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The Art of Living

For a Denver designer and her husband, surrounding themselves with art is as natural as breathing

By Elizabeth Train
Photography by Jason McConathy

FROM THE OUTSIDE, interior designer Sandy Reichborn-Kjernerud's home resembles several of the grand old houses on her street in central Denver. But looks can be deceiving. What lies inside the cut-glass windows, designed by Sandy to cherish both light and privacy, is a lively collection of art by artists from around the globe. Even as a young couple, Sandy and her husband Svein saved their pennies for paintings and sculptures they found in galleries in Manhattan's Greenwich Village and Soho neighborhoods. "Art has always been a priority for us—always," Sandy says. "My mother wanted to know where our vacuum cleaner was when she came to visit us in our first apartment, but we didn't have one; we had art." Pieces from their early years together still grace the walls of their home, showing the evolution of the couple's tastes as well as the changing styles of some of their favorite artists.



Jeffrey Starr's "Night Watch" keeps a vigilant eye on the striking living room with the dutiful assistance of "Shortie," the *papier-mâché* dog by Louis Recchia. See Resources, p. D86.



Below: A side table displays pop-culture sculptures; bottom: glass tops an old gurney Svein rescued from LoDo. Opposite, top: A work by local artist Zoa Ace rests atop the mantel amid a gentle sea of rhododendron-patterned wallpaper. Below: The kitchen's contemporary Italian lighting blends with an antique table and stove.



THE HOUSE IS MORE THAN 100 YEARS OLD and “has good bones,” according to Sandy. She and Svein were looking for the right space to house their family and growing art collection when they moved to Denver from New York City 27 years ago. “I wanted to live in an old house with character,” Sandy recalls, and admits that, subconsciously, she was looking for a house with “good walls.” Many of the couple’s early design decisions were made with regard to wall space, “not for specific pieces, just in the name of art,” she explains.

Believing that the entryway is an important introduction to a house, Sandy wants her visitors to be drawn in by the space. Accordingly, the area foreshadows the spirited eclecticism that resonates throughout the house. A wooden statue from Haiti, the first piece of art the couple bought together while on their honeymoon, takes center stage on a white pedestal. A Louis Recchia mosaic, “Lunar Eclipse,” to the left, eyes an Ida Kohlmeyer lithograph to the right, and a Luceplan Italian light casts a subtle glow that reflects off a Paul Schroeder wall sculpture opposite it. Although this 12-by-12-foot space holds an abundance of art, the entry is open and serene; nothing about its composition is “busy.”

Sandy and Svein are very involved in the Denver art scene, and in addition to the works of Louis Recchia, their collection includes those of local artists Zoa Ace and Jeffrey Starr. “There is a lot of good art here [in Denver],” says Sandy; she and Svein frequent such co-op galleries as Denver’s Pirate, Edge, and Zip 37 as well as the Robischon, Ron Judish, Rule Modern & Contemporary, and William Havu galleries. They also center their travel around galleries, museums, and shows, and Sandy, who earned her degree in art history, keeps a constant eye on the changing art scene for her clients and herself. Art is simply a way of life.

Sandy’s design choices in their living room intensify its ability to display art. One of the first structural changes was to remove a door at the far side of the room to maximize wall space, for their collection includes many large pieces. Neutral-toned fabrics and dark wood floors set off the striking red walls, a daring color choice that enhances the elegance of the room, yet does not overpower or challenge the art. “It sounds funny,” remarks Sandy, “but red is really very neutral.” The lacquered walls provide a stunning background for the mixture of paintings, prints, sculptures, and folk art. Sandy chose a glossy paint finish (perfectly matched to Lancôme’s “Imperial Scarlet” nail polish) to enrich the lighting in the room, which she considers a highly important design element. “Lighting can make or break a room,” she says. Accordingly, great attention is paid to the placement and intensity of the contemporary halogen lighting. A three-track lighting system allows for the flexibility and movement of her art collection. Smaller Italian floor and table lamps accent specific pieces.

Interiors, art, and accessories—from fine antiques to contemporary pieces—harmonize within the room. A Pembroke bedstand holds a contemporary Sintesi light, and a marble coffee table by Mangirotti provides organic shape while displaying a cherished Ocumichu piece: Mexican folk art made with clay and a low-fire glaze to ensure bright color. Jeffrey Starr’s “Night Watch” (which the family calls “Peeping Tom”) crouches over the central sofa opposite a dramatic urban scene by Zoa Ace. A Gene Davis stripe painting lies gracefully beside Zoa’s painting, adding a linear aspect to the wall. “Shortie,” a *papier mâché* dog by Louis Recchia, growls in the corner. “We had seen him in several shows and loved him, but didn’t know if we wanted to live with him,” recalls Sandy. Svein gave her the piece as a birthday gift, and Shortie, as he was dubbed by the children, has become part of the family. “He is very, very special,” Sandy says fondly, and, like many of her pieces, he has made his home in various rooms in the house.

