

# San Francisco Chronicle

## Designer's equestrian-chic pied-à-terre in SF

By Allison McCarthy

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Photo: G CRAWFORD, Grey Crawford

Sheldon Harte and John Combs' one-bedroom apartment at the Four Seasons in S.F. makes shrewd use of space with a custom desk at the foot of the bed.

With his mother's sense of style and his father's background in landscape design, Sheldon Harte was destined to become a tastemaker from the start. The respected Southern California interior designer honed his collector's eye from an early age, when, in fits of boredom, he spent hours antiquing with his fashionable mother. This grew into a personal passion, and by the time Harte was in his 20s he had already begun to amass a sizable collection of his own. Now in his 50s, he also has the homes in which to feature his finds.

The designer's latest pet project, a pied-à-terre at the Four Seasons in San Francisco, was a highly personal one. A longtime resident of Laguna Beach (Orange County), Harte began making regular business trips to the Bay Area in 2012 for clients; his husband, John Combs, president of a real estate

company, was also traveling to San Francisco frequently for business. So it was a natural next step for the two to set down roots here.

“Some might call it kismet,” Harte says. The decision about the Four Seasons was an easy one for the couple, who always enjoyed the comforts of the hotel when in town for work. “Being centrally located was appealing, and the residences are great,” he says. “Plus, there’s a palpable pride of ownership in the apartments.”

The next decision, about how to decorate, was also an easy one. Combs, a competitive show jumper in his earlier days, had his heart set on a modern men’s club theme — both moody and masculine — with a good amount of equestrian fine art. Harte was happy to pull from his own extensive archive. The striking wooden starburst mirror above a French postal cabinet in the living room, the bust of a horse atop a pedestal, and the smattering of sculptures and figurines around the pied-à-terre are all pieces he has collected from his favorite shops over the years.

In Los Angeles, he turns to Lee Stanton Antiques, whose clientele includes celebrities such as Tom Ford and Ellen DeGeneres. “The French postal cabinet in the living room is one of the treasures we bought from Lee, and I fashioned the floor lamp next to the sofa out of an old gas canister I found there.” In Palm Springs, where the couple has a vacation home, Harte frequents Colin Fisher Studios and Palm Canyon Galleria. “This is where I find the surprises,” he says. “Hidden behind something, there will be a great find.” And here in San Francisco, Harte already claims Coup D’etat, C. Mariani Antiques and Candace Barnes as his favorites.

Equestrian references are everywhere: The focal point of the one-bedroom apartment is a collection of sepia-toned wild horse portraits by Kimerlee Curyl that Harte, who sits on the board of trustees of the Laguna Art Museum, and Combs first spotted at Los Angeles design event Legends of La Cienega a few years ago. The two were so smitten that they bought multiple pieces, which now make up a striking gallery wall above the sofa.

Harte deftly maneuvered around space constraints — the apartment is less than 1,000 square feet — by adding a custom desk with a hand-crackled linen-lacquer finish to the foot of the bed and installing shelving in the hallway to showcase Combs’ equine ephemera, along with framed black-and-white photos of Combs and his horses. A pocket door between the bedroom and living room (built by the previous tenant) opens sight lines from both rooms and makes the home feel twice as big.

Harte, not one for subtlety, carries the equine theme to every corner of this space, including a floor-to-ceiling ink sketch of the entry that Harte commissioned by Los Angeles artist Mark Willems. If ever there was a statement powder room, it’s here — where bold black leather floors and a Philippe Starck vanity are tempered with stallion-printed wall coverings of upholstered fabric by Spanish company Gastón y Daniela, a prominent textile house in Spain.



The living room is filled with the couple's collection of equestrian-inspired art, including portraits of horses by Kimerlee Curyl over the sofa.



Beneath a wooden starburst mirror, a French postal cabinet serves as the bar.



The powder room is covered with a large-scale stallion-print fabric.

Luxurious textures continue in the living room with embossed leather wing chairs in a crocodile pattern, a wool and angora wool Turkish Tulu rug, and Ron Dier rock crystal occasionals. Curious objects, such as old car parts by Mexican artist Feliciano Bejar, add a touch of whimsy. There's a sort of balanced tension here, also evidenced in the juxtaposition of natural materials with industrial elements. A polished nickel nightstand from Restoration Hardware is the perfect counterpoint to the worn wood pieces — driftwood sculptures and petrified wood coffee table — that Harte treasures. "I like the unexpected friction of mixing styles, combining smooth with rough," he says. "It really keeps things interesting."

Harte and Combs' life in the Bay Area is just starting. The Four Seasons place serves as a jumping-off point for the couple to explore the culture here, and friends are already planting the seeds for another purchase in nearby Wine Country. "Now that we have a home here, we can't wait to get to know the northern half of the state," Harte says of the place where he and his husband very well might retire.

#### **Tips from design leader Sheldon Harte**

Unify the space "When you're working with smaller spaces, it's best to keep the walls and ceilings the same color to tie everything together. Bold hues can make a statement, set a mood, and give the illusion that the area is larger than it actually is."

Decorating with a specific theme "Approach the theme with taste and have a little abandon. Just don't take it to the point where it feels silly and overdone."

Finding the perfect pieces "Be patient and go with your gut."

Blending different styles “Don’t be too safe. There’s already far too much formula decorating in this world. Try looking at things in a different way and create a bit of tension. If it really doesn’t work, your friends will tell you.”

Building an art or antique collection “Do your research, choose carefully (impulse purchases are a no-no), and buy what you love. If you’re not confident, talk to collectors. And if you’re buying as an investment, hire a good consultant.”

— *A.M.*