

The Secret Garden

Tastemaker
Axel Vervoordt fashions
a verdant refuge
for Dallas antiques maven
Betty Gertz and
all her earthly delights

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etty Gertz may be the only woman in America with a towering Chippendale secretary in her bath. The eminent decorative-arts collector and dealer—whose Dallas shop, East & Orient Com-

pany, has been an altar to antiquarianism since 1979—has always had a playfully eccentric side. In truth, it radiates throughout her astonishing home.

Minutes from downtown, in a neighborhood peppered with mammoth French-, Mediterranean-, and Tudor-style houses, Gertz's private world is virtually invisible, obscured by tall walls of plastered brick that are being slowly and gloriously overtaken by nature. Shrubs, vines, and trees are all one can see from the street, save for a gable that peeks above the treetops and a glimpse of a car on the half-circle drive that disappears behind a hedge.

The unconventional and mysterious home is the second project Gertz has completed with her longtime friend Axel Vervoordt, the influential Belgian designer renowned for his ability to mix the past and present in remarkable ways. The two had previously collaborated on the redecoration of another Dallas house, a Georgian-style mansion where the chic dealer and her late husband, Melvin, a prominent oil executive and chemical engineer, raised their children. A tempting offer to sell that property, though, spurred her to relocate. After finding the new address, Gertz asked Vervoordt to take a look—and he made it clear that he didn't like it at all.

Narrow and utterly undistinguished, the two-story structure sparked an instant challenge from the Antwerp-born perfectionist: "How can we change it?" Vervoordt soon arrived at the idea of camouflaging the whole building behind garden walls in a manner contradictory to the city's reputation for flashiness. "The outsides of houses are always very glamorous in Texas, but the insides are always disappointing," the designer explains with his typical take-no-prisoners directness. "Why not do the opposite—a hidden house with a great surprise inside?"

Chez Gertz, one has to wander deep into the tree-shaded lot before finding the main entrance. What appears to be the front door actually swings open to an enchantingly small courtyard. Behind that, accessed through yet another doorway, lies a second, larger courtyard, and then, finally, the house reveals itself. In lieu of a typical foyer, visitors step into a greenhouse-like space that flows into a long gallery punctuated with skylights and flanked by the kitchen

and the master suite. (Guest rooms are upstairs.) At the far end is a verdant vista, visible from the front door. "You can see all the way to the garden," says Gertz. "I love that."

A comprehensive renovation elevated the structure in every way: ceiling heights, finishes, aura. Flemish artisans came to apply naturally pigmented lime washes to the walls, and for the floors, Vervoordt trucked in old Carrara-marble slabs and timeworn wood parquet set in dramatic patterns. Cabinetry from an 18th-century Bordeaux apothecary now lines the kitchen, while noble pilasters of oak and walnut augment the gracious library, the house's largest space, which is used for reading, relaxing, and dining ("basically it's a one-room house," Gertz says with a laugh). Finally, when all the dust had settled, a ho-hum dwelling had been transformed into something else entirely: a well-crafted treasure chest for the dealer's cherished trove.

"Everything came with me when I moved," says Gertz, who approved the top-to-bottom architectural revamp but had no intention of buying new furnishings, remaining loyal to the venerable objects she has acquired over her lifetime. She relishes a piece's origin, its provenance, its condition—a Georgian wood table glowing with centuries' worth of polish, a 1700s wing chair whose velvet-wrapped arms have been rubbed almost bare.

"The worn rugs and the fabrics on the beautiful antiques give the impression the house has existed like this for generations," observes celebrated Texas decorator Joseph Minton, one of the dealer's close pals. And in a way it has. Gertz's grandson Tyler Gertz, a designer who has come to live with her while working on a historical novel, says, "I recognize every single thing from my childhood."

Despite the echoes of yesteryear and the honeylike aromas of varnishes, wax, and mellowed leather, Betty Gertz is not constrained to the past. Vervoordt has nudged her into purchasing contemporary art that he adores and which she now loves, too, namely postwar Japanese works that, he says, "make rooms a little younger and more of today." And instead of the formal way of life she once enjoyed, Gertz notes, "now we practically live in the kitchen."

She also revels in comforts that no ancien régime duchess ever did, among them floors warmed by radiant heat, a swimming pool kept at a sybaritic 90 degrees, and state-of-the-art tablet controls. As for that car tucked behind the hedge out front? It's a shapely, sexy jet-black convertible, gleaming and, like its elegant owner, ready to roll. □

Opposite: A skylit gallery bisects antiques dealer Betty Gertz's Dallas residence, which she renovated with designer and fellow antiquaire Axel Vervoordt; bougainvillea climbs the lime-painted plaster walls, and a canvas by Japanese artist Norio Imai surmounts an 18th-century marble console. For details see Sources.

