

HOME AND DESIGN SPECIAL

Town & Country

EDITION

Simple
Splendor

CHRISTINA
BRANDNER

TATS MANAHAN
ARTISAN IN
RESIDENCE

A FRESH TWIST
ON FRENCH
FURNITURE

INSIDE A HOUSE
OF WONDER

PLUS:
THE PENINSULA
HONG KONG

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TOWN AND COUNTRY

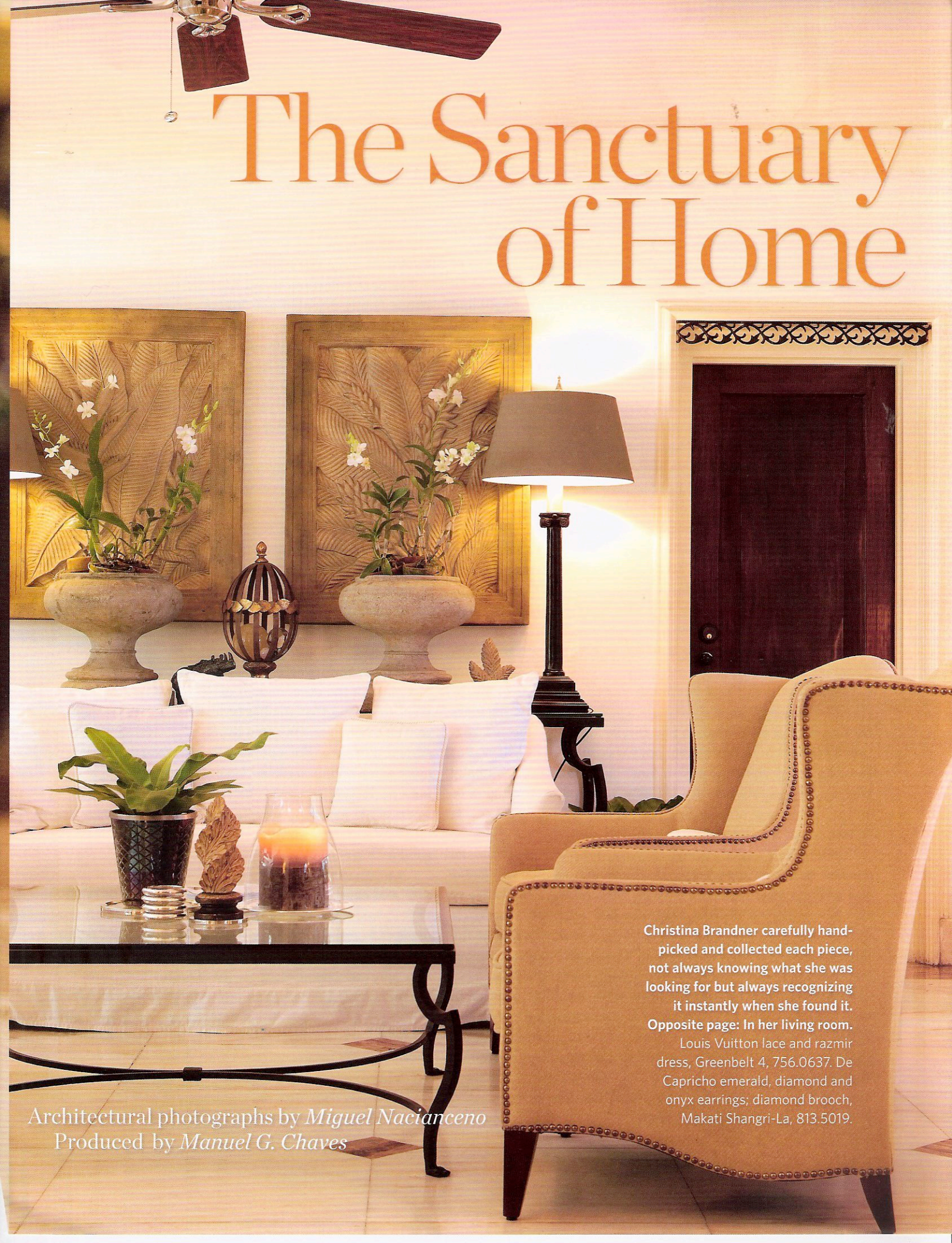
SUMMIT
MEDIA

Christina Brandner in Louis Vuitton



Elegant, spontaneous
and relaxed, the home
CHRISTINA BRANDNER
made for herself celebrates
her personal transformation.
By Sunshine Lichauco de Leon

Photographs by *Lilen Uy*
Styled by *Rorie O. Carlos*



The Sanctuary of Home

Christina Brandner carefully hand-picked and collected each piece, not always knowing what she was looking for but always recognizing it instantly when she found it.

