains, no visible light fittings, minimalist skirtings, cornices and door handles, glass display shelving, and as few internal doors as structural concerns will allow. Staying with the same colour scheme – “beige-on-beige-on-beige with touches of gold, black and ox-blood red” – brings eclectic collections together in harmony against a neutral background. “It stops pieces fighting

for attention with their surroundings. Furniture must not be allowed to crowd the stage," she insists.

The house was built in the 1930s – two-storey red brick with small dark rooms opening off narrow hallways – and decorated in 1970s style with chandeliers, carpets and a pink interior. She gutted and restored it, following her formula, with all walls painted a rich cream. She would have loved beige textured carpet throughout but, apart from the expense, sanity had to prevail: "With the boys in and out all the time, it was too ambitious." Settling for an off-white pure-wool loop because of its "good, strong, textural appeal", she had polished oak boards laid in high-traffic areas.

Downstairs, the original house had been extended twice, resulting in three different floor levels. This feature has cleverly been used to help define rooms where walls have been removed.

Upstairs there are now three bedrooms, two bathrooms and a home office. At the original ground level, the front door opens to a hall, with guest room on the left and an opening on the right, created by removing the dividing wall, which leads to a sitting room one step down. Ahead, the hall leads down three stairs to a room that runs across the rear span of the house. Previously four little rooms, it now contains a kitchen and general living and dining areas – rolled into one star-bright place for painting, cooking, eating and relaxing. The north-facing back wall is made entirely of glass and overlooks the garden.

Tucked away on a platform behind the dining section is a 'tatami room', a tiny corner of space stolen from the sitting room and open to it on one side. Designed for meditation, it looks out over the dining table to the peaceful back garden beyond. At first

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An atmosphere of calm defines the sitting room, opposite. The beige-on-beige colour scheme is a perfect backdrop for the family's collected pieces. *Royal Ogata*, a kimono painting by the owner, hangs above the fireplace. A Korean elmwood rice drum, topped with glass, works as a coffee table and display unit; in the foreground is a Hong Kong bird cage on a Balinese wedding chest.



An Afghan blanket chest, above, beside the meditation space displays a contemporary sculpture, a celadon bowl and Filipino wood carvings. A canvas by the owner hangs above. Left: the meditation area, on a raised platform lined with tatami mats, opens to both sitting and dining areas. A shelf is set minimally with a pair of Japanese dolls, a ceramic pot and framed calligraphy brushes.



Typical of the tactile qualities of the collections are ivory *netsukes*, **top left**, displayed in a printer's tray. **Left**: a Chinese red lacquer money chest sits in the entrance hall and displays a wooden Balinese lion, a bronze incense burner and Chinese wine jar that has been converted to a lamp base. **Main picture**: the east-facing main bedroom is furnished with gauze roman blinds, a Noguchii floor lamp, a Balinese ikat fabric on the bed and artwork by the owner.



glance it appears as a raised, near-empty alcove housing just one elmwood chest and a few small ornaments.

In all common areas, the skill of combining precious pieces with those of daily use comes into play. Nothing stands on ceremony. The atmosphere is completely 'feel' friendly; pieces are positioned so that they almost demand to be picked up and examined. Intricate Chinese bird cages wait to be inspected and ivory *netsukes* (Japanese toggle clasps) sit in the tiny compartments of a printer's tray, their sensuous curves begging to be stroked. A sturdy Korean rice drum serves the dual purpose of a coffee-table base and display cabinet. In its huge bowl, under a circular glass top, are collections of silver boxes from Cambodia, Thailand, Pakistan and Irian Jaya, watches from Afghanistan and ceremonial spoons from Indonesia. On a divan in the family room, a collection of more than 20 cushions – some covered

with precious Kasuri cotton – sits ready for the family's daily use.

But, as the owner points out, not everything in the house is old and precious. Solid teak chairs in the sitting room have definite Cinderella origins: discarded by Hong Kong's famous Repulse Bay Hotel, they were found on a warehouse tip, covered with tattered velvet and with springs protruding. "They cost about \$16 each," she says with pride. Repolished and recovered, they are extremely handsome, and fit well with more rustic furniture.

The reason why such diverse pieces combine so compatibly is the owner's consistency in choosing simple design, earth colours and hand-crafted natural materials. There are no vivid colours, no overpowering shapes; rather, a rugged mellowness suggesting a hard-working past life – which probably explains why they fit so well with family life today.

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