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A connoisseur's eclectic taste brings global treasures to New York.

BY BOBBIE LEIGH

PHOTOGRAPHY BY DURSTON SAYLOR



Judy Witt buys what she loves, mixing—but not matching—her treasures without regard for contemporary trends. Her New York apartment, the result of a decade-plus collaboration with interior designer David Scott, is filled with the fruits of her world travels. With Scott's curatorial advice and design savvy, she has created a residence in which disparate works of art—Indian deities from the fourth and fifth centuries, mid 19th-century opaline blue and apple-green Venetian vases, and a 17th-century Japanese bi-fold screen—harmonize. Collectors like Witt rely on Scott to research and collect for and with them, as he has an excellent eye and close associations with curators, auction houses and antiques dealers. With Scott's expertise, Witt has surrounded herself with a dozen mini-collections of mostly Asian decorative arts and antiquities, as well as an array of antique furniture from the 16th century to around the 1930s, showing a preference for rare and exotic woods often intricately inlaid with mother-of-pearl or ivory.

In this residence, just steps away from the Frick Collection, expect the unexpected. In one corner of the library Witt displays a rectangular antique Tibetan box containing yellowed parchment leaves of a Buddhist text, which was purchased at the House of St. Barth's in Gustavia, St. Bart's. It is the type of Tibetan manuscript rarely found even by Asian art connoisseurs. Equally astonishing is Witt's collection of tiny carved sandstone heads of Hindu gods mounted on black cubic pedestals; some second- and third-century examples from Gandhara still have traces of red pigment in their eyes.

During a tour of her apartment, Witt points to a circa-1850, 47-inch-high Anglo-Indian secretary, only one foot deep and 25 inches wide, made of sandalwood with inlaid ivory, brass and calamander wood (a rare hazel-brown hardwood related to ebony). "Its unusual and intricate design coupled with its high-quality craftsmanship epitomizes what I like to collect," says Witt, whose goal is to be surrounded by things that evoke her travels. "Each piece brings back memories."

Currently Witt, who serves on the board of the American Friends of the St. Petersburg Philharmonic, where she raises funds for new instruments, admits to a "love affair with Russia." A highlight of her Russian collection is a set of Imperial 1895 *demitasse* spoons in enamel filigree entwined with silver and gold. They were purchased in 2003 in St. Petersburg, where she annually attends the New Year's ball at the Yusupov Palace. Another Russian treasure is a circa-1839 neoclassical carved bench, with a rectangular backrest and adorned with an arched and foliated scrolled top and bottom. To complement the Fortuny fabrics that Witt uses throughout the apartment, Scott found two Imperial silk Chinese pillows for the bench.

The apartment's entryway is equally eclectic—its coffered silver-leaf ceiling is adorned with an antique Swedish alabaster light fixture. The star attraction is a gilt copper-repoussé head of the Buddha from 16th-century Tibet. It is one of



LIVING ROOM: Floor lamp, c. 1920, French ebonized wood twist; framed Indian miniatures, 17th- to 19th-century, watercolor on paper; Russian enamel spoons, 1895, atop a Biedermeier table, 19th century, cherry. **DINING ROOM (FACING):** English Regency mahogany oval table; Austrian Biedermeier chairs, 19th century, cherry; mirror frame covered with an antique rug, c. 1900; mercury lamps, c. 1940s.

several Buddhas of various sizes nestled throughout the residence. The "entry" Buddha sits on a circa-1810 German neoclassical mahogany and ebony console. An 1890 Syrian ivory and mother-of-pearl inlaid mirror imparts a tranquil beauty. On a pedestal near the entry is a wooden sculpture of Guan Yin, the Chinese goddess of compassion. "I bought it from a Swiss dealer in New York who told me that it had once belonged to Gertrude Stein," says Witt, adding that the dealer later sent her a book that had a photo of the sculpture in Stein's Paris apartment.

