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MORE IS MORE

Minimalism's dead. Or at least on vacation. When designer Sasha Emerson furnished her family's summer house, she found inspiration in its Victorian architecture, layering one secondhand find atop another to create eccentric, eclectic interiors that are true—in spirit, if not letter—to those mad collectors of the turn of the century.

BY CATHERINE WHALEN PHOTOGRAPHS BY WILLIAM MEPPEN

Emerson found this ornate Victorian sofa, below, at a flea market for around \$200, then added a dash of humor to it with sky blue paint and red grosgrain upholstery. She designed the throw pillows, made of vintage fabric, and hung an embroidered \$5 flea market panel between a pair of pricey gouache paintings. Opposite: A pair of folding beach chairs, picked up at a flea market for \$10 each, sit in front of Emerson's early 1900s Massachusetts house. Her daughter Isabel Levin (far left), Jack Whalen (son of this article's author), and neighbor Maia Coleman run wild on the rolling lawn.







Emerson, above left, kicks back in another piece of reinterpreted Victoriana; behind it: a leather ottoman of her own design and an old Fruit of the Loom haberdashery case, purchased from L.A.'s Wertz Brothers antiques store for \$195. The down-to-earth decorator couldn't resist the snooty humor of this 1960s French poster when she spotted it at the Santa Monica flea for \$200. Above right: This cabinet, \$400, and set of blue goblets, \$20, are also flea market finds; the African bowls, made of recycled labels, run about \$40 at Craft Caravan in New York City. Opposite: Emerson paid a shockingly low \$25 for this old kitchen cabinet and \$50 for the vintage Ferris wheel. The "painting" is actually a scrap of Brunschwig & Fils fabric left over from a decorating job, which Emerson had quilted and framed in red leather to match the \$60 chair beneath it.

WHEN SASHA EMERSON went looking for a summer home in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, she had in mind a simple farmhouse in the woods. Instead, the Los Angeles-based interior designer found herself drawn to a rambling Victorian giant close to town. The place was a bit fussy, with dark moldings, ornate woodwork, and heavy oak doors, but it was also surprisingly practical, affording Emerson, her screenwriter husband, Larry Levin, and the couple's three young daughters plenty of room—including a gently rolling lawn and a generous wraparound porch—to stretch out and enjoy their downtime in the Berkshires.

And while one might expect a California decorator with a mid-century bent (especially the cofounder of Orange, L.A.'s hip industrial furniture store) to fight such old-fashioned architecture by tearing down walls and opting for spare, modern pieces, Emerson has never been big on predictability. In this case, she decided to let the Victorians—who drew on many countries and cultures in what was often a collision of styles—inspire her. She loaded the place with bright hooked rugs, fake Tiffany light fixtures, witty vintage posters, quilts in wild colors, and a slew of secondhand fur-

niture dating from nearly every imaginable era, including the Victorian one. In her living room sits an early 1900s sofa, now lacquered sky blue, reupholstered in lipstick-red grosgrain, and strewn with pointy patchwork pillows. The end result may be far from a rigid interpretation of the period, but it's just the kind of crazy, layered, eclectic spin that those mad collectors from the turn of the century probably would have appreciated.

"I call it Andy Warhol meets Sister Parish," Emerson says with a laugh. "I'm usually hired to be more sedate, but with only myself as a client, this house turned into me at my most wacky and cheap." And because it was a vacation home, the designer was an even more free-spirited "client" than she might normally be. The fact that she and Levin were short on time (they closed on the house in October 2001 and were hoping to spend the Thanksgiving holiday there) and money (most of the budget went toward buying the palatial three-story home) only made the project that much easier. "When you're not spending big bucks, there's a lot less stress," Emerson explains. "It frees you up to make fast, spontaneous decisions. If a desk only sets you back \$200, you don't have to feel guilty if you get tired of it later."

