

In the LIVING ROOM of Brigitte Romanek's Laurel Canyon home, cream Senior armchairs by Marco Zanuso from Eccola; Hans J Wegner Hammock chaise; curly sheepskin armchair from JF Chen; magnifying lens coffee table from Eccola; 1960s Italian floor lamp; rug from Lawrence of La Brea; large photograph by Larry Sultan; photograph of Flea from the Red Hot Chili Peppers by Mark Romanek (leaning against wall). Details, last pages.

GRAND ILLUSION

The rumour that Harry Houdini once lived here may not be true, but everything else about this sprawling Laurel Canyon mansion is pure magic.

BY TIFFANY BAKKER PHOTOGRAPHED BY ANSON SMART



THIS PAGE: in the ENTRY, table by Jacques Adnet; reclaimed marble floor tiles from a French chateau; Labradoodles Roxy (left) and Rufus. OPPOSITE PAGE: in the ATRIUM, interior designer Brigette Romanek with Roxy; table and chairs by Michael Boyd; sconce from Blackman Cruz; vintage Italian rewired ceiling pendant light.



t's a beast," says interior designer Brigette Romanek of the grand 1925 Mediterranean-style mansion she shares with her film-director husband, Mark, and their two pre-teen daughters. "It's not really a practical family house. Not in the traditional sense of how homes are designed today — it's very different, and a bit ramshackle. It's quirky but that's what I love about it. It's got so much heart and soul."

The 2800-square-metre Laurel Canyon home, which was previously owned by Mark's best pal, legendary music producer Rick Rubin, has certainly attained something of a mythological status. Some stories are true: yes, Errol Flynn once lived in the five-bedroom, 10-bathroom home in the 1930s; and yes, The Beatles, The Rolling Stones and Jimi Hendrix all passed through its doors during the '60s and '70s. (More recently, the Red Hot Chili Peppers and Marilyn Manson have recorded albums in the residence.)

Less certain is the rumour that a woman was tossed over the balcony by a spurned lover, and patently untrue are reports that Harry Houdini lived and created his most famous tricks here. (He actually resided up the road).

But the home's artistic pedigree was perfect for Brigette — a former singer and handbag designer who now runs Hancock Design with business partner Estee Stanley — and for Mark, one of the most influential forces in music video, whose résumé includes Madonna, Jay-Z, Beyoncé, Michael Jackson and Taylor Swift.

Brigette says she was wary of making too many changes to the structure's footprint, lest any adjustments change its spirit and soul. "I wanted to honour the history of this place, and if I tried to erase all the imperfections, it wouldn't be the same house." So renovations were carried out with the utmost consideration and care to maintain the home's authentic, lived-in character. The entire property had to be rewired, the walls redone and the floors repurposed. Terracotta flooring in the entry was replaced by grey-and-white marble tiles sourced from a French chateau.

The previously "tiny" kitchen was modernised and expanded to connect to the airy dining room, which the designer also opened up by adding giant, stately arched windows. Brigette designed the kitchen with minimal storage space — there are no upper cabinets — because she wanted it to feel "uncluttered", and she chose an unconventionally dark, earthy palette. "It was a risky thing," she says, "but I wanted to create something that was warm and clean."

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However, she kept the expansive living room bright and white. Brigette says the structure of the room has barely changed since the 1930s.

"It was really important to me to let the house breathe," she says. "Look, I'm a hoarder with the best of them, but I wanted the house to have space because I wanted to experience the grandness of the rooms."

Brigette and Mark decided to decorate the living room with a light hand, allowing the design and architecture to speak for itself. Among the standout pieces are an elegant Hans J Wegner hammock-style chaise lounge, a pair of regal Marco Zanuso armchairs, goatskin carpets, African stools, and photographs by Richard Avedon and Larry Sultan. "It doesn't have a lot of pieces in it but, to me, every single piece is something that I really love," she declares. "I'm not over the top with how I pile things in, so I wanted to keep that initial feeling I had when I walked

in and I was like, 'Aaah!' So everything I brought in really had to enhance that feeling."

Brigette's favourite parts of the house are the library, with its floor-to-ceiling bookshelves stacked with photography and design books by such innovators as Diana Vreeland, Keith Haring and Diane Arbus; the cocoon-like wood-panelled den, housing Mark's multiple Grammys and MTV Video Music Awards, where she likes to relax after a busy day and "grab a little rosé"; and the atrium, a leafy oasis, perfect for Sunday morning breakfasts and, with the girls' guitars and amplifiers set up, impromptu jam sessions.

Warmth and charm permeate the home; despite its grandness, it feels lived in. "I want it to be beautiful, but I want it to be functional and liveable — and I don't think that has to be mutually exclusive," says Brigette. "I have two busy kids. They can go in every single room and not worry that they're messing it up. You can have an extremely aesthetically beautiful home that's also very usable."

The estate has become a popular stop on those Hollywood star tours, although Brigette says some of the information served up to tourists is slightly askew. "We hear the tour guide, say, 'Harry Houdini invented all of his famous tricks here and the house has 22 bedrooms!'" she laughs. "Mark gets really annoyed, and he's like, 'I'm going to set them straight.'"