Witt's living room and library reveal her attraction to strong colors and all things Asian. Intense hues prevail, especially in the library, where the ceiling resembles a Chinese red lacquer box, a match for her pair of Burmese red lacquer tables. A reclining Buddha (origin unknown, acquired at Christie's) rests on the living room's window ledge. The

most arresting statues, however, are in the library. One is a second- or third-century gray schist statue of two acrobats, one seated on the shoulders of the other. Both have flowing hair, topknots and garlands. It is paired with a 12th-century gray schist statue of the elephant-headed Indian god Ganesha. Although most of the rooms have seagrass rugs bordered in rich dark leather, for the library Scott found a magnificent hand-knotted, circa-1900 Tabriz carpet.

With the exception of two bedrooms, each space has its own mini-groupings of Burmese red lacquer objects and 17th- to 19th-century Mughal miniatures. The Mughals, Witt says, are "among my most favorite collections because of their fine details." They are lyrical, narrative paintings, an amalgam of the Iranian-style miniatures and traditional Indian art. The subjects mainly are portraits, gardens, romantic idylls and young girls painted in glowing bright colors. One standout is a late 17th-century example featuring a royal couple seated on a terrace with a floral carpet, the princess offering her prince a cup of wine. Another especially beautiful, but undated, painting, "Dalliance by the Pool," depicts a group of three young courtesans, two with their feet dangling in the water as a duck and her ducklings swim past.

"On my first extended trip to India, I saw several outstanding miniatures in museums and decided that I would pursue collecting them," Witt says. She acquired almost 20 exceptional Mughal miniatures with Scott's guidance at various New York auctions.

Aside from the miniatures, Witt has selected several modern paintings. The most imposing, positioned above a couch in the library, is an 1938 Jean Isy de Botton oil-on-canvas of two nudes bathing, typical of

the French-American artist's early realistic storytelling style. More closely related to the rest of the apartment with its many Egyptian inlaid ebony and ivory tables is "Ahmed," a Helen Katherine Forbes oil-on-canvas portrait of a bearded man

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wearing a fez. He is in semi-profile with eyes closed and could be a Sufi mystic.

Despite these exquisite antiques, Witt and Scott aimed for a degree of informality in the residence's design. "It was important to have a dining room where we could gather with family and friends," says the collector, who also needed a plan that incorporated her Murano glass, clear Scandinavian glass bottles and 18th-century creamware collections. These are displayed on a circa-1825 English William IV mahogany table. To pare down any whiff of formality, Scott designed a banquet table instead of chairs for one side of the circa-1910 oval dining table. A spectacular antique, the table is made of Dominican mahogany with contrasting bands of ringwood and ebony. Above the couch and running almost its full length is a square mirror bordered with a frame made from a French 19th-century rug. Guests are also seated in

five Biedermeier-style chairs and two late 18th-century Chinese Chippendale chairs, bright red in the chinoiserie style of Brighton Pavilion. A Dutch 18th-century fruitwood and mother-of-pearl tray with ebony inlay surrounded by mahogany and silver is the table's centerpiece.

Like an overture to the Russian symphonies she admires, Witt's home is a compelling synthesis of various themes. Not strictly Asian, Indian, Egyptian or European, its most alluring aspect is how seamlessly everything floats together. "When I enter my apartment, I see different aspects of my personality and passions," says Witt. "With David's help, I can live with all my collections and still be at ease with my nieces, nephews and young son enjoying every space. What is most important to me is that my son is growing up with beautiful and historic art and antiques, and maybe someday he will continue in his mother's collecting footsteps." ☞

Bobbie Leigh is an ART & ANTIQUES New York correspondent specializing in Asian art and culture.

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ENTRYWAY: Mirror frame, Syria, c. 1890, inlaid ivory and mother-of-pearl; Buddha head, Tibet, c. 16th century; obelisks, Italy, 19th century, onyx.
LIBRARY (FACING): Jean Isy de Botton, "Bain Marin ou Le Baignade" (above sofa), 1938, oil on canvas; Tabriz carpet, c. 1900; brass-inlay Indian table (foreground), 19th century.
On shelves: Indian terracotta and sandstone heads, second to fifth century; Venetian glass, 19th century.



