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### **Simplicity Itself**

\* No flashy prints or stuffy chintz for Barbara Barry. In her world, serenity reigns.

Series: Designing L.A.: First of Two Parts. Tomorrow: A look at five up-and-coming designers who are energizing the L.A. scene.

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Los Angeles Times Wednesday March 18, 1998  
Home Edition Life & Style Part E Page 1 View Desk  
56 inches; 1999 words  
Type of Material: Top Story

When confronted with the awesome job of designing the opening-night parties for the new Getty Center, Barbara Barry toured the museum, and the direction became clear: burlap tablecloths and wooden plates. "It had to be humble," recalls the rising L.A. designer, whose serene sensibility is influencing the homes and offices of the upper echelon here and abroad.

Before former Getty CEO Harold Williams, whose home Barry had done, hired her for the job, plans for the evening were heading in a predictable way: white dishes on white tablecloths with white roses. "It was going to look like a big wedding," says Barry, who instead accented the burlap-draped tables with simple green garlands of baby eucalyptus and succulents, terra-cotta-colored roses (it was Christmastime) and decorative platters of dark stained oak. She lit quartz halogen lamps that worked with the travertine walls to create the feel of an old cave. And with that, this back-to-basics designer set the stage for one of the most magnificent parties in city history.

And it was signature Barry.

"I don't care about the pedigree or provenance of a piece. I just care that it's handsome and that it delights my eye," says the 44-year-old, whose eye will earn her the Lifetime Achievement Award in Interior Design on Thursday during the WestWeek convention at the Pacific Design Center. The honor, bestowed by industry peers, puts her in the company of such design luminaries as Rose Tarlow and Architectural Digest editor Paige Rense, and architects Richard Meier and Frank Gehry.

"Barbara represents what people are looking for today," says Louis

Gropp, editor in chief of House Beautiful magazine, "a quality of life where people pamper themselves in an understated way."

"Her look is very much the design of the '90s, subtle and controlled," says Joyce MacRae, former West Coast editor for House & Garden magazine and now a consultant. "She blends classic with contemporary and does it very well."

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For her part, Barry prefers to be pegged as timeless. Typically, her rooms combine high modernism with 18th century Europe and a heavy dose of '30s and '40s French minimalism. No cabbage rose prints or overstuffed chintz sofas here. Her style tends toward the monochromatic--it's clean, unfettered and very much the antidote to frenzy. If any quality shouts, it's restraint. The loudest detail might be a vase of white tulips.

Sitting in her Pico Boulevard office, decorated in shades of her favorite pond-scum green and complex browns, Barry serves unadulterated water in a clear glass on a silver tray. Dressed in a brandy-colored suede jacket, adorned with a simple scarf and pearls, her own classic look meshes with her rooms'.

"If I had to be a note in music, I'd want to be very soft and serene. We live in a world that's beyond chaotic. Noise, traffic, billboards, magazines, TV constantly bombard us. Our homes are the only place we can really control our surroundings. They must be a sanctuary. If you make a lot of simple choices, that becomes a radical idea that in the end becomes restrained and tranquil. If you make a lot of radical choices, which is easy because they are seductive--the swiggly lamp, the beautiful chintz fabric, the painted cupboards, the heavy patina--they overwhelm. My overriding vision is simple, simple, simple, so in the end, the accumulation of these choices works in a harmonious way."

For Barry client Nicole David, who represents theatrical talent for the William Morris Agency, that's what her Marina del Rey home represents: "I'm in a stressful profession, but because of the way Barbara's decorated the house, I'm happy and peaceful every time I walk in." She notes that Barry has a rare gift. "Some people are competent; some are excellent; and some God has blessed with an extra something you can't learn. I see it in actors all the time. Barbara has that magic."

Some of her colleagues, however, aren't as generous. "She's been in design 12 years, what's this Lifetime Achievement Award?" sniffs one leading L.A. designer who asked not to be named. Although her contemporaries in the hothouse design world don't deny her ability,

dedication and disarming charm, some are suspicious or envious. For one, they suspect a big PR effort is behind her having her work in so many shelter publications. (Not the case, she insists.) Others have trouble with the fact that she's not formally trained. (A fact she doesn't hide.)