Almost everything in the house was (*continued on page 125*)



A cabbage from Emerson's garden, above left, sits on the kitchen counter next to a flea market wine bucket, \$5, that holds cooking utensils. The blue and green drawer pulls were also \$5 each at a flea market. Above right: The designer put this old library cart, \$75 from Wertz Brothers, to use in the kitchen, where it holds cookbooks and a mix of vintage and new cake stands. Above it, a secondhand chalkboard keeps track of phone messages, while an old tile gets a new life inside a studded leather frame. The stool was snapped up at an antiques store for \$69, then powder-coated and reupholstered. Opposite: Emerson cleans up in a sundress scored for \$20 at a discount shop. Her collection of British Art pottery from the early 1900s sits atop the cabinets. The teapots on the counter were \$3 each at the L.A. clearinghouse Dishes a la Carte.

ONE WEEK + \$3,000 = A NEW KITCHEN

When Sasha Emerson and Larry Levin bought their house, the kitchen was your typical 1970s nightmare of dark brown cabinets, fake brass hardware, and filthy beige countertops. In less than seven days—and with little more than \$3,000—Emerson transformed the room from floor to ceiling. Here's a play-by-play of how she pulled it off. —c.w.

■ **FLOOR:** Linoleum may conjure up images of high school hallways, but this eco-friendly material (made of sawdust and linseed oil) has undergone a serious face-lift: It's now available in a range of modern colors and patterns for as little as \$1 a tile at Lowe's or Home Depot. Emerson's total: **\$258**, including four 20-count boxes of tile and professional installation.

■ **CABINETS:** Not a fan of faux oak? No worries. Paint, rather than replace. Emerson used Benjamin Moore's Decorator White II in a semigloss oil enamel (which is more durable than latex). She found her plastic drawer pulls at a flea market for \$5 each, then enlisted the matching service at Liz's Antique Hardware (www.lahardware.com) to track down similar knobs for the cabinets. Her total: **\$208** (\$70 for hardware, \$30 for a gallon of primer, \$68 for two gallons of paint, and \$40 for painting supplies).

■ **COUNTERTOPS:** Emerson blew most of her budget on azurine, a blue-flecked marble. Don't have the funds for such big rocks? She recommends clean white laminate (about \$30 per linear foot) or Corian (around \$70 per *installed* square foot at Home Depot). Her total of **\$2,000** includes two marble slabs for \$750 and \$1,250 for polishing and installation.

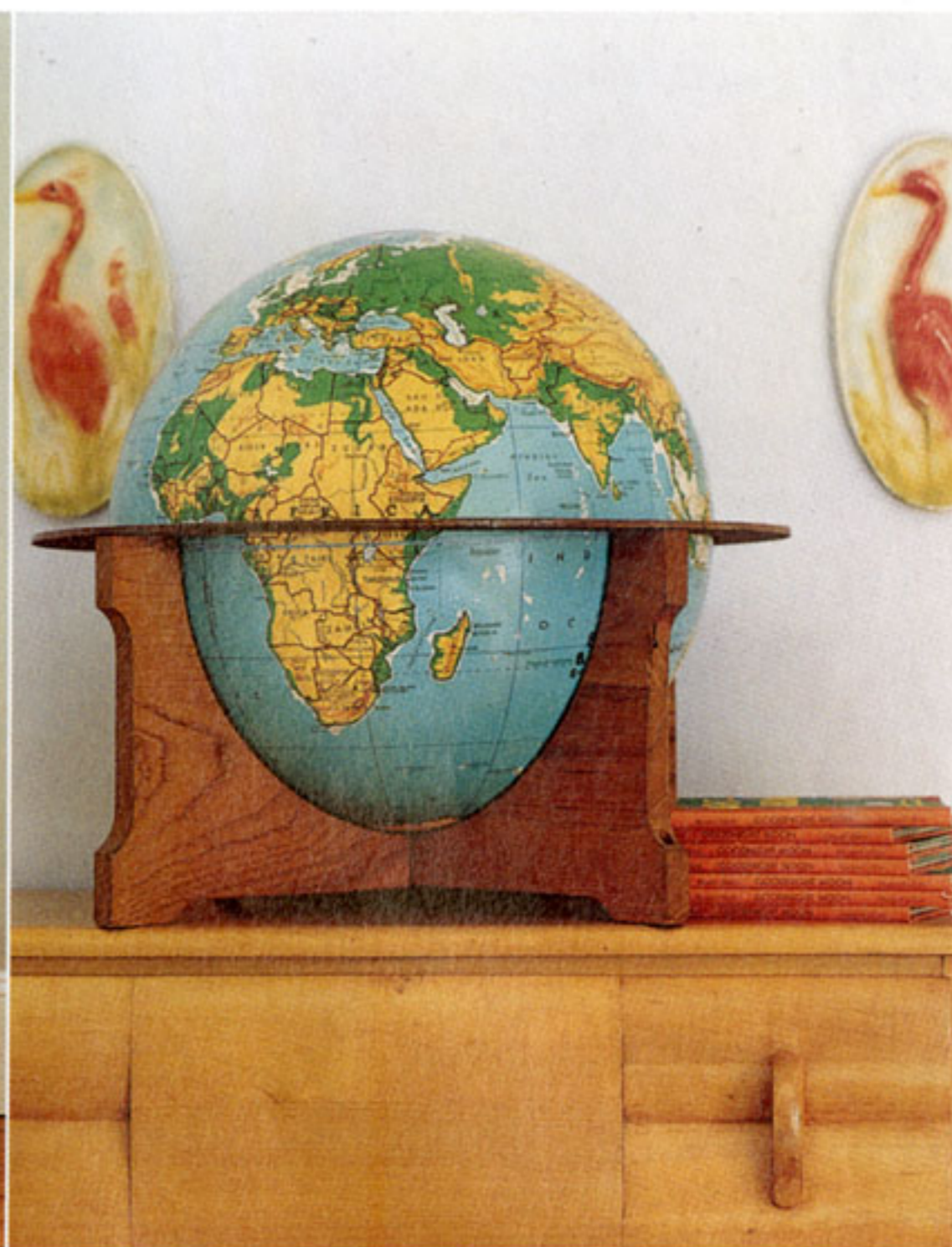
■ **BACKSPLASH:** Mexican glass tiles are affordable and come in a multitude of colors and sizes. Emerson opted for two-by-two-inch green tiles at \$9 a square foot and paid \$350 to have them installed, for a total of **\$550**.

