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YOUR HOME

The Italian job

A unique mix of sleek European furniture and ornate Chinese art and antiques gives a South End apartment worldly appeal.

By Marni Elyse Katz | February 21, 2010

Matt Burns's South End living room is on its fourth paint color in five years, but this time it's the perfect shade. Not long after moving in, Burns -- now 39 and a partner in the Aquitaine Group (owners of Aquitaine, Gaslight, and four other stylish Boston-area eateries) -- bought a large oil painting by Chinese-born photo-realist painter Yingzhao Liu. He put it in his living room along with a contemporary Italian couch and two chairs he had purchased at Back Bay furniture retailer Showroom and a side table and cabinet from Danish Country, an antiques shop on Charles Street. Burns also hung artwork he had collected over the years, including a pair of Japanese-style ink drawings to flank the fireplace.

In spite of these beautiful things, Burns wasn't quite satisfied with his condominium, a two-story unit in a 19th-century town house. To help him finish the place and make his disparate elements look and feel more connected, he took a tip from Showroom owner Doug Gates and called in Boston designer Meichi Peng.

Peng's starting point was the Liu painting, which hangs over the living room mantel and depicts a seated woman. "A lot flowed from the painting," says Burns, "like the cushions on the sofa, which came from the highlights of her skirt." In addition to the russet velvet pillows, Peng punctuated the rooms with decorative Chinese antiques, such as the Qing Dynasty lions that guard the living room's hearth and early 19th-century ceremonial rice-cake molds, both of which she found on a shopping trip to Taiwan. Burns added other Chinese artifacts to the mix, including a dragon carving and three Tang Dynasty pots that sit in the den, all from Asian Collections in Brookline. The pieces blend beautifully. "I love modern Italian furniture," says Burns, "but when used exclusively, there's not much personality."

As for the paint color, it's Benjamin Moore's Iron Gate -- a gray-toned taupe that serves as a unifying background for several rooms. "The statement here is the art," Peng says. "We just tied it all together."