





A Home with a story

BY JO UPCRAFT

While the black-and-white properties across Singapore all tend to have a commanding external presence, it's the interior that gives them their own unique personality.

And they come no more character-filled than the eclectic black-and-white of interior stylist, designer and artist JOSEPHINE BYRNES. Here, she lives with her husband Peter, their two children, Ivy (12) and Jasper (15), superwoman housekeeper Erna, two rabbits, a family of rescued lovebirds and their recent addition to the family – adorable toy poodle puppy, Ziggy.

Nestled in its own private tropical oasis off Bukit Timah Road, the 10-room colonial home features a sweeping driveway, outdoor decking, swimming pool and carriage house; but it's when you enter the front doors that it truly takes your breath away.

Josephine's house was never going to be boring. The daughter of an architect, she has natural panache, flair and curiosity – not to mention a fine eye for detail – in her Australian blood. Add to this a career of over 20 years in acting (Josephine had a starring role in Australian TV drama *Brides of Christ*), and periodically working in interior design and the art world, and it's clear to see how her home has come to combine elegant sophistication with a treasure trove of storytelling delights.

The family moved to Singapore in 2014 after 13 years of living the expat life in Hong Kong. An incurable collector, Josephine admits that they "must have moved a thousand boxes!" so they could hang on to their favourite furniture and homeware gathered over the years. Here, we chat over English tea (served in the finest antique bone china, of course) and home-baked apple cake while enchanting objets d'art wink at us from nearby, as Ziggy watches from a distance.



Your house is the anchor of your world, so surround yourself with things that make you feel inspired and comfortable.



You moved to Singapore seven years ago. Did you know what kind of house you were looking for?

I think we thought we'd put the bulk of our belongings into storage and do this last Asian stint in an apartment, on our way back "home". However, the heartbreaking deaths of two friends in two countries at the time of our move made me suddenly realise the shortness of time.

Ivy and Jasper were six and nine, and these were integral years in our family story; this was the time they'd later look back on and remember their "family home", so I set about finding it. I have always found these black-and-whites so compelling – the challenge of them and their heritage, and their beautiful light-filled spaces. They are very, very special to live in.

Your home is stunning. Was there anything specific that won you over?

It was in pretty good condition, and has, like so many of these homes, an easy layout, high ceilings, grand proportions and a beautiful flow. This one had been well looked after by the previous tenants and it had a kitchen fitted – not all the ones I looked at did. We also felt lucky to find a lovely garden and pool already in place.

I loved the layout and the space of the rooms, and the palpable history of the property, and all the lives that have made it home before us. I wanted the house to come alive again with us. We think it was built around 1915 to 1920, and I've been told it was the home of a British Army Officer or the Police Chief. One of the bedrooms has a small brass gun safe built into the walls.







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With no furniture here when you arrived apart from the fitted kitchen, how did you go about arranging your space?

The first thing I had to do was get some cupboards. I went straight to IKEA and ordered the plainest basic cupboards and added various collected door handles to them. I hung curtains – we have 14 doors on the ground floor so we needed some privacy – and I placed rugs down as “anchor points” and for a neutral base.

Did you buy a lot of new furniture?

Well, this house is much bigger than our apartment in Hong Kong. I did buy things along the way as I came across them – I made regular trips to IKEA and Junkie’s Corner, for example. Also, once we had our children, I wasn’t working as an actor in Hong Kong, and I started doing other creative work; this included art directing and styling bespoke private and corporate events for art galleries and a private event space. As I took on these small interior styling commissions, I was always sourcing and seeking lovely things – and, as you can see, too often they had to come home with me!

Absolutely! Your home is a feast for the eyes. Where did you get the art in the living room?

The large canvas in the living room is a section of a painting I saw in the National Gallery in London; she’s called *The Surprise* by Claude-Marie Dubufe, painted in 1827. I love her and just had her blown up on canvas as big as I could. The print next to her comes from a small wallpaper sample. I was planning to cover a section of the living room with it, then just got an enlarged print instead.

Talk us through the art in the dining room.

The *Mona Lisa* with the Damian Hurst skull crystal overlay is by artist Tanya Piratay and was part of a series, by various international artists, auctioned for the charity Smile For A Child. On the adjacent wall is a photograph of a derelict theatre in Detroit by artist Denise Hough. This is the first theatre The Jackson 5 played at. I love that there is nothing left standing amongst the rubble apart from (if you look closely) a few lonely chairs. In the corner of the room hangs an art piece by Marie Garcia Ibanez; it’s a human spine made of china, with a pattern on it of tiny flowers. I had admired this series for a long time and my husband gave it to me as a 50th birthday present. I love it so.

You have some intriguing personal collections ...

I think I become fascinated with a particular thing and the story and lives behind it – the love, care and reverence in making things by hand over time, and the occasions that are elevated and marked by decoration and adorning things. There are French church candlesticks, religious glass domes from Europe, birds’ nests, necklaces and headpieces from important celebrations from various parts of Asia, and tiny “lotus shoes”, made for bound feet in China many years ago and stitched with such perfect, delicate care. Almost everything has been picked up treasure hunting and curiosity shopping in local markets around the world.

What are your most coveted items?

Ooh, I’m not sure I could choose – I become in awe of them all along the way! That twinkling cross in the living room is one of a pair that was discovered in a crypt in the South of France – it was used to lead processions in religious festivals, and is completely covered in tiny hand-cut glass beads, wired on by hand by someone over months and months, I suspect. The “Cap I Pota” Madonnas were used in private shrines in Spain and dressed up for special festivals. They are so serene; I always wonder what they have seen.



