


Worth *the* Wait

A CHARLESTON LANDMARK WITH
A ROMANTIC HISTORY TODAY IS FILLED WITH
LIGHT, LAUGHTER, AND LIVELY ANTIQUES



Parlor An Empire-style chest of drawers under an 18th-century portrait by an understudy of French painter Louis Tocqué creates a handsome vignette in the drawing room. An antique Tabriz carpet from Doris Leslie Blau anchors the front half of a double-parlor drawing room, which gathers a custom scroll-arm sofa, a Rose Tarlow coffee table, and two Nancy Corzine "Rateau" chairs.

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Some girls just can't wait. Patrick O'Donnell, a Galway Irishman living in 19th-century Charleston, discovered this the hard way. According to local legend, in 1852 O'Donnell set about building a house for his fiancée. But his dream of an Italian Renaissance mansion was so ambitious that it took four years to realize. In the meantime, his bride-to-be—with other suitors knocking at her door—called off their engagement and married another.

It may be that, at heart, O'Donnell was disinclined to marry. He died a bachelor in 1882. But had his intended been the modern-day designer Susanne Csongor, she might have stuck it out. "The bones are so outrageously beautiful," she marvels. "Those details are amazing. And the light! There is this emotion to the space that was so warm and inviting and romantic."

Csongor first beheld the wealth of the home's architectural details—multisteped moldings, layer upon layer of ornate cornices, exuberant ceiling friezes, marble fireplaces—about three years ago. Longtime New England clients with whom she had col-

laborated on a dozen other projects had purchased the property as a vacation home four years earlier. But as the city developed a flourishing restaurant scene and the Charleston Food + Wine festival acquired an international reputation, these gourmands began spending more time in Charleston. They called in Csongor to make the house feel less like a pied-à-terre and more like the grand manse O'Donnell had envisioned.

"He loves history," Csongor says of the husband. "He wanted the house to be as historically accurate as it would hold without being stuffy. It had to make sense and strike a balance that made it feel as if it could have existed today or years ago."

Preceding pages A view from the front parlor to the rear parlor, where a daybed from another of the clients' homes, upholstered in a Clarence House silk, keeps company with a mid-19th-century Continental neoclassical console from Marie Antoinette Antiques and an 18th-century British portrait of Alexander, 4th Duke of Gordon. **Pool** Wide verandas on the south side punctuated by elegant balustrades and Doric columns overlook a wading pool and open all three floors to the outdoors.



To accomplish this, Csongor offset the magnificence of the architecture throughout the 9,700-square-foot main home with a neutral palette of mostly beige, gray, and white, along with a near-absence of patterned fabrics, a practiced restraint when it came to accessories, and natural materials such as linens and sisal carpets. She allowed herself “a little punch of elegance on pillows,” which feature antique brocades, needlepoint, and tasseled fringes.

After 20 years of working with Csongor, the homeowners’ trust in her was implicit. “I got general approval on the direction,” she recalls, adding that major purchases would require more consideration. Otherwise, she says, “Anything I saw, I would just buy it.” Not every purchase, incidentally, came at a high cost. “I mix anything and everything. If it looks good, makes sense, and has integrity to it, it doesn’t need a provenance. I respond to the form, shape, and beauty of it.”


In a guest bedroom, for instance, a mantel displays three framed silhouettes, which were all the rage in O’Donnell’s day. “I probably paid twenty dollars apiece for those,” Csongor notes. Of course, there are antiques and impressive 18th- and 19th-century paintings throughout the house that are in keeping with the husband’s desire for authenticity. However, Csongor juxtaposed

them with new comfy upholstered furniture, understated fabrics, and plain painted walls.

There are exceptions, most notably in the dining room, which is enveloped in a custom mural in the style of itinerant painters the home’s original owner might have hired. “Dining rooms should have an elegance and intention to them,” Csongor says. “You have a little more opportunity for drama and entertainment.”

To that end, she wanted the mural to be “a snapshot of what life was like” in the Charleston of the 1800s. Csongor and her team created an inspiration board illustrating typical Charleston scenes—magnolia trees, the peach-and-coral palette of the city’s gardens, the bustling harbor nearby where steamboats used to cruise—and handed it to artists at Gracie studio along with elevations of the space. The artists then sketched out a design that, once approved, was hand-painted on wallpaper in China. “The methodology is the same as that of the itinerant painters,” Csongor says. “There are no CAD renderings, just actual sketches in gouache. I’m old school. I draft in ink, not pencil. So I love working with artisans.”

Yet most of the other public rooms are less showy, reimagining old concepts for today. The second-floor family room, decorated



Stairway Deploying a natural Merida agave runner on the stair allowed the magnificent architecture to shine, including turned and fluted balusters, a coffin corner niche, and dramatically spiraling moldings overhead.

