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LAS VEGAS





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THE STRAUS HOUSE DESIGNED FOR LIVING

IT IS SAID THAT HOME IS WHERE THE HEART IS, BUT IN ARTIST JOYCE STRAUS'S CASE, HOME IS NOT SIMPLY WHERE THE HEART IS, IT IS HER HEART—THE LOCUS AND SOURCE OF LOVE OF LIFE AND FAMILY.

"It's not about making art, it's about living art," is one of her favorite aphorisms, and her particular heart's chambers include conventional living spaces as well as studios, workshops and a gallery.

The first indication that the Straus house was going to be special came even before I entered. In a curved bay window the size of a two-car garage door, the reflected cascading leaves of several Honey Locust trees recalled Louisiana more than Las Vegas.

I got close and an arm waving "hello" appeared within the reflection. The door opened and there was Joyce, welcoming me with her wide smile and twinkling eyes.

I entered and wanted to speak, (after all we hadn't seen each other in 15 years), but was rooted to the spot, struck dumb by walls the color of glowing red embers and terra cotta floor tiles the color of burnt earth. The curves of the baby grand piano were echoed in the contours of the burnt orange and purple upholstered furniture.

On the wall I saw a magnificent display of antiquarian books Joyce started collecting 65 years ago at age seven, including many handsome leather-bound and gold-embossed editions as well as a sprinkling of small antiques and precious objects.

Joyce's design for the bookcase is based on the pioneering abstractionist Piet Mondrian's grid-like paintings, and that

FACING AND THIS PAGE The Straus House. ©Stuart Townsley.

irregular pattern of rectangles brings a vitality and subtle harmony to the arrangement of books.

If I were a museum curator I would install this room instead of "... a few somber items put in an empty room, allegedly with great significance" (according to one wry definition of installation art).

Her sense of harmony is unerring and pervasive. Extensive renovations and additions over the years have allowed her to balance straight lines and curves structurally as well as decoratively. The circular bedroom window is an intuitive response to the insistently square pattern of her batik fabric comforter.

Batik is Joyce's favorite media to work in and she uses it in narrative as well as decorative work. Her favorite, "Eve was framed," tackles her obsession with the Adam and Eve story. "It's about everything—male-female relationships,



THIS PAGE Joyce Straus. Straus antique book collection. ©Stuart Townsley.

temptation, forbidden fruit and choices." Choice is a subject Joyce comes back to often.

Thirty-five years ago, a year after a life crisis led her to take up art, she started the "School of Creative Thinking" in order to share with others the joy of making art and interjecting a little philosophy that would help others make good choices. She teaches both adults and children and there is a waiting list to join her classes. I first met Joyce when I brought my then-teenage daughter, who was making some really bad choices, for art/life lessons.

Joyce's own art education began with a drawing class at UNLV. Luckily she didn't stay long enough to be told what she couldn't do, but instead moved on to learn batik, watercolor, collage, stitchery, glass, metal design and woodworking. Some of her more recent media conquests include cement sculpture, oil painting, altered books and designing on the computer.

She has created spaces for all these activities, which would not be possible without the unflagging support of her husband and prodigious talent for organization.

Mondrian, known as one of art's great space organizers, may have to share the distinction with Straus. The studios and workshops created for these activities are some of the most interesting parts of the house.

The ground floor studio classrooms are well-lit, gleaming white spaces lined with shelves that contain beads, buttons, fabric, threads and how-to books. The pattern they make of verticals and horizontals punctuated by circular spools of thread is beautiful.

One item in particular caught my eye, a box whose checkerboard pattern of bright colors was reminiscent of Mondrian's iconic painting, "Broadway Boogie-Woogie." Joyce had bought a whole set of these matching boxes, confirming for me her affinity for Mondrian's work.