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A DISCIPLE OF FRENCH PAINTING RESURRECTS AN ABANDONED CHURCH AS A COLORFUL HOME AND STUDIO.

faithful conversion

Artists see things differently. So friends weren't really surprised, just concerned, when impressionist painter Marlee Brown Musser announced she was going to buy a rundown old church in Harbor Springs, Michigan, and convert it into a home and studio. Vacant for 20 years, "it was just a big, open building with hardly any electricity or plumbing," Marlee recalls. Friends saw nothing but trouble. Marlee saw a blank canvas. She saw potential and a challenge, she says, "to make it look and feel like an old barn in the south of France."

Impressionists deal in splashes of color and light. Marlee took the same technique and transferred it to a new type of canvas. And this canvas is large. The scale of the work appealed to Marlee immediately. She'd been looking for a place big enough to display her paintings—"someplace that could be turned into a wide open space with good northern light, and where I could somehow bring in nature."

Northern light, with all its soft, reflected glory, now floods in from four skylights cut into the cathedral ceiling and from three French doors across the back of the house—the doors had to be French, like so many of the home's delicate grace notes. France has shaped Marlee's art and now her home.

"I studied in France, and fell in love with the French impressionist masters," she says. "They've been the biggest influence on my work." Her favorite was Claude Monet, who devoted his later years to creating a colorful Eden in the gardens of Giverny, his French country home.

Her visit to Giverny left a lasting impression on Marlee. "It was an old mill house with unusual open spaces, which Monet turned into his home," she says. So converting the old church fit her idea of how a home should grow.

In addition to Monet, Marlee took inspiration and encouragement from her father, Paul Brown, and from architect Doug Wright.

"The design and the decisions were hers," says Wright, whose initial look at

Top: Gently arched casement windows put a relaxed countenance on a building that had stared blankly for years through its small, double-hung originals. Homeowner Marlee Brown Musser designed the curved-oak shutters to reflect "the thickness and heft of shutters that would be on an old French house." The venerable structure was once a church. **Bottom right and left:** Landscape designer Deborah Silver contrived the whimsical fencing from copper wiring and tubing, curly willow, and cedar posts. Finials of copper grounding wire were inspired by the topknot hairstyle Marlee often wears. The style occurred to her in a dream, Silver says. **Bottom center:** Homeowners Marlee Brown Musser and Dan Musser

BY LARRY ERICKSON • PHOTOGRAPHY BY BILL HOLT

Above: A private back courtyard, with steps to a balcony off the loft, reinforces the French country character of the Mussers' house. **Right:** Marlee's landscape paintings inspired great-room walls she painted "the natural color of the outdoors." The wooden floor was excavated from beneath generations of sheet coverings. Whitewash on a grid pattern gives it vitality. Large painted baseboards are recycled floorboards from the former attic. The attic was reconfigured into a sleeping loft, visible at the top of the photo.

the house confirmed Marlee's hopes: The structure was straight and strong. "It was a very simple building," Wright says, "but something that a creative mind could really transform."

Marlee was both the creative force and much of the physical force behind that dramatic transformation. She was at various times the job's architect, contractor, and interior designer—even her own truck driver. But, after all, an artist seldom shares her canvas with anyone else. Art is the process of revealing a personal vision.

Outside, Marlee used color and texture to alter the old building's identity. Rigid rows of stark white clapboards were replaced by vertical board-and-batten siding that Marlee describes as "simple and more barnlike." Windows topped with





Above: Across the great-room walls, Marlee's landscapes create windows to another world. Patrons of her art include Hillary Rodham Clinton, who purchased one of her paintings for the White House. **Left:** The wrought-iron railing was designed by Marlee, who adapted the motif from the carved panels of her French doors. The Victorian sofas were discovered hiding under gold velvet upholstery in an antiques shop.

gentle arches are framed by the rolling shapes of form-fitting oak shutters. Sunny shades of peach and yellow give the old form a new radiance. Completing the French-country transformation, window boxes erupt in summer blossoms, and vines in the yard recall the wine country of Bordeaux.

Inside, Marlee sought to give her home new character without breaking faith with its historic role. She even added subtly to the religious motif. In the dining area, for example, a formerly squared-off entryway has been reshaped as a Gothic arch, echoing a newly installed, antique stained-glass window.

"I didn't want to lose the sense that this building was once a church," Marlee says.

Structurally, she tore out most of an old attic to create a 20-foot-high cathedral ceiling. The remaining attic area—about a third of the original space—became a loft that complements the character of the old church and features a heavenly view of the

> I don't like things that look too new. That made most of the people who worked on the project kind of crazy.
>
> —Marlee Brown Musser

great-room below. It was created in response to a higher calling: "I had planned to put my bedroom into the basement," Marlee says, "but my dad climbed up a ladder through the hatch of the attic and saw that it had a little more room than most attics do. It was his idea to locate the bedroom there."