Opposite page: In her living room.

Louis Vuitton lace and razmir dress, Greenbelt 4, 756.0637. De Capricho emerald, diamond and onyx earrings; diamond brooch, Makati Shangri-La, 813.5019.

Architectural photographs by *Miguel Nacianceno*
Produced by *Manuel G. Chaves*

When Christina Brandner

was growing up in Austria, she was often described as “baroque,” meaning “something that cannot be figured out.” Both her physique and her Austrian-Filipino features were a mystery to the people in her hometown of Graz, which had welcomed her mother years before as its first Filipina resident. Because Brandner had a smaller build than other students, they considered her fragile and so treated her with “kid gloves.” She remembers, “Strangers saw me as a tourist until I opened my mouth. Then they got really confused and asked me where I learned to speak perfect German.”

Two decades later, unexpected twists and turns in Brandner’s life brought her to the Philippines, yet even here the word *baroque* may still apply in many ways. Although her mestiza looks now allow her to blend in perfectly, her calm, cool, demure and very European demeanor leaves people baffled as to who she really is. It is when one visits the home she has designed for herself that one can begin to peel back the layers of her quiet stories. In essence she is someone whose transition from girl to woman has taken her on the greatest journey—and led her to a place she can call home.

Raised in a highly conservative family, Brandner had a very sheltered upbringing. Her closest companions were the cousins she would see at Sunday family gatherings. The eldest of three children, she was known as the quiet, sporty tomboy of the family but at an early age was also involved in creative activities like painting and drawing.

When she was thirteen, her family moved to Vancouver, Canada, and remained there for five years, a period that Christina looks back to with great fondness. She recalls attending the International School where the student body was made up of Asians, Europeans, and Jewish and native Americans. She says, “Normally they would separate into groups, depending on their religion or culture. Because of how I looked and my upbringing, I was accepted into any group and that was nice.”

Unsure of her career path when she moved back to Austria, she decided to follow her creative instincts. She studied cosmetics and makeup after high school, then went to the Philippines to visit her grandmother. Encouraged by her father who “never let his children do nothing,” she then spent a year studying at the Philippine School of Interior Design. There, while learning about materials and colors and how to combine them, she discovered her gift: “I find mixing colors in my head so relaxing. I am able to visualize how it will all look before I start creating anything.”

She also discovered a new artistic direction—jewelry design—upon returning to Austria and visiting the jewelry store of a family friend. She had loved jewelry even as a little girl and always wondered how it was made. She recalls that visit: “One day they asked me to try doing my own thing. I didn’t know how but they said,

‘Never mind, just try it.’ I could not believe how easy it was for me!” A few years later, having received training as a goldsmith, silversmith, jeweler and gemologist, Brandner found her calling. The logical next step was to open a small gift shop in Graz that would sell her jewelry designs along with luxury items.

The next milestone in her life emerged from the imprint of a strong family-oriented upbringing and the example of her parents who had been happily married since their early twenties. At the age of twenty-six, Brandner accepted the marriage proposal of her first boyfriend, an Austrian whom she had known since she was eighteen. Looking back, she reflects, “Getting married so young was a mistake as you forget you still have to grow up. We both changed as we matured and realized one day we had drifted far apart.”

In 2002, after eight years of marriage and two children, Brandner found the courage to embark on a huge change in her life. Realizing the difficulty of staying in a place where she had always been known as part of a “couple,” she decided to take her children, then aged six and four, and leave everything behind in the country of her birth. She explains her decision to move to the Philippines: “I am a family person—it’s how I feel safe. I moved to Manila because my sister and my brother were living here. I also needed to clear my head, and having help with my children was something I knew would be beneficial.”

