

Asia Week
brings fine
Chinese
works to
the auction
block.
Page 4.



The Philadelphia Inquirer

Home & Design

SECTION E

FRIDAY, APRIL 9, 1999

www.philly.com

Enter, the sophisticated bathroom



It's no longer just the "necessary" room. In many residences, it's a private gallery with murals, mosaics, sculpture, even antiques. Offbeat collections or risqué art can be found there, too.

By Diane Goldsmith
INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

Off the entrance hall of a sumptuous Center City townhouse, redolent with art and antiques, a dramatic room draws the eye. Black walls frame a yellow alcove in the shape of a half shell, where a vase of flowers sits poised.

Inside the room, antique-looking lighting fixtures adorn the walls along with a richly colored still life. A gold-plated basin and black commode complete the picture.

Oh no, we've wandered into the john.

It's not hard to make the mistake since bathrooms have gone from utilitarian spaces to full-fledged rooms for living, bringing with them such trappings of fine design as art. It's no longer unusual to see murals, mosaics, statuary and even paintings and antiques there.

Bath and powder rooms are also used to house offbeat decorative collections — items that may not fit elsewhere in the home or may be better-suited to private viewings. The only limits on what's chosen are whether the pieces will work in what can be a tight space and whether steam from the shower will adversely affect them.

"Nothing makes a room real like paintings," said interior designer Barbara Eberlein, who fashioned the dramatic black and gold powder room for herself. The still life she placed there is her favorite painting.

"If it were in the living room...it wouldn't be fresh," she said. "But in the powder room or rooms you frequent less often, it's always a surprise."

Those who place art in the powder room also realize it has great
See **BATHROOMS** on E8

MICHAEL S. WIRTZ / Inquirer Staff Photographer

Barbara Eberlein has hung her favorite still life in the black and gold powder room she designed for her townhouse.

The bathroom as gallery: Art enhances a humble room

BATHROOMS from E1

impact because a captive audience comes face-to-face with it.

"Bathrooms are great spaces and shouldn't be ignored," said interior designer Michael Gruber, who is having a mural depicting a classic ruin painted in a Media powder room.

His client, June Wapner, was pleased with the decorative painting Gruber had ordered for her dining room and when he suggested the mural, she thought it would work well in her formal powder room, with its pedestal sink, sconces, gilt mirror and antique linens.

Art in the bathroom hasn't always been so sophisticated; indeed, some people still like the room to retain an informal feeling.

"Bathrooms used to be like refrigerator doors. That's where you hung things your kids did," said Eric Rymshaw, Center City architect and interior designer.

They've also been the province for kitsch, he observed, recalling his mother's bathroom in the 1950s.

"There were these fish scenes on tropical wallpaper and she hung a plastic swordfish and two guppies," he recalled laughing. "It was hysterical."

"Then there's the whole bathroom-humor thing — wallpaper with nude pictures on it — or people would put up drawings by Michelangelo. When you think about [the statue] David and things like that, it's an OK place to do that."

M. M. Pharr, a North Philadelphia artist, has erotic drawings in his bathroom. "It's very private. It's a place where — not that I want to censor a statement — you could confront [these images] without having anyone else observe your reaction," he said.

Helen W. Drutt English, whose Center City gallery exhibits contemporary ceramics, textiles and metals, displays a 14-year accumulation of snow domes from many parts of the world in one bathroom, and artifacts, textiles and ornaments she picked up on two decades of trips to China, Guatemala, Morocco and Greece in another.

Why snow domes?

"They support my need for acquisition and give me the pleasure of hunting for something without spending a lot of money," she said.

So why not display them in her home's public areas?

"I didn't have the nerve to bring plastic into the living room," the art dealer said. "It's a different aesthetic" there. So "it's a wonderful solution to put them someplace where they could have their tacky presence."

In her other bathroom, she uses a skirt men wear in the Guatemalan hill town of Solola as a rug and other Guatemalan fabric as a shower sheet. Masks and ornaments, which she had consigned to oblivion in a dark drawer, decorate the walls.

"Now I see them every day and love it. They give me a great deal of pleasure when I brush my teeth and use the facilities," she said.

Other people have so filled their lives with art that excluding it from the bathroom would be inconceivable. That is the case with Isaiah and Julia Zagar, whose three-story South Street home is literally covered with Isaiah's signature mosaic work, an art form he has been using to create a spectacular facade for the Painted Bride Art Center in Old City.

Outside the home, the mosaic work with its large pieces of mirror pulls light onto Zagar's exuberant design. Inside, virtually every inch of wall space is covered with mosaics.

"How will we ever sell the building," Julia said, as she reached for the light in the bathroom. "Someone will buy it," she went on. "It's a work of art."

Isaiah ventured into this medium decades ago when he embellished his wife's Eyes Gallery on South Street "to sell folk art in a folk-art environment."

Now, about 30 building facades in the city — mostly in Old City and on South Street — carry his imprint.

"Part of the way my design evolves is the same kind of intuition that evolves in cave art," he explained. "It's not focused for a standing figure looking at a rectangle. It's to be felt as a cocoon around you."

Not everyone wants that much art around them. For those who love mosaics and art tiles in smaller doses, there's Joanne Hudson Tile & Stone, one of the shops in the Marketplace Design Center, at 24th and Market, that is open to the public.

There — with the price of hand-painted tiles and mosaic work fairly high for the average consumer — Hudson counsels a less-is-more philosophy.

"You don't need 200 square feet of this" to make a statement, she said, walking toward ethereal 6-by-6-inch tiles of nymphs in relief, at \$120 each, and raised images of frogs, dragonflies and lionfish in vivid greens, blues and purples, at \$36 for the same size tile. On the more affordable end, she points out other whimsical hand-painted images from \$12 to \$26 for a 4-by-4-inch tile and 2-inch mosaic borders from \$14 a linear foot.

If you'd rather leave the art in your bathroom to the creativity of its occupants, you can handle the situation as they did at Roscoe's Kodiak Cafe in Manayunk.

Interior designer Marguerite "Meg" Rodgers worked with the owners to create the look of the Inuit-inspired eatery, where an outlet for expression in the unisex john is available to anyone who wants to take chalk to the slated walls.

"The concept for this was an Alaskan neighborhood bistro environment, so Meg wanted it to have a certain ease and charm and be accessible," explained her executive assistant Karen Cronin.

And why use slate?

It's about "the lightness of writing on walls but not defacing them — the fact that you can erase them," Cronin said, "and putting this up in a nongendered bathroom so there would be communication between men and women."

The restroom has been a hoot since the place came together three years ago, said restaurant co-owner Sharon Sullivan-Ingalls. She has closed up many a night to find every kind of message, cartoon, hieroglyph and comic gargoyle on the walls.

But none was as amazing as what she saw when a scientist invited her to look at his creation.

His company was conducting trials to see whether a new compound would inhibit tumor growth, and on the board he'd scrawled an elaborate chemical formula.

"We figured, 'They're legit,'" said Sullivan-Ingalls, referring to the firm. " 'Let's go buy stock.' "