Her success has allowed her to build a staff of 20--an empire by design firm standards--since starting Barbara Barry Inc. in 1985. With her staff, Barry creates ambience for elite clients ranging from real estate magnate Eli Broad to musician Glenn Frey to retailer Brooks Brothers. Projects reach well beyond Los Angeles to include homes from Maui to Connecticut, Paris to the Bahamas. Another division designs products, and a third offers home accessories. Among the products she's designed include pieces she's licensed to other manufacturers, including furniture for Baker, plumbing fixtures for Kohler, patterned rugs for Tufenkian and, most recently, a crystal piece for Baccarat. As she says, "I design what I can't find." Industry insiders consider that one of her great strengths--her ability to conceive and market new products.

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A sort of Left Coast Martha Stewart--equally maniacal about detail and control--Barry takes pride in the fact that she's frequently knocked off. "It means what I've designed has trickled down and people needed it." She hopes her latest launch, Barbara Barry Home, will inspire similar enthusiasm. An exclusive home accessories store, BB Home is where only her clients can acquire towels, sheeting, dishes and tips on the art of living to finish their Barryfied homes. "I hated to see the kitchen look perfect and the dishes all wrong," she says.

It also distresses her to see the hostesses in her \$100,000 kitchens not know how to make a proper cup of tea. So that, too, they learn at BB Home. "You never hand someone a mug of water with a tea bag in it that has just come out of the microwave. That is not a gracious act."

What is gracious is slowing down, bowing to the acts of daily life. "When someone makes you a perfect cup of tea, you know it. Love goes into it. Or when they make up a guest room where they're offering crispy sheets, thirsty thick towels, the right sachets and soaps, it's an honor."

At heart, it's a style so simple it seems impossibly sensible (unless you have other things to do besides ironing the creases in your linen luncheon napkins).

A clutter buster of the highest order, Barry concedes that our culture is one that acquires. "Believe me I'm no monk. I buy things all the time.

But to avoid visual clutter, you have to edit and rotate. Put things you like away, then revisit them and see them anew." She believes we should not only pare down, but also design for the daily acts of life. "That's the problem with the beautiful homes in shelter magazines. They never show the mail, the kids, the dog."

Instead of letting the mail become unsightly--get a beautiful porcelain bowl to put it in every day. Set out a silver tray for your keys. "I get very excited about sheets," she says, speaking of daily acts. "If I can come home from a long flight and climb into a freshly ironed, crispy bed, I feel like a princess." In everything you do, she reiterates, honor your daily acts.

Although her touchstones have always been beauty and order, her execution of those themes has evolved over the years to render increasingly less decorated interiors. "When we don't have a lot, we tend to think we need things, and we think we need what they mean and say. But as we evolve our spirit, we need less, therefore the meaning in what we do choose is more meaningful. That's how I'm feeling about life. So it's a little bit about less."

### **In Matters of Beauty, Mother Knew Best**

Barry traces her love of beauty to her mother, and her love of order, inadvertently, to her sisters.

The third child of an insurance man and a painter, Barry was born in Oakland and raised in Long Beach. Her father wasn't present much in her life, and her parents divorced when she was 9. "My mother's surroundings always mattered to her. She put things together in an elegant way. And she loved to change the slipcovers, the drapes, the color on the wall. She's a closet decorator." Barry says with some regret that her mother didn't get to realize her gifts, "largely because after her divorce she worked every job she could raising four daughters in the '50s, a time that was not about emancipation."

Out of watching her mother struggle and sacrifice her talents came a drive to be successful, to write her own ticket and to forgo children, "though I'm a terrific aunt." Still close to her sisters, Barry vividly remembers the chaos of sharing one room with them. In recalling one of her early attempts at order, she remembers sorting towels. Because towels didn't come in many colors, her mother used to buy white ones and dye them purple. As the towels faded from washings, Barbara would perfectly fold and stack them from darkest eggplant to lightest lavender. "It's a curse," she laughs, "I'm obsessed with order."

Which is why today she buys products she can strip the labels off. "I can't stand to open the drawer in my bathroom and see Crest," she says, her voice laced with disgust. "I buy Pearl Drops because the bottle is nice and I can remove the label."

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After graduating from Woodrow Wilson High, Barry briefly attended the Academy of Arts in San Francisco, then dropped out to see the world. She married a tax attorney, 16 years her senior, when she was 26. The couple met in Aspen, and the marriage lasted 10 years.

Her extensive European travels largely shaped her style. "Europe profoundly impacted me in its sense of scale, in its architecture that has evolved over so many hundreds of years, and in the way people honor the simple acts of life; they're very pared down."

