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On Belgrave Square

*A Signature Space
for Rose Tarlow in London*

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"It isn't decorated in the conventional sense," says antiques dealer Rose Tarlow of her London flat. "All you need are the right proportions, pleasing colors and things you really love." Tarlow collected the contents of her apartment over the years, shipping them to London from her native United States. In the living room, a Japanese bronze hawk rests on a leather-topped Régence beechwood table. A pair of Régence chairs are upholstered in Gobelins tapestry. Framed between birch branches is a 17th-century limestone fireplace.





PERFECTLY DECORATED ROOMS? Rose Tarlow just isn't interested. If she sees a "perfect" room her first reaction is, "How stunning! Such finesse." By the next day she can't stand it. "It's like wearing a new party dress," she says. "Fabulous, but keep it on too long and it loses all the glamour. Putting good furniture into good rooms is what matters to me."

She has a gallery for fine antiques in Los Angeles and another for the "new antiques" she designs, but "decorating" is something she just doesn't think about.

Clients beg her to help with their houses, but Tarlow usually limits her assistance to building a collection of furniture. "People get so hooked on the idea of everything being perfect," she says. "They spend too much time and money matching this color with that one, or worrying about which chintz. I can do that very well—but I'd rather not. I can understand the point of decorating if the furniture is not the quality you'd like it to be. Then it's time to pull out all the tricks to create an atmosphere."

"I don't mean that a room has to be filled with gorgeous things to be beautiful. A couple is enough, but what's there should be immaculate, polished, lovingly cared for. A bedroom with fresh white linen, a bowl of flowers, one polished chair—that's enough. Just find a well-proportioned space, paint it a pleasing color and fill it with things you really love. That's my idea of a perfect room."

And that is why Tarlow's apartment in London, her house in California and the residences she very occasionally agrees to do for clients are all similar. Each follows those three essentials, and each is filled with things she loves.

"Just buy what's gorgeous," she says. "If you fall in love with it, then you have to have it. Never mind that the room is full. Choosing furniture is like choosing a husband—if you really care, you'll find a place for it. Even if a chair blocks an entrance, buy it and put it there. Period."

Tarlow's London apartment is in

what had been the grand, tall drawing rooms of a fine nineteenth-century house in Belgrave Square. When she first saw it, those splendid rooms had been divided into medium sizes. Not for her. She likes very large rooms with high ceilings, very small rooms with low ceilings, or rooms that are just plain odd, perhaps tall and narrow—the rooms other people might call awkward.

She turned to an architect, Livio Cumbo, for help. Down came the partition wall and false ceilings in the front room to restore its original glorious size and height. Then she added a floor across the back room, creating two levels within the one tall space—a dining room and kitchen below, a bedroom and bath above.

Next the color, her favorite off-white adjusted to a maize to compensate for English light. She used the same color for walls and fabrics and the same fabrics in several rooms. "Unless it's an antique, fabric is just a background," she says, "nothing to do with anything. People say, 'You can't use that fabric in the dining room, you've already used it in the living room.' I say, 'Why not?'"

Almost everything in the apartment had been collected prior to her taking residence, and what she shipped over originally is still there ten years later. She's added a few things—two Régence chairs covered in Gobelins tapestry, a piece of Elizabethan embroidery—but she never sells anything. "If something was good enough to be there once, it's good enough to be there forever," she says. "It's not a question of upgrading, because I never buy what's not good in the first place."

Once something is right she wants to think about something else. She

"Warmth can only come from your personal possessions and the way your personality fills the house," says Tarlow (right). "I chose each piece for its own qualities, rather than to fit." A reclining bronze and American Indian baskets are part of the living room's eclectic mix. Tarlow designed the silk velvet sofa.







sees no point, for instance, in rearranging the furniture. She did all that on paper a hundred times before she moved in, just to make certain it would all fit. "Give me a piece of graph paper and it really turns me on," she says. "But of course, where things went on moving day was not where I had them on paper. The mover set a table down in the room

and it looked right, so it's still there. Sofas took their places by the fire and stayed. Nothing has been rearranged since that day."

Some pieces brought a sense of belonging with them. A fine Flemish table "would look sensational in my California house, but this room won't let me take it out. And the other day I bought a candlestick to take back. I

set it down here and now I can't take it away. I get annoyed—but that's the way it is."

Everything Tarlow puts in each room gently becomes a part of the whole. She likes "rooms where nothing bounces out at you. People always say they want a Drop Dead Room. Well, if that's what they want they should go to a funeral parlor.



OPPOSITE: The living room's Kangxi coromandel screen provides a rich backdrop for a Dame Elizabeth Frink horse sculpture, a 17th-century Flemish walnut table and Louis XV fauteuils. ABOVE: "I like rooms of eccentric dimensions, even if they're tiny, like the dining room," says Tarlow. A Chinese dignitary figure surmounts a 16th-century Spanish side table; the Regency dining table is of mahogany. French doors open onto the garden terrace.

You shouldn't walk into a room and say, 'Wow.' Instead, you should become aware of it slowly, quietly. Serenity is important. That's why I love drawings. A painting takes over a room. I love furniture and would rather nothing else takes over."

The furniture she especially loves is English, French and Oriental antiques. "That's what I buy for myself, and that's what I specialize in as a dealer." When she can't find what she wants she designs it herself. Sometimes it's a nearly direct re-

production, but more often her pieces improve on a particular antique (better proportions, better wood) or are inspired by something she has seen—the turn of a leg on an antique chair, a branch growing in a certain way.

And her ideas about reproductions have changed with the increasing rarity of fine antiques. "I would rather have a very good print than a mediocre oil painting," she says, "and I would rather have a very good reproduction than a mediocre antique."

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OPPOSITE: The architectural character of the bedroom was enhanced by the placement of oak beams across the ceiling. "I wanted this room to be a little jewel box where everything would be beautiful and serene," says Tarlow.

BELOW: An Italian lay figure and a dog painting share a corner of the kitchen with a collection of 17th-century Pyrenean wooden spoons. "I find it interesting to mix simple country woods with elegant Georgian silver."





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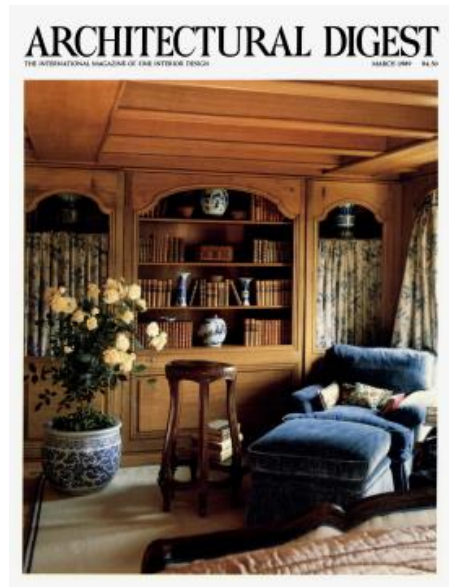
BELOW: An English Colonial commode of lemonwood and ebony, ornamented by an Edo lacquer tray, is a sturdy presence in the guest bath. OPPOSITE: The expansive garden terrace is paved with Yorkshire stones. “It’s really as large as the entire flat,” notes Tarlow.





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