A successful home is a collection of things that you love.







Is there one piece of furniture you'll never tire of?

I had the black cupboard in the dining room made years ago for our Hong Kong apartment, out of an old Chinese screen of window panels. It used to be white and held books and toys. When it was reassembled here, I hated it and wanted to get rid of it. On a whim one day, Ivy and I painted it black, and now I love it all over again!

Do you have a favourite room in the house?

Hmmm ... maybe the dining room? I do love entertaining and I love imagining the dinners held in here over the history of the house. I fill it with flowers – the wilder the better. The chandelier over the table I found many years ago in a dusty old junk shop tucked away in Sheung Wan in Hong Kong. It has become a source of amusement for my family as I dress it up with decorations whenever there's anything to celebrate – birthdays, Christmas, CNY, Deepavali.

Where do you spend most of your family time?

We gather in the upstairs living room at night. As with all these houses, this room was originally an open verandah, and over time it was closed in with windows. It has three bedrooms, two interconnected, off either side. The ceilings are 5.5 metres high, and it's very hot up there during the day.

I constantly marvel that these houses were built with such generous proportions. The large coffee table, an old Chinese bed bought here in Singapore 20 years ago, has been used by my children as a perch to watch cartoons from; it's had jigsaw puzzles all over it and all manner of art-and-craft creations; it's been a hideout and a boat; but now it's regularly covered in laptops and various remote controls.

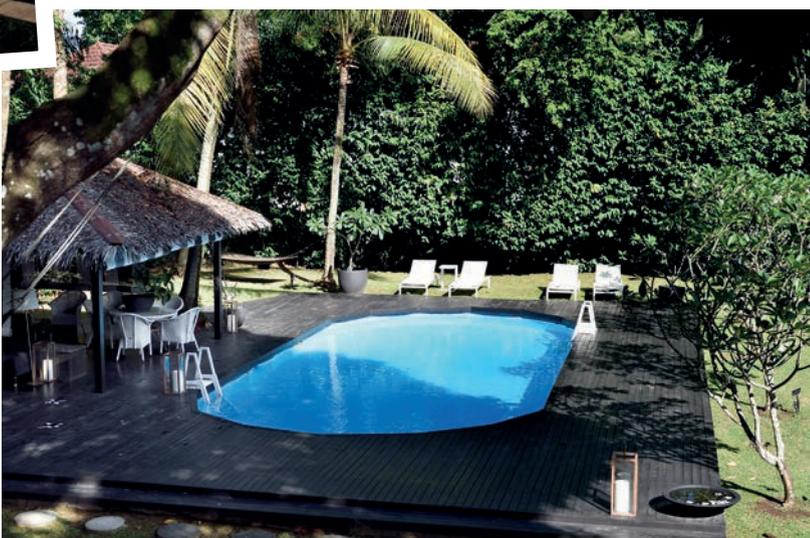


What are your tips for expats who want to restyle their spaces themselves?

Make your home where you are; our spaces have a profound impact on our daily lives. Buy what you love, not what's trending. I'm drawn to pieces that people put time, effort and energy into and the curiosity and love in them sings to me all over the house every day. Especially now, our home is the anchor of our family and our world I think it's important to be surrounded by things that make you feel both inspired and at ease. I guess as an expat I'd say spend money on things you'll take with you through your life, and with the rest get creative: cushions you love, a candle or two and any heartfelt details can instantly lift up your space. Oh, and lamps ... lighting is everything.

Where do you retreat to for some quiet time?

This house is full of spaces to retreat to, but sometimes this open-decked room by the garden. It's at its best in the afternoons and as the sun goes down. In the courtyard, I planted two small frangipani trees for my two friends who died and prompted the move to this house. Seven years on, these "remembrance trees", now big and strong, often decorated with candlelight, twinkle as the night draws in – a constant reminder to me to focus on what is important (even if I sometimes ignore their call) – and how lucky we are to be here, now and together.





JOSEPHINE'S RECOMMENDATIONS

Shop Lottie Lifestyle ("for gorgeously curated everthing")
shoplottielifestyle.com

Bungalow 55 ("tropical style at its finest")
8D Dempsey Road, #03-04
thebungalow55.com

Common Touch Pottery
Burghley Lifestyle Hub
45 Burghley Drive, #01-08
commontouchcraft.com

Originals ("they sell beautiful, unique pieces from around the world")
1 Bukit Batok Street 22, Level 5
originals.com.sg

National Gallery Singapore
nationalgallery.sg

Puppy Colours, dog behaviour specialists, trainers and teachers
("they've been a lifeline to us, who are all unused to small dogs, helping us settle in our new puppy")
puppycolours.com

Hock Siong ("the store often sources items from hotels being refurbished; the lamps are from The St. Regis Hotel - I painted the lampshades black; also, the chairs on the outdoor verandah were from the Raffles renovation")
153 Kampong Ampat, #01-03
hocksiong.com.sg

SPMKT Dempsey,
Blk 8 Dempsey Road,
#01-15A
sprmkt.com.sg

Tippling Club
38 Tanjong Pagar Road
tipplingclub.com

Jypsy Restaurant
38 Martin Road
pscafe.com/jypsy-martin-road *el*