She serendipitously ventured into design in the mid-'80s, while running a wine and cheese store in Northern California. There she met cinematographer John Bailey, who was in town filming. The two became friends, and he encouraged her to pursue her design instincts. Her first project was his home, which brought her to Los Angeles.

Shortly after, she met Janet Karatz, a modern art collector, who hired her to decorate her Santa Monica home. But Karatz, who sits on the California Arts Council, reined her in a bit at first. "Barbara thought she would purchase the art and put color on the walls," recalls Karatz, who insisted on pure white walls and on buying the art herself. Recently, when Karatz asked Barry to do her New York apartment, Karatz still chose her own art, but let Barry put color on the walls. "I now have walls a color somewhere between lime and mustard and a flowered print on the walls in my bedroom. And the art looks fabulous," laughs Karatz.

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Most commonly associated with Jean-Michel Frank, the French designer of the '30s and '40s, Barry says, "I don't feel I was influenced by him so much as I resonate to the same truths, which manifests itself in very simple lines and not a lot of color."

For style influences, she also looks to New York society designer Albert Hadley, contemporary painters Suzanne Caporeal and Joan Nelson, director Bernardo Bertolucci, Japanese aesthetics, and people she's met who are masters of their trade, whether an upholsterer carrying on the family business or the men who blow glass at midnight for Baccarat.

Her own Hollywood Hills home blends art deco, modern and classical pieces from Italy, Sweden and France as well as designs of her own.

What's different about Los Angeles, besides the relaxed lifestyle and green outdoors that make windows seem like paintings, is the light, says Barry, and it should be celebrated. "Here you can see the subtle difference between a light beige and an ivory; that doesn't happen in New York. There you have to pump color. I've put paint on a chip that looks bright mustard here and in New York it looks camel."

### **Starting the Day With a Fresh Canvas**

Barry's offices are a picture of high energy--and high order. Persnickety doesn't begin to cover it. "It's a little like Montessori school," as one employee puts it. "Everything has a place, and when you're done, you put it back." At day's end, Barry wants desktops clean, so everyone starts the next day with a fresh canvas. The young, diverse staff plays an important part in the office canvas: The dress code stipulates they wear black, navy or chocolate brown and, for neutrals, cream, taupe or beige. No prints may intrude; no dangling earrings or hoops, no high heels, low-cut tops or short skirts; hair must be tidy and freshly cut.

"Some people who don't work here think that sounds restrictive," says Lauri Gibilterra, Barry's product design manager. "But most people who come to work here are already in that mode and appreciate her standards. She wants a restrained look, so when we present to a client, the focus is on the work, not some loud floral blouse."

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Although frequently out of town, when Barry hits the office, the staff goes on high alert. "She's like a tornado that can hit your office any time. When she does, she generates a lot of ideas at once. Our job is to capture them and make them happen," Gibilterra says. "She's exciting to be around, a great storyteller and a humane boss. But when she moves on, she's gone."

Current projects are taking her to New York, where she's designing a 20,000-square-foot spa for Avon on Fifth Avenue, and one floor of the landmark Brooks Brothers store at 44th Street and Madison Avenue. Next, she plans to expand Barbara Barry Home to several locations, write two books and design a small hotel, where she can extend her ideas about gracious comfort. She also wants to do her part to help women achieve what she has, by discovering themselves through work or by gaining confidence in their choices, whether about wardrobe, home furnishings or

deeper matters.

And just when will she personally have time to slow down and honor her daily acts?

"You don't get what you don't visualize," she says, tilting her head back and closing her eyes. "I want a sabbatical. Three months, please. And I want to take Wednesdays off to get back to my watercolor. And I'm ready to let love in my life again. There hasn't been room for anyone for a long time, but I'm a lover of life, and loving someone, that's an art in itself."

PHOTO: The interior designer, at her home in Los Angeles, says she prefers to design what she can't find. The Pasadena Chair with a pair of High Heel Tables, below, carry her creative stamp.

ID NUMBER: 19980318hls0002

PHOTOGRAPHER: GENARO MOLINA / Los Angeles Times

PHOTO: Branching out into product design, Barbara Barry created the oval-back, left, and X-back chairs for her line of Baker furniture.

ID NUMBER: 19980318hls0003

PHOTOGRAPHER: Koch Studio Inc.

Descriptors: INTERIOR DESIGN

FURNITURE

BARRY, BARBARA

AWARDS