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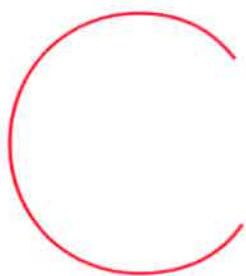
HOW L.A. TASTEMAKER CLIFF FONG BECAME A FORCE
IN THE GROWING DESIGN EMPIRE OF ELLEN DEGENERES

BY
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AESTHETE

An antique family-heirloom secretary stands in the master bedroom of Fong's home. Opposite: The designer in his studio. For details, see page 152.



Cliff Fong is the ultimate design insider. He knows Los Angeles real estate intimately, so ten years ago during his own house-hunting venture, when he got wind that the 1927 French Normandy-style building in which he had rented an apartment with roommates during his college years was going condo, he jumped. Not only did the interior designer end up buying an apartment at an insider's price, but that apartment is right above the one that he loved so much as a student. The building, in L.A.'s Wilshire Center, is adjacent to Koreatown and Hancock Park, where he previously had rented a house. Here he has the best of all worlds: a 4,000-square-foot space that includes access to a rooftop patio.

Fong's career in design is not exactly accidental, but you could say that it has evolved organically. Born in New York City, he grew up in a large American Craftsman house in Wyoming County in upstate New York. Fong was fascinated with marine biology as a teen and traveled around Europe before attending California State University, Los Angeles, where he studied art history. His aesthetic antennae emerged at an early age.

"My first memories of design were being in Cape Cod in one of those post-and-beam-construction houses, and I remember sitting on an Eames 670 lounge chair," he says. "I might have been five or six, and I thought, How cool is this?"

Cool defines Fong's *métier*. He started in fashion as a salesperson at Fred Segal in L.A. and later became a buyer for Maxfield, traveling to Paris, where he bought his first Prouvé and





Artwork by Eddie Martinez hangs over a custom bed from Sanctuary Boutique Home in the master bedroom, above. In the dining room, below, vintage Børge Mogensen chairs surround a Knoll table from JF Chen. Right: Fong's Great Dane in the hallway



Hans Wegner chairs. And then, 16 years ago, after he had left his job at Maxfield and was taking time off (to be, he says, “a beach bum after a very career-focused existence”), a friend asked him to house-sit and do a little redecorating while she was away. “When she came back, she really liked it,” he says. “That friend happened to be Ellen”—DeGeneres—“and now we’ve done over 20 homes together.”

His signature is evident in DeGeneres’s 2015 book, *Home*, which features many of their projects. “I don’t think I’m a decorator in the classic sense,” Fong says, “and I don’t think I have ever approached my work in a formal sense. I usually start with the space’s inherent design identity and build around it, but I won’t ever create something that is so fussy or precious that it doesn’t feel comfortable and warm and embracing.” Fong’s own apartment proves that his philosophy results in a timeless elegance that welcomes friends and canines alike, especially his three dogs.

His spacious living room is painted a pale pearl gray, with its original moldings and fireplace surround painted white.

The apartment’s decor includes that Prouvé Standard chair he found in a Paris flea market. “I’m rarely on the hunt for anything specific,” he says. It’s more about what catches his eye: sconces found in Rome, a painting bought in Budapest, and “bits and pieces of family heirlooms and gifts from friends.”

His apartment also proves that furniture from different periods can mingle harmoniously. His tastes range from Gustavian antiques and midcentury French furniture to American primitive and African tribal artifacts. “The mix is always where I have the most fun,” he says, adding that in his space he took his cues from the building’s European influences. “I furnished it slowly over the years, bringing items home from various travels but of course also by shopping in L.A. through my own showroom, Galerie Half, as well as other favorites such as JF Chen, J. Ilouliau Rugs, and Woven Accents.”

Recently his life took a joyous turn. A new father, Fong has been on the prowl for larger digs with more green space. Starting over again with a home doesn’t faze him. “My environments tend to be a little bit loose and detached,” he says. “My great hope is that I can come and go. I do my job and maybe people won’t really know I was there.” ♦



The living room features a Pierre Guariche cabinet and Carlo Mollino chairs, all vintage.