Decor Score: Color, texture add visual attention to a plain room

by Rose_Bennett_Gilbert

Q: Our old house is charming, but it would be more so if the previous owner had not "modernized" by removing most of the woodwork. There are no crown mouldings in the living room, for example. Even the mantel had been stripped out. We're slowly putting some detailing back in place, but my husband is a stickler for authenticity and it will take a long time. What should we do in the meantime?

Placed close together, gallery-style, boldly framed maps assume architectural importance in a simple farmhouse room. Photo courtesy of Peter Margonelli. A: Think surface design. While you're saving for investment-level restoration work, there are a number of superficial ways to add interest to a stripped room. The trick is to make your improvements easy to change-out when the time comes for the authentic pieces.

Color and texture are empowering mediums that can also be temporary. Color has the ability to move walls around, raise a ceiling, impart depth and perform other special tricks. Try painting just one wall five shades darker than the others. Or take a leaf from artist Anne Dobek's sketchbook and paint strong overlapping angles onto the next wall where they adjoin. Dobek lives in an octagonal house so she has multiple angles to emphasize.

Textures also equal visual interest. Consider covering one wall with gathered fabric or a wooden trellis that can simply be removed. Even easier, hang a dramatic arrangement of artworks, as interior designer Matthew Smyth has done in the pictured sitting/dining room.

This is Smyth's own country home, a farmhouse built in 1790 but sadly abused through the past centuries. Smyth has carefully restored some details, but he creates architectural interest by framing a dozen sections of an old Paris map and hanging them frame to frame and floor to ceiling.

The wall of black and white art is the perfect complement to the simple geometry of the overhead beams and raised paneling on the fireplace wall.

To see more of the house and Smyth's legerdemain, click on www.matthewsmyth.com.

Q: We inherited a rather impressive Empire settee from my great-aunt, but it's turning into a problem. When we talked to an upholsterer, he said it should be done in horsehair. We never heard of that â€” does it really come from a horse? And we don't know where to find it. Can't we just use a more normal fabric?

A: You could, certainly. Not all 19th-century settees were lucky enough to be covered in horsehair in the first place.

We're talking about the real thing â€” hair from horse manes and tails was woven into fabrics, which were considered the "iron horse" of textiles: slick, durable and expensive. Therefore, it was favored for the front parlors of wealthy Old World homes.

Today horsehair textiles are still available; although the horsehair comes mainly from China, the fabrics are still hand-woven in Europe. Before you give in and buy "more normal fabric," you may want to do a little research at www.horsehairfabrics.com.

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