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Color Virgin

(continued from page 98)

my yellow living room. I'm proud of my tri-color kitchen. I stand by my choice of a burnt-orange dining room. But that's the trouble—these were all *my* choices. I didn't have an interior designer pick out my colors. I didn't copy and paste rooms from the pages of *Metropolitan Home*. I just looked through some paint samples and did it. Myself. Because I figured if anyone should be able to create a color scheme for a home, I should, all the while dreaming that my house, my design, would be worthy of the pages of *Met Home*, that friends, relatives, the entire cast of *Trading Spaces* would

Color Tip #5: Neutral colors, such as creams and browns, look good with pale and saturated colors.

clamor for an invitation to see the architectural chandelier in my dining room. ("Can you believe she designed that *herself*?" they would whisper.) Needless to say, Hilde Santo-Thomas hasn't called. And I've spent the past six years wondering, secretly, if maybe I did it all wrong. If, maybe, I'm not the natural that I think I am (despite the fact I was best known in junior high as the girl who relentlessly matched her socks to her sweaters). If, maybe, I missed some of the key color palettes, or went with cool shades when I should have gone warm. If, maybe, a burnt-orange dining room is *so yesterday*, and actually proves that I'm really a fraud. I had to know. So I called interior designer Mona Ross Berman.

Little did Mona know that before my husband, Don, and I bought this house in 2000, I had never painted a single wall in a single place I ever lived. Since the age of 22, I'd rented apartments in various cities—a studio in Chicago, a two-bedroom in Greenwich Village, an amazing flat across from the Presidio in San Francisco—that had one thing in common: pure white walls. In the kitchens, the living rooms, the bedrooms, the hallways. Blank slates that taunted me, begging to be splashed with color, but instead were merely pacified with framed museum posters and wagon wheels and mounted steer heads rescued from garage sales. But even a splurge-worthy deep red Oriental rug and a moss-green, vine-patterned shabby-chic sofa couldn't disguise the fact that those walls lacked depth and texture, which meant the apartments lacked depth and texture and, by default, I lacked depth and texture. Or at least, that's how I overdramatized it.

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Color Virgin

How could I—a person whose job it was to find beautiful interiors to publish in pages of magazines, to write about new products and design trends, to interview architects and interior designers to keep abreast of the latest happenings in the design world—have a boring home? How could I wax on about how color “can transform even the most architecturally void of spaces,” “can create art where there is none, and mood where it’s lacking,” when the most I was doing was stuffing files with tear sheets from *Architectural Digest* and *Elle Decor*? And, worse, how could I advise my readers what they should be doing in their homes if I couldn’t even paint the inside of a closet in mine? I needed a house of my own. Bad.

“I hope it’s that one,” said Don, pointing out the car window at a handsome stone colonial. It was January of 2000, and we had just moved to Philadelphia (my hometown) to be closer to our families, and we were on our way to meet with our realtor in Chestnut Hill to look at some homes. On the phone that morning, the realtor had mentioned a new listing on this pretty, tree-lined block that she might be able to show us, so we’d taken a slight detour, and Don immediately singled out the stately colonial. “Wouldn’t it be great if it were that one?”

As it turned out, it was. After showing us six other houses, none of which were quite right, our realtor pulled up in front of the big, postcard-worthy Wissahickon stone home, with a rusty-red painted front door and shutters, a half circular drive, and a neat line of cedar trees in front concealing it from the street. Don and I were sold. Instantly. Without question.

And then we went inside.

Apparently, the owners had a penchant for the various shades of cotton candy. Every wall was painted purple or pink. A few rooms of peach were thrown in for good measure. Don and I argued over what, precisely, was the pièce de résistance: the magenta, pet-stained wall-to-wall carpet that crept up the grand center-hall staircase and lined the lengthy hallway upstairs? Or the purple master bath, complete with lavender walls, lavender accent tiles, lavender toilet, lavender bidet, and two-person lavender whirlpool tub? I thought for a second that Don might bolt back out the front door. (Did I mention the six brass sconces in the lavender bathroom?) But all I saw was opportunity. Not only was it my dream home, grand and old, with big, beautifully proportioned rooms, mint-condition crown moldings and a great flow. It was also a canvas. My canvas.



