

# PUNCHES OF COLOR AND POPS OF WARMTH

Article by Ellie Lawrence, based on an interview with Mona Ross Berman of Mona Ross Berman Designs

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When a young family approached Mona Ross Berman to finish the daunting task of decorating their first home, the design scheme throughout the generously proportioned, mid twentieth century house near Philadelphia felt flat. Although the building's architecture gave the space inherent charm in the way of trim, molding, and natural light, the furnishings purchased by the couple left the graciously spaced rooms feeling unfinished. Mona, eager to infuse a fresh and fun vibe, knew just how to attack the space to pull together a cohesive design—which can now be characterized as a gentle mix of high-end accessories and affordable retail items, family heirlooms next to custom-made furniture, and vintage antiques paired with modern art.

There was no cookie-cutter template that the interior designer followed, nor did she impose her own signature style onto the space. Instead she worked with the existing elements and meticulously layered design choices to create a home that was truly custom. "I do try very hard to incorporate a wide variety of pieces into each project," describes Mona, "because I am interested in creating a space that has the most unique appearance. To achieve that, you really need to layer design, and incorporate as many elements as you can to create a home that can really grow with you."





Mona's career path is as layered as her design approach—underneath the eight years of interior design lies a once-practicing lawyer. Interior design was never the plan for Mona, who studied law after working a stint in government and politics and had full intentions of making partner in a law firm. However, while working as an associate, she often found herself fantasizing about the furnishings she'd put in her partner's office. "I realized that wasn't a good reason to become a partner in a law firm," she explains. "Maybe I should just cut to the chase and pursue design."

Networking led Mona to a great interior design firm that brought her on as an apprentice. "It was a small enough firm that I was allowed to really see everything going on, soup to nuts, and get a good perspective and somewhat of an education by virtue of being there," she remembers. "Immediately, I loved the creative element of planning spaces, choosing fabrics, and working with architects to create beautiful environments for clients. But I could also see how it'd be a nice combination of creativity and marketing skills."

A year lapsed before Mona ventured out into her own firm. "I decided to give that a try and see if I could do it on my









own," she recalls. "I started small with very modest goals—in terms of how many clients I felt like I needed and the size of the projects—and took everything that came my way until business started to grow. My projects would eventually get bigger, but I always tried to be realistic about what I could expect."

When the opportunity arose to help the young couple furnish this Center Hall Colonial, it brought life to Mona's dreams. "It is really one of the ultimate experiences for a designer to really be able to influence every space in a house in some way so that it is cohesive and really flows nicely. I have been lucky enough to do that more and more," the interior designer reflects. "But this was one of the first bigger projects I had. We focused on all the rooms in the house, paying particular attention to the public spaces (the living room, dining room, and foyer) as these were the rooms most in need."

The young family had initiated the process of decorating their first home when they contacted the design firm for help. The soon-to-be mother had fantastic taste, according to Mona, and rightly so thought she could furnish her house on her own. However,



time constraints and limited access to resources led the family to purchase items that did not fit or function well within the space. "We rearranged furniture as much as we could to other rooms, and we didn't throw anything away," Mona recalls. "Yet sometimes, some things just don't work. It is much better to just cut your losses and move forward rather than redesign a room around something that doesn't work because you are going to be throwing good money after bad design."

To inspire a new direction for the space, Mona determined one design element to base all subsequent decisions around: a distinct chartreuse green and sky

blue color palette, enriched with chocolate browns and punches of cerise pink. "It is much easier to start with one thing that the client really responds to, that they really love, because then I know that we are starting with something they're just thrilled with," clarifies the designer. "Everything else is going to flow nicely from there."

"The color scheme is pretty consistent, which is something that we did very much on purpose. It's not a huge house, and you see so many rooms from another room, so we wanted to create a cohesive flow," Mona continues. "The client and I both really liked chartreuse and sky blue. The chocolate brown is a great

versatile color that can straddle traditional and modern styles, and makes a nice foil for those punchy colors. Then the cerise pink, that pop of warmth, helps make the space feel more finished and inviting."

With the house bound by a unifying color scheme, Mona turned her attention towards finding vintage treasures. "I think it is essential to get something old, something worn, something with a patina into the space. There are a lot of vintage stores that I prowl every once and a while, as well as auction houses and the popular online sources," she reveals, "because I am always looking for that one-of-a-kind piece that you don't see every

day. Generally, it is rare that I have a project where there is not something vintage going into it."

Her appreciation for all things old, while pertinent, is never overpowered by her design approach to layer varying styles. "I love older pieces, but for me, it is more interesting if you have, let's say, a beautiful dresser from the nineteenth century paired with a modern painting over it," illustrates Mona, who went about every room coordinating everything old with something new. An undulating leather mirror is matched with a brand-new, bright yellow umbrella holder in the foyer. Antique French dining room chairs sit boldly in front of the custom-built cabinets. The



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eye-catching Tibetan wool rug, commissioned in a particular color and pattern, complements the vintage mohair bench in front of the living room window.

The nursery is probably the clearest example of Mona's ability to work around challenges. “A lot of people are inclined towards buying sets of furniture, which especially makes sense to do so in a nursery. But if you are not careful, it can end up looking really boring,” admits the designer, who was faced with working around this particular set of yellow furniture. “This room shows

that you can go to a store and buy those things, and still find ways to make the rest of the room feel unique.” Here, she opted for a fun, diamond-pattern wallpaper to frame the furniture and added balloon roman shades to infuse a sweet and youthful charm. “The artwork,” Mona adds, “is something I commissioned. I gave the wallpaper to a graphic designer with whom I work. She enlarged the design and superimposed animals on top of it. We framed them up simply and put them over the crib. They help pull everything together in the room and keep it looking interesting.”

Mona appreciates the fact that good design takes time. “I do feel like in this world, especially with all the home and shelter TV shows, there is this expectation that things will just come together quickly,” analyzes Mona. “I think, within reason, it does take time to really plan a space well.” How much time is directly contingent upon how quickly the client makes the decisions. “The biggest mistake anyone purchasing furnishings can make,” she divulges, “is to be either completely paralyzed by their decisions and unable to choose things, or to be impetuous, meaning they just move too quickly and pick the first thing they see that they think is good.”

As the final outcome of this family's home reveals, the time spent and challenges conquered certainly paid off. The space, once lacking in direction and cohesion, now boasts a style that's glamorous, slightly feminine, and perpetual. “It was reassuring to know that I had the capacity to take on the project and that my client was really happy with the results,” discusses Mona. “It was a great experience at the time, and I still look back at the pictures and think it looks fresh and relevant. I can't say I would do anything differently.” [AL]