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LIVING UP TO A LEGEND

Reimagining a Los Angeles mansion, Marc Appleton and Windsor Smith pay homage to the work of a 1920s tastemaker



Architect Marc Appleton and decorator Windsor Smith collaborated on the expansion and redesign—or de-decoration, as Smith calls it—of a 1926 house by celebrated architect George Washington Smith. The southwest façade remained untouched; rooms overlooking the lawn include (from left) the dining room, living room, and garden room.

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HE STRANGE THING ABOUT SOUTHERN California in the years following World War I was that, even after decades of statehood, it still needed to be invented. And no one quite knew what it should look like. In the wake of the war, as Americans resumed their European grand tours, the haciendas of Spain and the villas of Italy suddenly began to appeal to citizens in search of a romanticized image for the New West. California architects, armed with large-scale picture books that documented these European estates in detail, wasted no time in designing expansive and comfortable houses recalling the Mediterranean. The strong sun sculpted the solid walls into planes of light and shadow; austere stucco surfaces silhouetted exotic plants. It was a go. The houses belonged.

George Washington Smith, a bond salesman turned painter turned architect, had traveled extensively in Europe, and he excelled at picturesque structural compositions that never seemed forced. The Santa Barbara-based Smith occasionally ventured south to Los Angeles, and in 1926 he designed a villa fusing Andalusian and Italian influences in a sprawling two-story plan that represented, in the words of one commentator, "sobriety coupled with opulence."

"Smith never shouted 'ornament,' but in a quiet tone he designed buildings with great compositional balance," says Marc Appleton, an architect who has written a monograph on Smith's work. The L.A. house, north of Sunset Boulevard in Holmby Hills, acquired its own history over the years; most recently it belonged to Rod Stewart. When the latest owners—a prominent producer/scriptwriter, his philanthropist wife, and their four school-age children—bought it, they set about removing the usual additions and changes that sneak up on an old house and compromise the purity of the original. After the restoration, however, the ball game abruptly changed. The property next door, belonging to Véronique Peck, widow of Gregory, became available. The couple bought it and increased their lot size to seven acres, giving them the space to add a properly scaled family wing to their own place and, just as important, reorient the expanded house to face grounds that could now be rightly considered an estate. The children gained the Pecks' tennis court and quirky log cabin in the deal.

In the garden room, a 19th-century Chinese lacquer screen is displayed against silvered wallpaper with hand-painted additions in gouache by Scott Waterman. Furnishings include a Moderne gilded console table with leather shelves by Richard Shapiro Studiolo, a zebra-print stool from Paul Marra Design, and a Parsons-style low table from Eccola.