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Color Virgin

Don and I agreed that the house needed to be repainted from top to bottom. (Okay, Don needed a little convincing. If we didn't do an overhaul, I reminded him, we'd have our first dinner party in a two-toned peach dining room. He caved. He is a smart man.) Finally unleashed, I went wild. The last time I'd been allowed to choose the color of my room, or any room, was when I was seven and my family moved into a new house

Color Tip #6: Never choose a color solely from a paint swatch. Always put some up on the wall.

(ironically, just around the corner from this one). Of course, being seven, I picked poorly. By the time I realized just how awful the bright "sunshine yellow" really was, it was too late, and I had to live with it until I was 13 and replaced it with a raspberry floral Laura Ashley wallpaper. In the meantime, I plastered it with photos of Andy Gibb and Scott Baio I tore out of *Teen Beat*.

I was determined not to make that same mistake again.

The dining room was easy: I'd admired my cousin's, painted a beautiful burnt orange (the official name was "Firebush"—how much did I love that?), on a recent visit, and wasn't above a little "borrowing." For the master bedroom, I chose a soothing silvery yellow ("Silvered Pecan"), soft, but not too feminine, and for the kitchen, we landed on a three-color palette: a medium blue-gray ("Denim Wash"), an apple green ("Central Park"), and a subtle, creamy butter yellow ("Good Vibrations"). For the guest bedroom, which would eventually become our first daughter's room, we settled on a yummy melon green ("Honeydew"), and for the living room, we chose a vibrant yellow (a custom blend of "Lemon Drops" and "Crowne Hill Yellow") ... after, um, eight tries. Because there unfortunately was no longer the option of using Andy Gibb, or any of his lovely brothers, as wallpaper. The painter we hired probably wanted to kill me. And when he saw the painter's bill, so did Don. But it was done. And I loved it.

The moment I open the door and lay eyes on Mona Ross Berman, I start to sweat. She's wearing a moss-green floral print blouse under a soft purple v-neck sweater, topped with a short purple corduroy jacket. *Of course she can wear moss green and purple together*, I think to myself; *she's a professional, and you're not*. Except that I am. I am, dammit.

I first met Mona, a 30-something trans-

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Color Virgin

plant from Washington, D.C., at last fall's DogHaus 2005 Designer Showhouse, where I admired the office she designed for its bold and unexpected color accents: long, flowy grass-green F. Schumacher Harmon Manor II curtains, contemporary paintings in shades of Mediterranean blues and greens, a punchy watermelon-red bulletin board. The room felt cozy and inspiring, exactly how I hoped my house felt. Mona also had a very pleasant and agreeable manner—she was easy to talk to, laughed at my jokes, and generally seemed like someone I might be friends with—so I figured she'd be perfect for my masochistic color therapy session. (In other words, I figured she'd let me down easy if she thought my color scheme was atrocious.) And what's the worst that could happen? Don might be faced with another massive painter's bill? Wouldn't that be worth it to him? To help me retrieve a shred of self-esteem?

First, I take Mona into the kitchen. Don and I describe it as "urban farmhouse": a mixture of stainless steel appliances and painted cabinets (alongside pieces we bought at Ikea, which we intended to replace within a couple of years and didn't), and a built-in dining banquette and lots of beadboard. I happen to love the blue-gray/apple green/pale yellow color scheme in here. I am certain that Mona thinks the palette is too precious. Too quaint. Too ... and I wince at the thought of the word ... *trendy*. I can see it in her eyes.