■ **WALLS AND CEILING:** Emerson juxtaposed the bold tiles and bright cabinets with a muted gray green from Benjamin Moore called Grey Mirage. One gallon cost **\$25**.

■ **SEATING:** Emerson found four old dinette stools, each \$70, at an L.A. antiques store, then paid \$100 to have them powder-coated green and another \$120 to have them re-covered in blue leather for a total of **\$500**. To get the look for less with your own set of vintage stools, she recommends spray-painting the metal with Rust-Oleum (about \$6 per can) and using a staple gun to reupholster the seats yourself.







Graphic fabric from the remnant bin, at \$1 a yard, updates an office chair, above left, unearthed for \$22 at a used-furniture store. Emerson's parents brought the poster back from China; she had it matted in polyester panda bear shirt fabric and framed in faux bamboo. Above right: A pair of plaster flea market flamingos flank a vintage globe and a stack of *Goodnight Moon* books, nabbed for 50 cents each at a closeout store. The Heywood-Wakefield-style dresser was a steal at \$200. Opposite: With twin beds, two are expected, three are fresh—and practical for a woman with a trio of little girls. Emerson paid \$150 each for the midcentury Paul Frankl frames at Futurama in L.A. Then, instead of blowing big bucks on perfectly preserved quilts, she found unfinished quilt tops, \$5 to \$10 each at a flea market, bought some batting, and for \$45, paid a seamstress to sew it all together.

(continued from page 121) purchased at some kind of discount—from estate sales, eBay, flea markets, closeout stores, and used-furniture dealers—then repaired, reupholstered, or simply assigned a new purpose. “I’m always amazed when I go into people’s houses and they’ve just bought the latest thing,” she says. “I’d much rather have something unique and imbued with its own history. Who owned it? Where was it? You’re assembling this power of the past in your environment.”

As powerful as the past may be for Emerson, she’s not afraid to mess with it a little. She has a dynamic relationship with her relics: Instead of treating her vintage possessions as precious, static period pieces, she interacts with them and changes them, when necessary, to suit her needs. In her hands, a slanted library display table is topped with a piece of sheet acrylic to serve as a console in the front hall. A scrap of expensive fabric gets quilted, framed with red leather molding, and hung above an old chair covered in the same scarlet material. A wine bucket holds cooking utensils on a kitchen counter near a tiny garden pot turned saltcellar. And a high school podium, emblazoned with the words CLASS OF 1953, is made over as storage for games and toys, its front panel modified to swing open like a cabinet door. Ultimately, it is Emerson’s ability

to filter almost anything she finds—from tag sale trinkets to 100-year-old antiques—through her own distinct vision that turns an otherwise hodgepodge collection into a style statement.

