



MADE IN THE SOUTH

Mimi Cay grew up in Savannah, where
much of her home reflects personal
heritage and that of the region



Opening pages: Mimi Cay's home occupies a Spanish moss-draped lot in Savannah. Above: The focal point of a hall gallery is a mid-nineteenth-century gilded mirror, beneath which is a circa-1825 pier table with gilded swan supports. Right: Her dining room breakfront is filled with natural objects and those made to replicate elements of nature, including antique oyster plates, nautilus-shaped English spoon warmers, and real corals and barnacles.



When Cay first moved into the home with her family in 1990, she was exploring what she refers to as her "English house phase, which everyone was in then." A pair of 1930s chairs are upholstered in Donghia's Sabrina fabric in Saumon. The two mahogany cane-back chairs are circa 1830. The draperies are Colefax and Fowler. The Persian rug dates from 1890.



Above: Portraits are prominent elements in the living room, including one of the owner's father, circa 1970. The English black and gilt settee dates from 1815. Opposite: A portrait of a young woman fills a niche and is circumscribed by an antique English limed frame.



The dining room walls are painted with Farrow & Ball's Joa's White. The dining chairs, slipcovered in a Belgian linen with a green custom monogram, are grouped around the English mahogany Jupe table. A collection of seventeenth-century Dutch prints fills a wall. The pair of silver-plated English lamps is new; the chandelier is a nineteenth-century Russian piece.



Above: The master bedroom, cast in a golden glow from a ceiling treated with a Donghia tea paper, features a custom bed frame made of French Gothic gilded pieces, which once adorned an altar; bedding is Matouk. Draperies are Nancy Corzine, with Samuel & Sons trim. Right: The bedside table and walls are covered in a woven grass from Donghia.



MIMI CAY HAS a favorite designer she always turns to for inspiration and advice. This designer is always inventive and rarely lets her down. Nature is its name.

Throughout the many rooms of her Savannah home, situated among groves of oak trees bearded with Spanish moss, the work of her favorite designer is much in evidence. Shed antlers, barnacles, branches of colorful coral, sinuous seashells, deeply imprinted fossils, striped bird's feathers, inert hornets' nests, even snake skins. "I'm very interested in natural history and the design of natural elements is so pleasing and perfect," says the Savannah native who operates a high-end namesake antiques business. "Some people see some of these things in my home and are horrified, but I tend to like things that have character, are unusual, and have a story to tell."

Although the natural world certainly figures into her home, so, too, do some of the finest man-made objects and finishes. Antique mahogany chairs, elegant pier tables, English Regency settees, and silver-plated lamps appear alongside items fashioned by the elements. After living in the house for more than twenty-eight years and raising her five children there, every room has its own mood and character, but Cay insists that the look she achieved is more by accident than by plan.

"This house is always very popular on local tours by the decorative arts society, but this house was never decorated," she emphasizes. "We didn't move to this house from our 1850s house in Savannah's historic district with my deciding to decorate every room a certain way. This represents a layered accumulation over years."

While Cay's décor is the natural result of having lived and entertained in the house for years, she is careful with the details. She transformed the ceiling of the master bedroom with a Donghia gold-leaf tea paper, an effect she likens to being "in a golden treasure box." In the living room, deep red-hued velvets and oil portraits illuminated by painting lights, along with bookcases filled with volumes documenting the architecture of the American South, make for a space evocative of an English manor house. "When we first built the house, I was deep into my English house phase," she says, "and I was trying to establish an English country house feel."

Just as Cay has a penchant for living with old, indeed sometimes prehistoric natural items, so, too, does she have

an eye for vintage materials and furnishings. "I like old fabrics," she admits, "and when I find ones I like, I use them. If and when I find something better, I do an upgrade. But I've never been one to take a room and say, 'Okay, here's the carpet I'll buy, the colors I'll use on the walls, the furniture to bring in.' It's never a *fait accompli*."

As an antiques dealer who travels the world for pleasure and for her business, Cay accumulates things—furnishings, objects, artworks. Her collections, displayed in vitrines and hung on the walls, result from her stated desire to live with beautiful things. "You purchase one thing and it leads to another and then you investigate that new item which leads you to another kind of object. Soon you have a collection."

Where she once hosted animated cocktail parties in the home, with guests sampling, in classic Savannah buffet tradition, oysters, crab, and other local delicacies at the dining room table, Cay's most frequent guests now are her children and nine grandchildren. "The house has evolved into being a place for my family now," she says, with the grandchildren making good use of the property's access to the woods and river.

While every room is a dense assemblage of natural and fine objects, along with striking artworks and objects, no place feels cluttered. When asked how she accomplishes this, Cay says, with humor, "My children would not agree with that assessment. Tell that to them—that I don't have too much stuff! I do think though, that as I've gotten older, I want to be more minimalist. If I had to do it all over again, I think I would build a modern house. I like the process of editing, of paring down, of removing layers."

As a native and lifelong resident of Savannah, Cay is proud to be so deeply connected to the city's history and geography. Indeed, many of the natural elements found in the home were gathered on local beaches and terrain. "I am always reminding myself that I already have x number of things and that I don't need any more. But I like to look at beautiful things and when I find an object, a furnishing, something natural that I think needs to be seen, I buy it. Something pleasing to the eye is hard to resist. You want to live with it." ■

Mimi Cay travels frequently to France, where she finds many of the antiques she sells through her namesake business. Here she pauses in a Provençal garden.

*"I don't arrange collections
so much as I rearrange them."*
—Mimi Cay

