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THE WORLD OF KITCHENS & BATHROOMS





THE VIPER ROOM

When a couple in San Francisco wanted to honour their house's role in the free-love era, the re-vamp of the interior, driven by Nicole Hollis, took many twists and turns. Not least when artist David Wiseman remade the powder room as an onyx-and-gold-leaf nest of bronze, peaceful, hippie hippie snakes. Carly Olson marvels at the scale of the triumph. Photography: Douglas Friedman

PERHAPS it seems natural that a house in Haight-Ashbury, the once-upon-a-time hippie enclave in San Francisco, would possess a powder room that writhes with snakes. After all, the Age of Aquarius echoed Art Nouveau decadence in more ways than one, from the embrace of sinuous typography to the exploration of various mind-altering pharmaceuticals. This particular ophidian environment, though, is of recent vintage, a magical snake pit conjured behind an old-money façade.

Interior designer Nicole Hollis oversaw a five-year renovation of the property, which is owned by a couple with two young children. That included several outside-the-box commissions that the clients hoped would honour the psychedelic past of the build-

ing, a late-19th-century mansion that architect Edward J. Vogel designed for a member of the Spreckels sugar dynasty. What fascinated Hollis's clients was a period in the mid-1960s when the attic ballroom served as Buena Vista Studios and saw the Grateful Dead record some of the group's earliest tracks. They had admired the house from afar long before they held the keys, though, and not just because of the celebrity associations. It is a San Francisco landmark, part Queen Anne, part Colonial Revival, and notable for the wreaths and foliage that swag the entablature and front porch. Smitten, they wrote the previous owner what was essentially a love letter: should the house ever be offered for sale, they were ready to buy. Eventually, it was, and swiftly, they did.

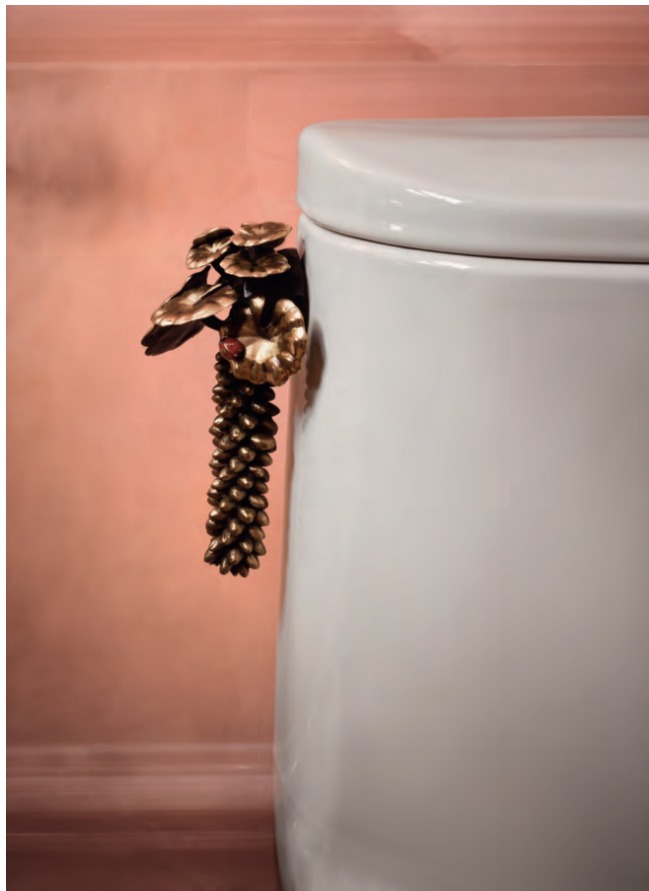


Opposite: creating the 3D snakes was a technical feat – and a first – for Wiseman. This page: such imaginative pieces reflect his signature whimsy, yet are practical. Instead of traditional wall sconces, the mirror is embedded with glowing crystals

Breathing new life into a historic home requires confidence, care and an ability to not only see the big picture but also to be keenly aware of every small detail. 'I kind of see myself as a conductor of a symphony,' Hollis says. 'It's about gathering great craftsmen and fabricators and, of course, artists – and pulling them all together.' For the powder room on the primary floor, she tapped Los Angeles designer and artist David Wiseman, known for his lyrical bronze metalwork, to devise a total environment. She suspected that Wiseman and the clients would click, given their mutual fascination with fungi and crystals, if not for their shared love of music. One studio visit later, the couple were entranced by Wiseman's wonderfully ornamental creations. Twisting chandeliers bloom with glowing porcelain flowers. Sculpted vines that frame a chimney-piece mirror break free to crawl across a ceiling. A golden table emulates the nest of a bowerbird. Wiseman got the assignment.

Though fascinated by the marble-clad bathrooms that were fashionable around the time their house was built, the clients wanted the powder room to be a modern, colourful twist. Hollis would sheathe the walls in boldly veined rose-pink onyx – the cornice, skirting boards, basin and counter are carved from the same stone – and sheltered them beneath a ceiling shimmering with gold leaf. Thanks to the quality of the stone as well as some strategic concealed lighting, the space appears to be illuminated from within.

Now for the snakes. Before that studio visit, Wiseman had already begun experimenting with ophidian forms, namely looping serpents with tessellated backs. When his studio shut down for a Christmas holiday, Wiseman explored the idea further by sculpting a massive serpent with scales that incorporated motifs taken from sources as disparate as Indian architecture and Japanese kimonos. He counted himself lucky if he could produce an



inch of snake a day; ultimately, it would stretch to over two metres in length. 'It had so much power to me, and I think they could feel it, too,' Wiseman says of the clients. They loved the serpent so much, in fact, that they asked him to invent a universe of slithery objects: a mirror, a ceiling fixture, a screen, a towel tray, a flush handle and a loo-paper holder. The mirror and ceiling fixture are bedecked with illuminated rock crystals, which cast a glow across the slightly translucent onyx. Imagine an otherworldly realm pulled from the pages of a tripped-out storybook that was written by an author who happened to be sipping absinthe at the time.

The Haight-Ashbury commission represents a new chapter for Wiseman, who worked colour as well as three-dimensional snakes into his oeuvre for the first time. The process was new too. To create the pieces, Wiseman scanned his pattern drawings into a computer program to digitise them and then used a 3D printer to produce segments of snakes covered in motifs. Next came the making of moulds, which he used to cast the works in bronze. 'There's still an incredible amount of handiwork, but the process allowed me to create patterns that would not have been possible by hand.'

From start to finish, the serpentine suite took more than two years to execute. Crafting three-dimensional forms proved to be a challenge, as was concocting a resin that would reproduce the colour gradations. But the striking results – and relationship forged between artist and clients – were worth the effort. Since the powder room is situated on the main floor, the clients know that it will be getting a lot of use and, everyone hopes, a lot of admiration. 'It's whimsical and fantastical,' Hollis says, adding with a laugh, 'I hope it doesn't scare the kids' ■

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Opposite, top: the lavatory's flush is formed from a ladybird perching on trumpet-like flowers. Bottom: crystals of Lemurian quartz, sourced by Wiseman from Brazil, illuminate the chandelier. This page: in the top left, glass-enamelled turkey tail mushrooms adorn the mirror's twisting branches

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THE WORLD OF INTERIORS