The attic's original flooring, rough-cut 2x10 cedar planks, was used to make baseboards, other moldings, and window sills, and to frame the new stairway that climbs to the loft.

Preserving an aura of antiquity was important to both the new French-country barn image as well as to the legacy of the old church, although the vintage focus of Marlee's vision was sometimes hard to impart to others. "I don't like things that look too new," she says. "That made most of the people who worked on the project kind of crazy."

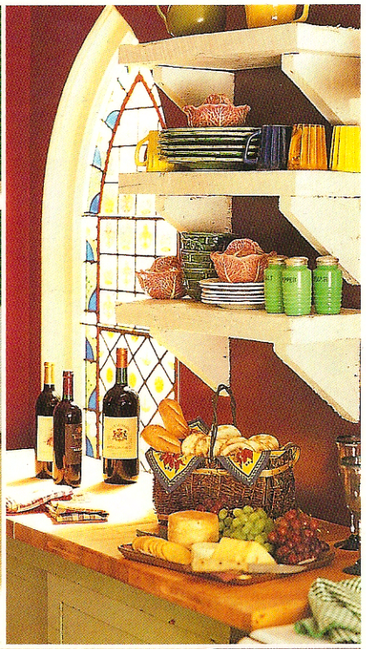
But artists can't be swayed by critics. Marlee stayed true to her colors and her vision. She worked to find new uses for old spaces rather than enclosing new spaces. A room that had been a parson's office, for instance, became Marlee's kitchen. "Everyone, including my dad, wanted me to do a nice, new kitchen," she says. "But I wanted it to look like an old place with lots of character."

Character can come from many sources—deep introspection, the vivid colors of the world around you, and sometimes even from deep in rummage heaps. Marlee found her refrigerator for $50 at a yard sale and the sink and oven were salvaged from a kitchen in the church basement. Her table and benches were commissioned, their style borrowed from favorites at the family's old lakeside cabin. Their color, however, is pure Marlee.

Throughout her home, Marlee deploys color like Monet raised flowers—in brilliant abundance. The house vibrates with crayonlike shades such as the cornflower blue of the foyer and the deep plum of the kitchen. The great-room isn't just green, it is "the natural color of the outdoors," Marlee says. And like Monet, Marlee mixed the green and plum shades with oils on her studio palette and took samples to house-paint stores challenge to match them in wall colors.

More like archaeologists than artists, Marlee and her craftsmen used ice picks to excavate her floors, hacking away layers of heavy old tile. Eventually they reached a hardwood surface they could sand and stain. The resultant floor, once







Opposite: An antique stained-glass window added to the kitchen recalls the building's roots but also serves the house well, admitting light while maintaining privacy between close-set neighbors. The doorway was reconstructed to echo the window's Gothic arch. **Top left:** In the kitchen, a splash of chartreuse paint energized a tired old sink retrieved from the church basement. **Top right:** Chunky shelving in the kitchen was once attic flooring. **Above:** Marlee overruled advice to build a modern kitchen. "I wanted it to look like an old place with lots of character," she says. Her refrigerator and stove are a couple of old characters—one resurrected from the church basement, the other from a yard sale.





Left: The loft's antique iron bed was found with the help of Marlee's sister, Lynn Brown, who works for a Manhattan antiques shop. The wrought-iron railing that started at the base of the stairs continues here along the rim of the loft. **Above:** Creating a dormer in the attic roof permitted a small bathroom. Marlee's aim was to make the bathroom appear old, so she styled it with a garage sale dressing table and and mirrors made with gilded moldings from her picture frame source. She found a small sink at a local yard sale and painted the bottom a quirky but soothing mint green.

a diamond in the rough, is now a whole series of polished gems. Marlee envisioned a sweeping diamond pattern, with one diamond directly under a central light fixture. After some calculation by her floor finisher, a grid of 2½-foot diamonds took shape. Diagonal lines were snapped with a well-chalked cord and lightly colored. The translucent, whitewashed effect was achieved by adding thinner to white paint.

The floor's diamond pattern is the perfect metaphor for Marlee's gem of a home. And like any good jewel, it has multiple facets: home and studio, church and barn, art and architecture, solo and group project. Surely there were times, during its 20-year vacancy, when neighbors thought the old building didn't have a prayer. But it was everything Marlee wanted, and she was everything it needed.

And *that* is a match made in heaven. ❑

Regional Editor: Suzy Farbman

For more information, see the Buying Guide on page 106.