"You clearly put a lot of thought into this design," she says. "The blue-gray is just slightly off." *Screw her*, I think. *What does she know anyway?* She continues: "I like that you used that color instead of a more traditional French blue, which is more commonly used in kitchens." Oh. "Slightly off" is a good thing. One of Mona's key philosophies, she explains, is to incorporate one color in a room that's a little different from the rest of the palette, one that still works, but isn't too "matchy-matchy." She likes to mix colors that are appealing together but aren't expected, like chartreuse and grayish-blue, celadon and red, orange and robin's-egg blue. Orange and robin's-egg blue? I just did my newborn's nursery in orange and robin's-egg blue! I try not to jump up and down. Because I'm still very nervous. She has yet to see the living room.

I should probably mention this about the living room: It is my favorite room in the house. I call it my "Ode to Modernism" because it's the one space in my very traditional colonial where I went entirely and completely against type, where I countered the bones and the architecture and decorated with modern furniture. Some people

Color Virgin

would call it sparse. Some people would call it a travesty. But I'd been planning this long before I ever saw this place, since I clipped a page in *Met Home*, a picture of lipstick-red Barcelona chairs posed against a vibrant yellow wall. But which yellow? I had a history with yellow. With bad yellow. With can't-live-with-it yellow. So I went nuts, forcing the painter to put up samples of eight different shades on the wall, side by side. Then I studied them. In the morning light. In the afternoon. In the evening, with the lamps on. "American Cheese" was too orangey. "Yellow Highlighter" was too fluorescent. I finally landed on that custom blend because Benjamin Moore didn't make the exact shade I had in mind.

And Mona hates it. I can tell. She walks around the room looking and nodding, looking and nodding, saying nothing. It isn't the right yellow. My Barcelona chairs are a little too red. The orange and red Tibetan rug is just overwhelming. It's ugly. Ugly ugly ugly.

"Yellows are the hardest colors to choose," she says. She's trying not to hurt my feelings. I want to die. "Your yellow has a brown undertone. It's a little muddy," she says. I am dying. Slowly. Painfully. I knew I should have gone with "American Cheese." I

knew it. "And that's why it works." What?

Did she say it works? Like a kid who just opened her report card to discover all A's, I let loose.

"Well, I'd originally considered a pale, cooler, lemon-meringue-y yellow for the walls, but my architect talked me out of it because the living room is directly across the hall from the dining room, and I had already decided on the 'Firebush,' and I wasn't exactly sure why that would work but I just

Color Tip #7: Floors and ceilings are important surfaces, and great places to bring color and texture into a room.

loved that color and knew I wanted to use it even if I couldn't define why, and ..."

"Your architect was right," Mona interrupts. "You have to be mindful of how colors flow from room to room, and the tone of a color is important. Rooms that are next to each other or across from one another should share the same color tone, even if the actual colors are very different." Oh. So my yellow living room and deep burnt orange dining room make sense across the hall from one another because they both have strong

tones, as opposed to, say, the burnt orange with a lemon yellow or a pale blue.

Plus, Mona adds, "There's continuity in the accent colors in both rooms." Oh. So the red Barcelona chairs and red and orange Tibetan rug in the living room play off the reddish walls in the dining room. And the amber light fixtures in the dining room compliment the yellow in the living room. I didn't even plan that. I am not, however, going to share this fact with Mona.

"All of this started with a photo of those red Barcelona chairs," I admit. "I just had to have them."