It’s a sensibility she’s been honing since childhood. “I grew up with a father who never passed a yard sale without stopping and a mother who could take an old blazer, add a piece of velvet to it, and turn it into something really beautiful,” she recalls. “They are still extremely frugal, but they also know how to work it, and how to live well.”

Emerson obviously enjoys a bargain, but she’s not the type to scrimp, make do, or cut back. She likes to shop cheap—then again, she also simply likes to shop. “My husband jokes that I’m the only woman he knows who can spend \$1,000 at the Pick ‘n Save,” she admits. Instead of restraint, Emerson practices another facet of her guilt-free decorating: At these prices, you can afford to buy whatever grabs you. “If it’s only \$125 and something about it speaks to you, why not get that beautiful china you found at the flea market?” she implores. “Even if you have two sets already. Be free! Be spontaneous! People often hold back because they just don’t want more stuff. But it’s fun to have more stuff. It shakes things up.” Not surprisingly, in less than two months, she had filled—and



Emerson's husband, Larry Levin, above left, sits at a vintage desk from Futurama (which now sells a reproduction of the piece for \$700). The large upholstered chairs were \$150 each from Wertz Brothers; professional upholstery added \$350 to their price tags. Above right: In the master bedroom, a small secondhand rug hangs above the bed, which wears a wavy \$40 bedspread from Ikea. Two campy sailing lamps, \$100 for the pair at a flea market, complete the nautical theme. Opposite: Emerson and Levin's daughter Isabel steals the spotlight in a \$10 butterfly chair, which has been powder-coated yellow and covered in a whimsical cotton. To make it, and other interior fabrics, suitable for outdoor living, Emerson has them laminated at a cost of about \$7 per yard. The weather-resistant "Oriental" rugs, \$32 apiece, are from the L.A. shop Plastica.

CHEAP ADVICE

No two Sasha Emerson interiors look alike—which is exactly what keeps her clients coming back. Below, her tips for achieving personal, one-of-a-kind style on a real person's budget. —C.W.

- **LOOK FOR FURNITURE** at flea markets, estate sales, restaurant-supply stores, and institutional auctions (liquidation of a school, library, theater, etc.). All yield unique pieces at cut-rate prices.
- **USE YOUR IMAGINATION** when assigning an item a purpose. An office credenza can house a TV in the living room. A bathroom cup holder hung in an entry hall makes a great catchall for keys.
- **BUY IN MULTIPLES.** The more you buy, the more likely vendors are to negotiate. At home, this makes it easier to use whatever you've found. (One ceramic Chihuahua is a curiosity; five is a collection.)
- **ALMOST ANYTHING BECOMES ART** once it's properly framed, from a child's drawing to a silk scarf. Make a store-bought mat more interesting by covering it in fabric or wrapping paper. Save money on framing by having molding cut to size at the hardware store.

I do mean filled—all 4,000 square feet of her family's Massachusetts vacation house. The total cost of all that furniture, fabric, and frivolity: less than \$20,000.

Whatever the budget, though, Emerson believes that good interior design must reflect the personality—including the quirks—of the home owner. "A house is a visual journal of its inhabitants," she elaborates. "On one hand, I'm a little embarrassed when people walk through this place. It looks as if a crazy person may live here. On the other hand, I threw all these silly, incompatible flea market finds together and came up with something comfortable, comical, and happy—perfect for a summer place." Or any place, it would be easy to argue after spending a laid-back afternoon at her house. There's something about Sasha Emerson's wacky world that immediately puts visitors at ease. "When someone sits down on my living room sofa and has a look around," she explains, "how can they help but laugh a little bit and have a good time? ■

Catherine Whalen and Sasha Emerson are both Budget Living contributing editors. Catherine had planned to stop bounding Sasha with questions once her piece was written, but then she and her family moved to a big—and very empty—house outside Washington, D.C.