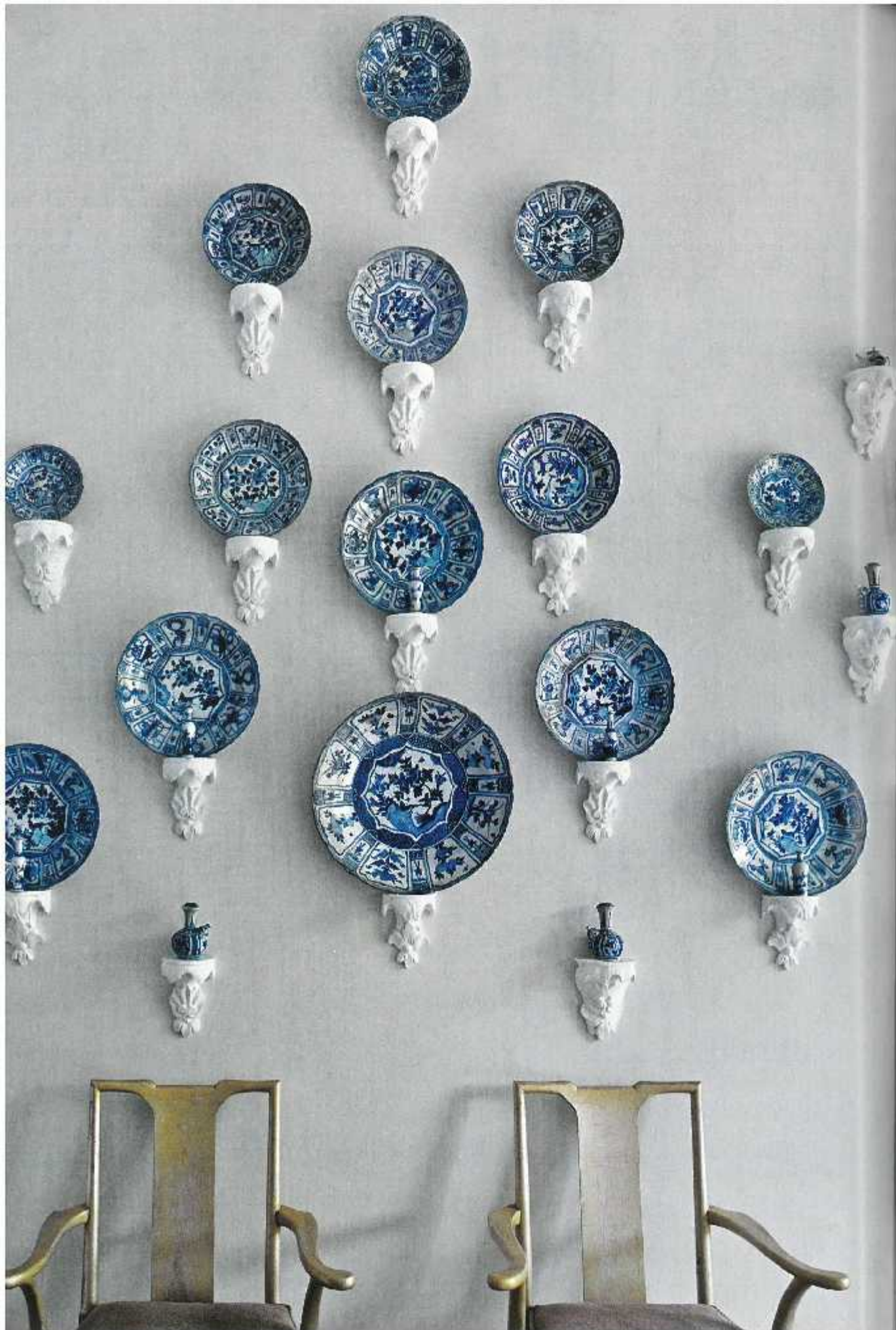


For the multipurpose library, Axel Vervoordt devised bookshelves built around circa-1700 French pilasters. An 18th-century Italian mirror overlooks a cocktail table draped with a Flemish tapestry, and a Georgian drop-leaf table stands beside the pink silk sofa; the flooring is composed of mismatched antique parquet de Versailles that once graced seven different houses.



Just inside the front door, a Khmer bronze torso offers a sensuous counterpoint to an abstract painting; the planter is a 19th-century hibachi. *Opposite, from top:* Gertz sits at the library's antique architect's desk. A Chinese root table nestles beneath an artwork by Axel Vervoordt in the gallery. The poolhouse incorporates a Colonial-style entrance salvaged from Gertz's former home.





The kitchen is equipped with a Lacanche range and walnut cabinetry that integrates antique French elements; the windows are hung with Belgian gingham.

Opposite: In the poolhouse, antique Chinese porcelain from one of the famous Hatcher cargoes perches on plaster brackets designed by Axel Vervoorde.

The master bath has the atmosphere of a boudoir, appointed with a Chippendale secretary bookcase and an exuberant Venetian corner cabinet laden with blanc de Chine; the Bath Works tub features Watermark Designs fittings.

