

OCTOBER 2015

House Beautiful

DREAM

kitchens

**& FRESH
IDEAS
FOR
EVERY
ROOM**

+
**Paint
COLORS
men
LOVE**



OCTOBER
kitchen
SPECIAL



CLOUD WALK

IT WASN'T ALCHEMY THAT TRANSFORMED RAW WOOD, WHITE PAINT, AND RETAIL FINDS INTO A DREAM OF A HOME. IT WAS DESIGNER BENJAMIN DHONG AND HIS UNERRING EYE FOR SERENITY.



In designer Benjamin Dhong's house in California's wine country, an original cloud painting by Sonoma artist Wade Hoefler accentuates the ethereal character of the Montpelier pedestal dining table from Zentique, and the vintage klismos armchairs by Michael Taylor. The Toscane stool is from Restoration Hardware, and the vintage Chinese horseshoe chair is a flea-market discovery, painted white. The bullet-shaped mold for a missile tip becomes a piece of sculpture. **OPPOSITE:** A 19th-century French apothecary cabinet from Healdsburg Vintage, repurposed as a hutch, presides over the kitchen.

Carrara marble frames the top and sides of the kitchen island, equipped with custom under-counter cabinets by Cabinet Solutions and a Kohler faucet. Vintage table lamp by Sirmos Lighting. Indoor-outdoor runners by Safavieh.



JOSEPH GIOVANNINI: How did you make a 1980s generic builder house in wine country look so Napa?

BENJAMIN DHONG: This is an agrarian area, so I tried for an updated farmhouse feeling by keeping the simplicity of Greek Revival houses in mind—but without getting too historical. I didn't want the place to feel old. So I combined flea-market hand-me-downs with straightforward utilitarian pieces from regular stores, and I mixed old and new, East and West Coast, low and high. I applied wabi-sabi—that Japanese idea of imperfection, irregularity, and serenity—to keep it all informal.

Was designing for yourself different from designing for clients?

It wasn't, actually. My home reflects exactly what I do for clients, and that includes a great respect for the budget. I don't like rooms where every item is expensive. I mix it up. My goal is to create beautiful rooms that are harmonious and soulful and never flashy—rooms that make you feel relaxed. I put in a lot of effort to achieve a design that does not look as though it's trying too hard.

How did you infuse so much character in such plain spaces on a budget?

I couldn't afford expensive moldings or even recycled materials, so I looked for the junkiest pieces I could find at the lumberyard—the more knots and flaws, the better. I applied wide planks on walls and ceilings to create character and give the bland, abstract rooms scale. And I'm not a design snob: I have no problem going into Cost Plus or CB2 to find something that might work.

With eclectic design, how do you know when to stop? When are there just too many styles?

Decorating with an eclectic eye is risky. It has to be done deftly, with a certain restraint, otherwise it can look chaotic. I do combine a lot of different styles in my rooms, but there's a balance. There's French formal, something Gustavian, old mercury lamps, things with a '60s or '70s vibe, export Chinese, and nautical, but spaced apart, and not all in the same room. I love a little glamour, but in the wrong place it can be vulgar. I choose things



ABOVE: Dhong centers the breakfast area on a Saarinen-style table, under a nautical porthole that adds luminosity. Jules armchair, Bliss Home & Design. The banquette doubles as a sleeping alcove. Distressed white-oak floor.

that evoke a sense of history or have an intellectual thought, which come together in a room and agree in a dynamic, kismet way. Think of a captain in the old China trade who brings home souvenirs from his travels, but in the end it all works together and harmonizes because of something they have in common, an overlap. It's not just a collection of things but a narrative, each piece commenting on another in a little dance.

It looks like you could walk right into the living room and plunk yourself down with a thick book. What's your secret for creating that sense of welcome and comfort?

Maybe it's because I balance the humble and the dramatic. I also designed these multiple seating areas to flop and lounge, where people are not too far apart. One area catches the view, one soaks up the sun, you fall asleep in another. It's not just visual comfort, but real comfort. In the living room, there's a hard-backed chair, but also a tailored sofa by the fireplace and a very loungey, Moroccan-style divan. It's all organized around a shaggy Moroccan tribal rug.

The kitchen is like the inside of a Monopoly house, iconic and simple but voluminous. What was your strategy for tackling the size?

Matthew MacCaul Turner, my architect, merged three of the original rooms and opened up the ceiling to the gable roof, and I broke up that room, which is 30 feet long, into dining and breakfast areas on either side of a kitchen. The vaulted ceiling adds drama and light, and I sheathed one side with 12-inch planks to give it the texture of a farmhouse. I wanted this pure, beautiful space to feel like it was more than just a kitchen.

The huge cabinet almost says cozy library.

I believe in big pieces for big spaces, and a dear friend, the late designer Myra

Hoefer, led me to an amazing 19th-century French apothecary case—a soulful piece of furniture that cost less than uppers would have. It anchors the space and gives it instant character. The cabinet is large enough to hold most of my dishware, a motley collection of white china. For juxtaposition, I made the island very modern and encased it in a block of Carrara marble.

The art you choose is not just art, and the mirrors are not just mirrors—you use both very strategically.

I'm adding character and uniqueness. Paintings can bring in personality. I had a leftover piece of cloudy Fornasetti wallpaper, which I backed with a jigsawed piece of plywood and hung over the fireplace. Besides drama, this piece gave the room a modern, graphic sense that's unique. And you can never have too many mirrors. Their reflectivity adds an unexpected dimension to a room, and sometimes mystery. I love the patina of antique mirrors.

I see a lot of white.

I paint things white to make them look ethereal. Most of the old pieces I painted were just "airport souvenirs," but special ones I left natural; the woods act as an accent. If you have a room that's all period, your eyes glaze over. When you do the unexpected, it forces you to look with fresh eyes.