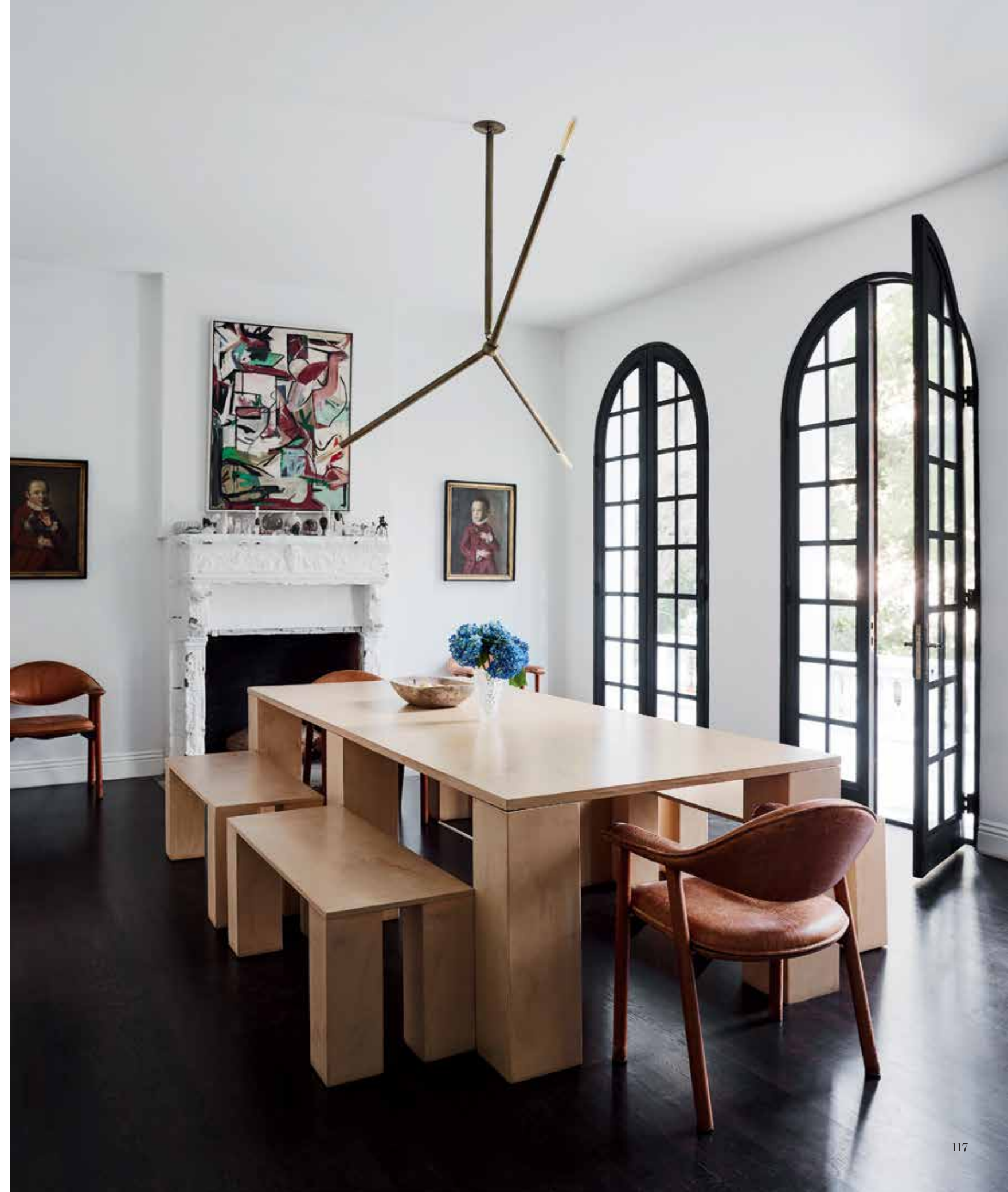
"We go outside the gate, and then Mark just stands there and starts waving to all of these people on the tour bus. I'm like, 'You really told them, honey', and he says, 'But did you see their faces? I didn't want to ruin the myth of it.'" *VL*

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In another view of the LIVING ROOM, 1950s sofa by Marco Zanuso; Larwo chair by Han Pieck; 1960s surfboard coffee table; 1940s Art Deco vase (with flowers); floor lamp by Serge Mouille; console (in background) from Blackman Cruz; rug from Lawrence of La Brea; triptych photograph by Peter Beard (far left); photograph of Francis Bacon by Richard Avedon.



THIS PAGE: in the KITCHEN, custom oak cabinetry and shelving unit; Portoro marble benchtop; 1940s Art Deco vase; limestone floor tiles; 1960s pendant light.
OPPOSITE PAGE: in the DINING ROOM, De Sede leather chairs; bowl from Galerie Haff; vintage vase; Apparatus ceiling light; 1960s abstract expressionist painting; pair of 18th-century portraits by unknown artists.



In the DEN, red Pyramid chair by Poul M Voltber; vintage French club chair; Siglo Moderno Gallery coffee table in Marquina marble; bowl (on table) from Blackman Cruz; hippopotamus skull; taxidermy kookaburra; painting stand from Dragonette; wall lights from Lawson-Fenning; 1960s French ceiling light; rug from Hamilton Rugs; artwork includes pieces by James Nares and Kevin Earl Taylor.





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THIS PAGE: in the OUTDOOR AREA, Brigette and Mark's 11-year-old daughter with Labradoodle Rufus. In the BATHROOM, antique marble vanity; sink from Waterworks; tapware from Compas; ebony side table by Michael Wilson. OPPOSITE PAGE, FROM LEFT: in the LIBRARY, Tobi-Isbi dining table by Barber & Osgerby; Seguso coloured vases (on left); case (with flowers) from Galerie Half; Tre Pezzi lounge chair by Franco Albini; African wooden stool; B&B Italia coffee table and sofa; sconces from Y Lighting; antique ceiling light; Chinese rug; photographs by Danny Lyon and Diane Arbus. Details, last pages.