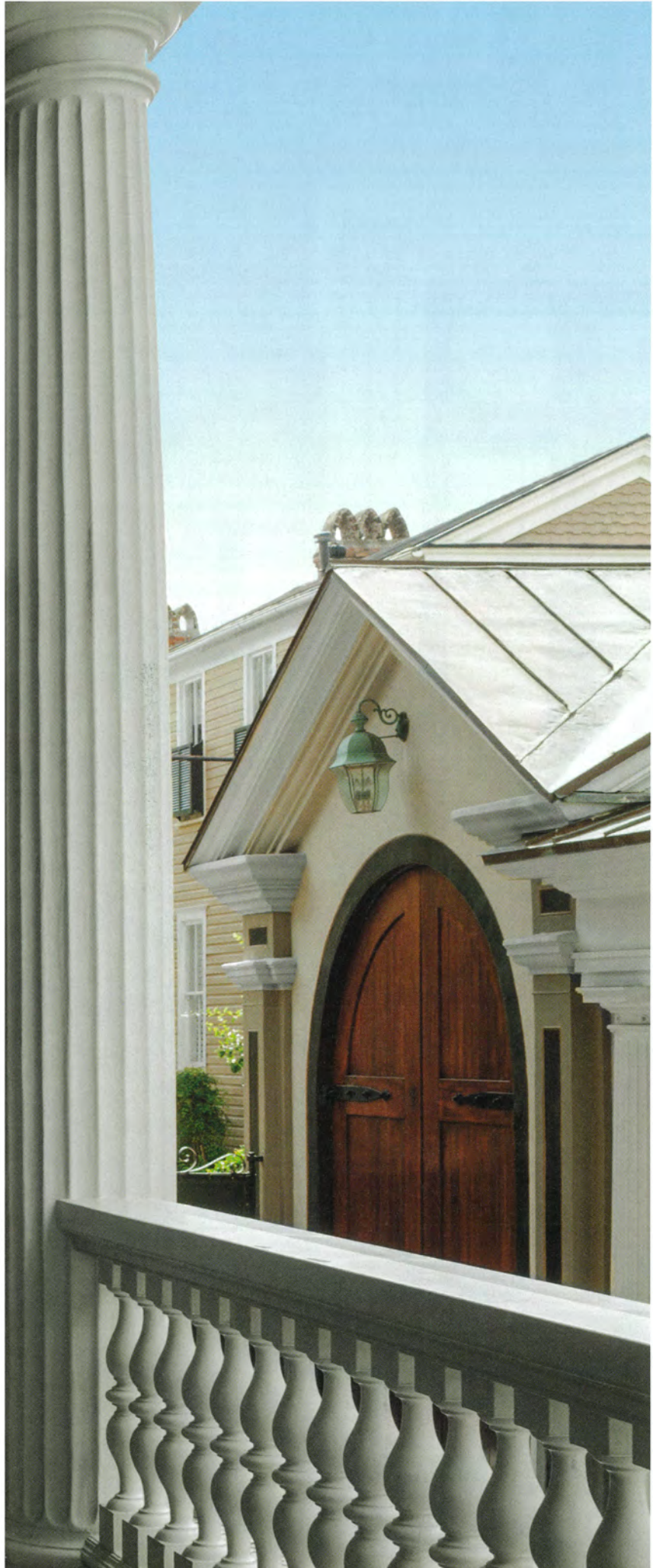
Dining room A custom Gracie wallpaper energizes the dining room where Nancy Corzine chairs surround a custom New Classics table. Above the marble fireplace is a Napoleon III mirror from East & Orient Company in Dallas. The crystal chandelier came with the home.





Kitchen Patrick O'Donnell incorporated an existing structure into his house design; today that area is the kitchen. A small breakfast room contains the clients' own corner cabinet and settee and spindle-back Windsor chairs from Debenham Antiques in England. Csongor worked with Bryan Reiss of Distinctive Designs in Mount Pleasant, South Carolina, on the design of cabinetry and an island that features locally sourced black marble. Charles Edwards Ashwell lanterns hang above. The grisaille harbor scene, purchased from Gracie, was made by an 18th-century French company. The Minton Spindell counter stools have Townsend Leather seats.





Porch Deep porches that shield interiors from the sun are a classic feature of Southern architecture. This home's carriage house is in the background.
Library A rounded archway and classic Venetian plaster walls and ceiling frame English Regency cane-back armchairs purchased at Manhattan's Doyle auction house.
Portrait Designer Susanne Csongor conceived the dining room's hand-painted Gracie wallpaper based on her vision of 19th-century Charleston—magnolia trees, steamboats, and a peach-and-coral palette inspired by local gardens. "I'm old school," she says. "I draft in ink, not pencil."





Billiard room A pair of tufted-leather wing chairs, circa 1930, evoke a British men's club. **Master bedroom** The master bed is a Leonards reproduction of an early 1800s sea captain's bed discovered in Maine. It's dressed in Sferra bedding and pillows made from vintage fabrics by Melissa Levinson Antiques. A circa 1825-35 mahogany recamier made in Boston in the Regency style, a faceted Continental sewing table from the 19th century, and an 18th-century portrait share the master bedroom with a Merida sisal carpet and linen curtains. **Powder room** Adjacent to the parlor, the powder room boasts a Verde marble sink with gilded swan faucet by P.E. Guerin. A 19th-century English portrait is visible in the reflection of a Louis XVI-style mirror from Trianon Antiques. The sconce is French 18th-century cast bronze.



with maritime paintings, conveys the masculinity of its probable former function as a library. In the 19th century, however, the rug would have been a patterned Persian, the walls covered in a jewel-tone damask, and a heavy tufted Chesterfield would have held court. Csongor took a lighter, less formal approach with warm beige walls and a sofa in a chenille-swathed Wilton with a simple Greek key trim. “Instead of a collection of snuff boxes,” she adds, “there’s just one.”

The contemporary expressions of traditional ideas make the residence much more serviceable for the homeowners, who often travel down with several couples at a time to enjoy the famous local cuisine and Southern charms of “Chucktown,” as the city has been nicknamed. Today the home’s seven bedrooms are frequently filled with guests, its double drawing room hosts large gatherings, and the dining room is the scene of candlelit dinners for 10. It breathes with a life that sadly eluded Patrick O’Donnell. What was once a “heartbreak house” has been transformed, thanks to Csongor and its homeowners, into a house of mirth. ■

Interior designer: Susanne Csongor

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