Two identical fireplaces at either end of the room provide structural interest and additional venues for display. A Robert Rauschenberg lithograph, an early purchase, counterpoints the purity of an Andrew Dasburg landscape. An architectural mold taken from a building the couple owned in LoDo (where Sandy had her office for a number of years) forms a strong bridge between them. Since they sold the building four years ago, Sandy has moved her business, Sandra Reichborn-Kjennerud, Inc., into their home.



TWO SLEEK KOREAN KIMCHEE POTS stand in front of the high windows on either side of an intense Earl Linderman painting. An assembly of Ocumichu pieces adds merry color to the bookcases beneath, and an easel holds an early work by Robert Goodnough. Mirrors above both mantels reflect light and add depth and movement. Sandy's careful placement of art and other objects in the room, as well her focus on the presence of negative space, ensures that there is no competition among the myriad pieces. Instead, each element contributes to the lively atmosphere of the space.

The art-filled room is also highly functional, the furniture arranged for conversation and entertaining. Despite the attention paid to placing and displaying the art in the living room, Sandy declares that "floor plan comes first," and stresses the importance of serviceability. "I wanted the living room to be comfortable and inviting for us and for our guests," she explains; hence, the ample seating and intimate clusters of furniture. She designed the living room to be classic and timeless, so the room can evolve without being "redone"—a philosophy she uses for clients as well.

The dining room, a mixture of traditional functionality and contemporary elegance, features Italian halogen lights juxtaposing a crystal chandelier, and two antique console tables that hold pop-culture sculptures by the father of Denver's Pirate Gallery, Phil Bender. A woodcut by Michael Dufy, illuminated by an Italian "Gong Light," gazes across the table at a Zoa Ace painting above the mantel. Carleton Varney wallpaper unifies past and present with a stylized version of a traditional rhododendron pattern. "I rarely use wallpaper," remarks Sandy, "but this really holds the room together."

A small patio off the dining room provides continuity by blending antique wicker furniture with bright, figurative art by Steve Long and Buddy Mitchell, and a hologram sculpture by Ed Lowe. The space, a threshold to the adjoining patio garden in summer, provides sunlit solace during the winter months.

When guests enter her redesigned kitchen, they don't realize it has changed. "This is the best compliment I could get," Sandy beams, for her intent was to preserve the character and history of the room. The original tile wainscot glows with age, and the 50-year-old Roper range is honored as a vestige among new cabinets and granite countertops. A lithograph by friend Cath Murphy and a Zoa Ace watercolor subtly blend new and old. The antique kitchen table, whose twin appeared on the television show "Ponderosa," is lighted from above by a "Floss Light," a contemporary Italian design. A SubZero refrigerator and added storage and counter space result in a kitchen that functions well while maintaining its integrity.

A small sitting room on the second floor offers a cozy family room setting intimate with art and accessories. Good reading lights abound, for the couple uses the room to unwind with a book or an evening television program.

To be functional by today's standards, the master suite "needed work." Like many houses of the period, little closet or storage space existed in the upstairs rooms. Sandy designed a spacious but unobtrusive built-in unit of cabinets and shelves along one wall to house books, accessories, and a television set. The bed's custom chenille headboard and a painting by Zoa Ace mask an old fireplace. Consistent with the neutral tones used throughout the upstairs, the bedroom is accented with playful details such as colorful canvases and the leopard-printed curtain rods and rings that hold traditional chintz draperies. The master bath retains much of its old physique, due in large part to Sandy's successful search through South Broadway antique shops for vintage hardware. Tile, fixtures, and walls glow in their original warm-white tones. Sandy admits that she designs fancy bathrooms for her clients, "but here, it just isn't right."

After 18 years in the design business, Sandy recognizes that interior design is more than an occupation for her; it is a love and a lifestyle. She particularly loves to help her clients—both residential and commercial—discover and develop their own artistic tastes, and to display their art with grace and flair.

"There are spaces without art that are fabulous," Sandy admits, "but I wouldn't want to live in them." ♦



Above: Sunlight bathes the master bedroom, with its lighthearted touches of leopard-print curtain rods and rings mixed with traditional chintz drapes.

Opposite: Once a butler's pantry, the space is now a cheerful, much-needed first-floor powder room.

