The bay window—a focal point in this Northern California living room—seemed to call for furniture arranged according to classical ideas of symmetry. But designer Myra Hoefer breaks up the pairs with different Brancusi-esque side tables, from West Elm, for more interest. She had the antique claw-foot coffee table and the pedestals for the vintage French torchères lacquered in white to match. The 13-foot sofa is slipcovered in Romo Esina linen; the Louis XV–style chairs are covered in Summer Hill's La Donna.

WIDE-OPEN SPACES

TAMING THE GREAT ROOM

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House Beautiful

Interior design by MYRA HOEFER   *Interview by* CHRISTINE PITTEL   *Photographs by* FRANCESCO LAGNESE

CHRISTINE PITTEL: You've blended California ease and French elegance so effortlessly.

MYRA HOEFER: It's an open, casual house to begin with, and my first take on it was that everything should be white. So we painted the whole place out, the color of bones. Then we furnished it in a modern, monochromatic way, very soft and subtle, with lots of pieces we bought in France.

Why were you so set on white?

We had plenty of things to give it soul and character, and I wanted the backdrop to be clean—a clean, chalky white that looks as if it could come off in your hands, like powdered sugar on a cake. It has layers of depth, which gives it a lot of movement and a little mystery.

The living room, dining room, and entry are all one big space. *Really* **big. You could feel dwarfed here.**

But you don't, because when you enter the room you can touch the arm of a chair or the top of a table, and that's a really sexy thing to do. It gives you a feeling of safety. Nothing's pushed against a wall. The furniture comes to you. And there are a few great big pieces to ground the space, like the 13-foot sofa in the bay window and the armoire in the dining room.

Those overscale pieces make me think of Michael Taylor, who basically defined the California casual look.

Oh, he's a big influence on me, and on so many other people. He had a wonderful way of mixing fine antiques with contemporary pieces that looked so fresh and modern.

You can clearly see that here. In the great room, you have a Napoleonic mirror, cast-resin tables, Louis XV bergères, molded plastic chairs. How does that all fit together?

It has a lot to do with color, and keeping to that ivory and caramel and stone-gray palette. If I brought in something red, it would be jarring, just awful, even if the piece was good. It would knock it all off balance.

But isn't it also about the balance of rough and refined? Like how you juxtaposed the fluted torchères with that big lamp that looks like stone.

ABOVE: The butterflies alighting on the walls and ceiling are an art piece made from salvaged beer cans, by Paul Villinski. OPPOSITE: The Louis XV–style bergères are new, not old, made in France "with big, wide seats," Hoefer says. "Nothing silly." Then she brings in accessories like that stool, "which is like adding some great pieces of jewelry." The fireplace is faced in plaster mixed with marble dust, to add depth and texture. Antique candelabra have "my kind of finish—anything that has aged in a wonderful way. So easy on the eye." Sculpture by Dan Corbin.

It is stone—from the carved gatepost of a château. Those are sorcerer's balls, to fend off evil spirits, and they still have bits of dried moss on them. You need some nature in a room, e ecially if it has a white background, so it doesn't get too cold. And textures like the jute rug and the stone-colored linen on the love seats take the bergères down a peg, so they don't feel so formal.

You got me with the butterflies.

I can't take credit for those. They're part of the owner's art collection. I love the way they're hung, as if they're in flight. They draw your eye to the window and the garden.

What's that heroic column doing in the middle of the room?

Another eye-catcher, isn't it? It was originally just a wooden post, like something from a barn. We couldn't remove it, so basically we made it sculpture…or a pole for the biggest pole dancers around! If you have a pillar in the middle of a room, you'd better make it a big statement.

Talk about turning a negative into a positive!

Absolutely. We beefed it up and classicized it like a column from the Paris opera house. I was going to do an Italian marble finish like the fireplace, but then I thought, 'No—it should be high-gloss white.'

You use lots of high gloss. Why?

It's elegant, first, and practical, second, for wiping down. I use it on things people will touch.

Did you also redesign the fireplace?

Yes. It was jigging and jagging with all kinds of brick. We simplified it and brought it right up to the ceiling to create height in the room.

As if you needed any more.

You always need more height! For me, a room can never be too high. It emanates grandeur.

That mantelscape is a brilliant lesson in design—the repetition, the shapes, the arrangement.

You know, whoever was emptying the boxes just stuck those books up there, and it was so perfect, we left it.

You mean it was serendipity?

Well, I was lurking around, and if it had looked awful, I would have made it go away. But it was a good place for the books to end up, given their parchment color. And the candelabra are their soulmates, all caramel and gold.

You always do the best pillows. What's the secret?

Scale! I hate tiny little pillows. Don't put 'em there! I love a big, big pillow, filled tight enough to stand up and look pretty but loose enough to snuggle into. You don't put it at your back; you put it at your side and it becomes your armrest, your little island. If you're conversing, you're not knocking knees together. You can lean over and talk and even share a pillow if it's big enough for two elbows.

Some of the furniture—the dining chairs, the barstools, the coffee table—looks as if it might just up and trot off.

I'm in love with anything that has feet! The lions' legs on the chairs were inspired by another legendary California designer, John Dickinson, who created the most wonderful, whimsical animal-legged furniture. You need a little eccentricity.