BUYING GUIDE Continued from page 107



page 82 Faithful Conversion

Consulting architect—Douglas Wright, AIA, Douglas Wright Architect, 322 Bay St., Petosky, MI 49770; 616/347-1030. Landscape architect—Deborah Silver, Deborah Silver & Co., 1794 Pontiac Dr., Sylvan Lake, MI 48320; 810/363-3843.

Page 83 (exterior): Doors and arched windows—Weathershield; 800477-6808. Shutters—Pat Obeshaw; 616/548-5123. Copper wire and tubing and curly willow fence—Deborah Silver & Co.; 810/363-3843. Great Lakes split face cultured stone siding—Stone Products; 800/225-7462. White vinyl frame and muntins for lower windows—Signs of the Times; 616/348-3874. Asphalt roofing shingles—Owens-Corning; 419/248-8000..

Pages 84–85 (terrace): Provence blue cotton tablecloth, 70x70 inches—Williams-Sonoma; 800/541-2233. Chippen-dale-style wrought iron chairs—L'Esprit; 616/761-8160. Aluminum sconces with verdigris finish—Jefferson Art Lighting; 313/761-8160. **Large photo right:** Rio plaid cotton napkins #7089694009 yellow—Bed, Bath & Beyond; 201/379-1520.

Pages 86–87 (stairway): Iron railing with fleur-de-lis design—Greenwell Machine; 616/347-3346. Victorian loveseats—Town & Country Antiques; 616/539-8340. Blue-and-white fabric #9849.70, Signe de Neptune, on loveseats—Nobilis; 908/464-1177. Wire basket holding magazines—Perlmutter & Freiwald; 810/6626-8823. **Photo right:** Oil paintings—Oil Paintings by Marlee; 616/526-5266. Pine table—Joie De Vie; 616/347-1400. Gilt picture frames—Jerry's Artarama; 800/827-8478. Floor treatment—Shannon Reynolds; 616/547-0389.

Pages 88–89 (dining area): Black painted trestle base for table—Shannon Reynolds; 616/547-0389. Wrought iron chairs—Pier 1; 817/878-8000. White duck cushions trimmed in gold rope—Decorator's Pointe; 517/347-2555. Carved fleur-de-lis panels inset into lower section of doors—Pat Obeshaw; 616/548-5123. **Toward kitchen, all photos:** Napkin in bread basket, 8-quart copper casserole, and green gingham stripe dish towels—Williams-Sonoma; 800/541-2233. Gothic stained glass window—Town & Country Antiques; 616/539-8340. Pink cabbage bowls—Horchow; 800/456-7000. Coffee cups, green salt and pepper shakers, and green Majolica plates—Pier 1; 817/878-8000. Renatta tea kettle—Bed, Bath & Beyond; 201/379-1520.

Pages 90–91 (sleeping loft): Iron bed—Alice's Antiques; 212/966-6867. Designers' Guild blue-and-white bed linens—Horchow; 800/456-7000. Antique quilt on foot of bed—pooter olooms; 616/526-6101. Green-and-white fabric on armchair #L200-4, Pagoda Plaid—Carlton Varney; 212/758-2810. **Bathroom, photo right:** White terry cloth towel with sage green trim—Henri Bendel; 212/247-1100. Indulge bath towel— Bed, Bath & Beyond; 201/379-1520. Gilt frames on mirrors—Jerry's Artarama; 800/827-8478. Wooden shelf over sink—Hold Everthing; 800/ 421-2264. Soaps—Joie De Vie; 616/347-1400.

page 92 The Gardener's Folly

Landscape design—Conni Cross, Environmentals, Box 730, Cutchogue, NY 11935; 516/734-6874.

page 98 Balancing Act

Architect—Robert Orr, Robert Orr & Associates, 441 Chapel St., New Haven, CT 06511; 203-777-3387.

Pages 98–99 (exterior, photo left): Stone planters—United Housewrecking; 203/348-5371. Wicker Chairs—Pier 1; 818/878-8000.

Pages 100–101 (family room, photo left): Sofa fabric—Kravet; 516/293-3000. Fireplace fender—Madeline West Antiques; 203/2634604. **Dining room, bottom photo:** Carpet—Michael Trapp Antiques; 860/672-6098. China—United Housewrecking; 203/348-5371. Chandelier—Lampshades Plus; 203/795-6628. **Hallway, right photo:** Urns, mirror, and crystal chandelier—Michael Trapp Antiques; 860/672-6098. Hall carpet—Hamrah's Carpet; 203/266-4343. Crystal sconces—Grass Roots Antiques; 203/263-3983. Antique chairs—Mill House Antiques; 203/263-3446.

Pages 102–103 (kitchen, photo right): Table and chairs—Monique Shay Antiques; 203/263-3186. ❑