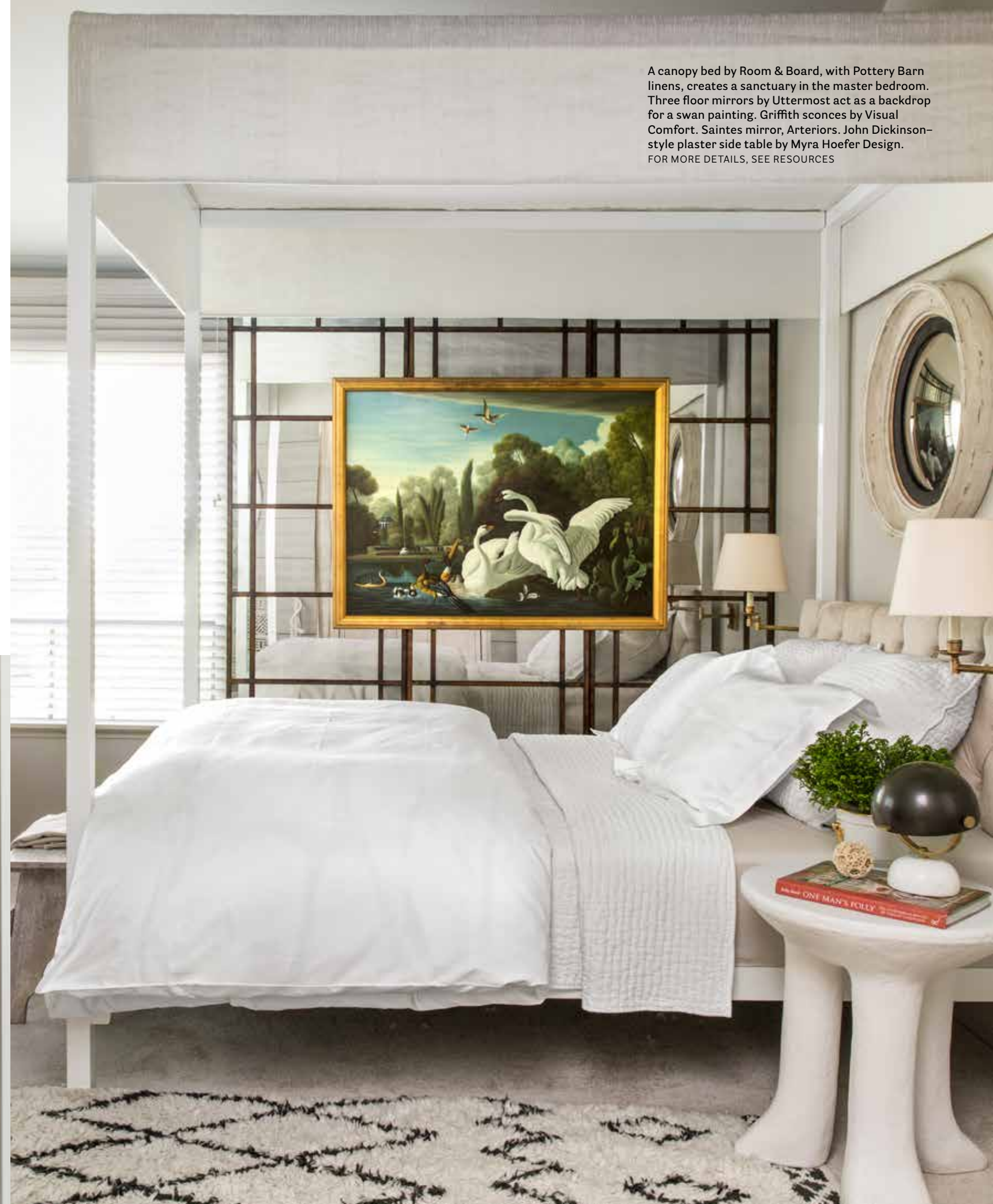
The living room summarizes Dhong's main design interests: architecture, bold graphic shapes, antiques, plaster objects, the magic reflectivity of mirrors, and touches of glamour. The massive faux-cement mantel, by Touchstone Architectural Cement, establishes a strong focal point. Tufted Savoy sofa, Belvedere coffee tables, and Jewel mirror by Restoration Hardware. Piazza sofa by CB2. Cardboard Wiggle chair by Frank Gehry. The plaster floor lamp is a flea-market find. Kasbah rug, West Elm. Walls in Benjamin Moore's Light Pewter.



ABOVE: In the powder room, Dhong repurposed a Gustavian-style cabinet by Horchow as a sink console with a marble top. Faux-bois mirror, Wisteria. Sconces, Restoration Hardware. **BELOW:** Dhong in the master bedroom. A tansu from Tansu Design fits beneath World Market's San Paolo dining table. Cog Wheel mirror, Restoration Hardware. Le Michel lamp, Niermann Weeks.



ABOVE: The guest room is a mix of old and new. The Hawaiian quilt is by Kapa Mua. Ryder lamp, Arteriors. Walls in Benjamin Moore's Revere Pewter. **BELOW:** A surreal print from CB2 in the entryway. A Signature lamp from Currey and Company sits atop a Chinese table, another flea-market purchase that Dhong painted white. Walls in Benjamin Moore's Light Pewter.



A canopy bed by Room & Board, with Pottery Barn linens, creates a sanctuary in the master bedroom. Three floor mirrors by Uttermost act as a backdrop for a swan painting. Griffith sconces by Visual Comfort. Saintes mirror, Arteriors. John Dickinson-style plaster side table by Myra Hoefer Design. FOR MORE DETAILS, SEE RESOURCES