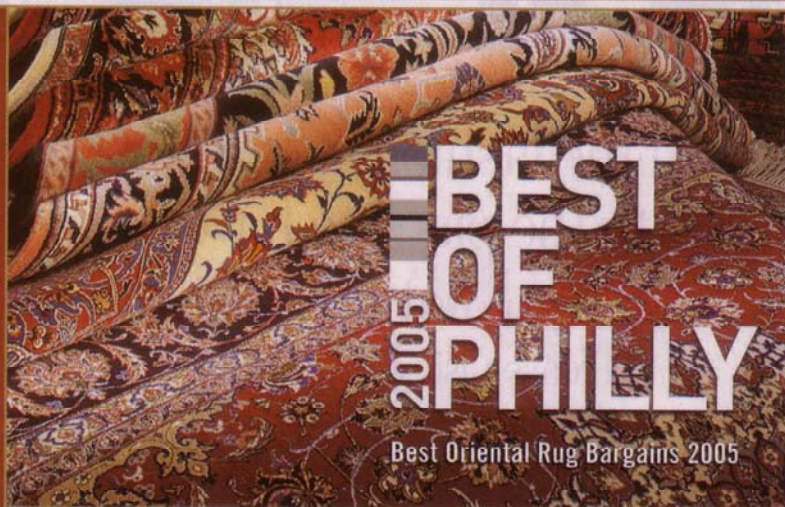
"It's a great idea to build a room around something you love," Mona says. "It can be fabric, or a fabulous rug, or a great piece of furniture—anything you feel strongly about. This is what makes a room feel personal," says Mona, "it's what makes a room really feel lived in. It's what gives it that look of 'I didn't try.'"

I'm reeling. I'm delirious. I'm vindicated. And I'm a total loser for second-guessing myself to the point that I needed to invite her over in the first place. But ... did I mention ...

Mona loves my reddish-gold metallic wallpaper on the ceiling in the library! ("It's like looking up and getting a surprise.")

Mona loves the robin's-egg-blue-and-orange floral wallpaper in the baby's nursery! ("Covering a wall or two in paper adds

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warmth and instant interest to a room.”)

Mona loves my green trellis-patterned wallpaper in the powder room! (“Powder rooms are great places for wallpaper or bold color, because they’re small and don’t require too much of a commitment.”)

Mona loves the multicolored FLOR carpet tiles in a checkerboard pattern in my brand-new basement playroom! (“Floors, as well as ceilings, are important surfaces that should not be ignored.”)

I love Mona. She is my new best friend. And she got me thinking ... I’d love to try a wilder pattern in the powder room and paint the master bedroom in a restful blue shade and add window treatments in the living room. I want to reupholster the dining room chairs and redecorate the guest room on the third floor. I want to find some way to use both a chocolate brown and a deep plum in our space. But there’s no way I can in this house. This house is perfect as it is. I can’t wait to tell Don. No need to call the painter. No massive overhaul ahead. No. Honey. Dearest. Love muffin.

We need to buy another house.



E-mail: mcragas@phillymag.com

RESOURCES

Lisa Stone Design, 116-O Montrose Square, Rosemont; 610-525-3091.

Mona Ross Berman Interiors, 112 West Springfield Avenue; 215-680-7200.

Rebecca Paul Residential Design, 8403 Flourtown Avenue, Wyndmoor; 215-836-1697.

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The Guide

(continued from page 99)

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BOLD IS BEAUTIFUL
Scenes from the author's home.

Confessions of a **Color Virgin**

it

's almost noon, and I'm sprinting around the first floor of my home at full speed. I cram Dora the Explorer figurines into pantry cabinets, pocket massive yellow tufts of Lab hair from under chairs, scour the crayon on the kitchen countertop with antibacterial Wet Ones. I have seconds to run upstairs and change out of my bullet-gray cashmere turtleneck that, until 13 minutes ago, did not have spit-up dripping down the left sleeve. For

I thought I knew everything I needed to about color. Until I had to paint my first house *By Meg Cohen Ragas*

me—a lifestyle editor, a purported expert on home design—this is worse than Martha Stewart dropping by unannounced to use the powder room. It's worse than Georges Perrier coming over for a home-cooked meal. In just minutes, a Color Specialist will arrive at my door, a woman whose job it is to create color palettes for homes. And the worst part is, I invited her.

Don't get me wrong. I adore *(continued on page 100)*

PASCAL BLANCON