It’s been seven years since Brandner began her in-depth exploration of the other side of her cultural heritage. The adjustment to living in Manila has brought with it essential lessons as well as challenges. On some things, she says, she has learned to adjust: “I used to take it personally but now I don’t get upset anymore when people are late.” On other things, though, such as being a perfectionist who is often described as “too picky,” it’s just a part of her nature. She explains, “I like some things done a certain way and if it’s wrong, I will ask them to do it again. I am not good with ‘*pwede na*.’”

Although she likes being with friends, she is “not a group person” and enjoys spending time alone. The pace of life in Manila has allowed her much time for herself, during which she paints, reads and engages in sports. Always one to try new activities, she recently added shooting and *arnis* (fighting with sticks) to her list. As a “city girl who needs to go out to nature every now and then,” she finds great freedom in being outdoors. But given her quiet, reserved yet disarmingly direct nature that prefers to observe people before getting closer to them, her life here is centered on her home, her safe haven.

It’s hard to determine what the best description for her house is—French colonial or more Caribbean—but it is definitely a perfect reflection of her character. It seamlessly blends elegant, com-



Brandner has a well-edited sense of style, and everything in her home seamlessly blends into its appointed corner.



A woman with long, wavy brown hair is sitting on a wooden chair, smiling at the camera. She is wearing a strapless Missoni knit dress with a colorful geometric pattern. Her arms are crossed over her chest, and she is wearing a gold and diamond cuff on her right wrist. To her left is a round wooden table with a glass of water and a vase of flowers. The background is a blurred indoor setting with a lamp and a plant.

"I love nature so I wanted to feel like I am sitting outside, as if I am sitting on a big terrace." Missoni knit dress, Adora, Greenbelt 5, 0918.2436666. De Capricho gold and diamond cuff, Makati Shangri-La, 813.5019.

fortable and sporty in a way that makes one feel relaxed yet in the company of someone with a refined simplicity.

Brandner likes history and so collects pieces that have a story. She finds many of her most beloved pieces when she goes to old houses and there collects pieces no one wants, or when she identifies treasures in other people's trash. A few steps past the old and heavy *ipil* doors that lead into her private world, one is greeted by a tribute to her favorite fruit, a giant carved wooden pineapple. She discloses, "I had no idea when I bought it that the pineapple actually means welcome. It actually was not even for sale! Aside from its sweetness, I love that it has so many eyes—even the pineapple has stories to tell."

Attracted to hardwood like *kamagong*, Brandner demonstrates the difference between old and new wood by running her hands along her front and kitchen doors. She explains, "They don't make doors like this anymore, really old and heavy. They are nice to touch and the handles are original!" Pointing to a wooden cabinet she rescued from an old Spanish ship, she muses, "Imagine what that piece of furniture has seen."

Decorative pieces, such as an old wooden standing mirror and a crown rescued from an old wooden cabinet, are other examples of pieces brought to her present from someone else's past. The collection of "falling-apart treasures"—old books from her great-grandmother's library—reveal how her own family's history plays a part in this scene as well.

As Brandner shows a set of chairs whose heavy wood frame is perfectly balanced by delicate and intricate carvings at the top, it is clear that this is also a woman who values equilibrium. "Try to lift one," she suggests. "It's like stone wood. I like them because they will last for generations. Just touch it and you feel its age. I like buildings made of huge stone, like castles." Standing in her own little "castle," she smiles and says, "These are not pieces that you throw away. They will be here after a hundred years."

Perhaps this attraction to the past stems from Brandner's European upbringing, when she was surrounded by beautiful old buildings. She fondly remembers the special ambiance of old opera houses: "It's a certain flair you can't copy anymore."

The solid feeling of wood is perfectly contrasted by the lightness of everything else in the room. She says, "I love nature so I wanted to feel like I am sitting outside, as if I am sitting on a big terrace." Never able to understand why some people have homes that are dark despite living under such blue skies, she made a point of opening up the walls of her living and dining rooms and transforming them into large windows. Of course, the coolness of her white marble floors and specifically shaded areas ensure that sunlight does not mean too much heat.

Central to her planning for her home was paying attention to proportions, as was choosing pieces that would adapt themselves



to the hot climate. In keeping with the light and airy feel, most of her furniture pieces are made of glass, wood or wrought iron. For her dining room table, she chose glass instead of wood to ensure that nothing would appear massive and give the small space a cramped feeling.

Her detailed explanations of her decisions confirm that nothing has been left unstudied. Because she wanted a space that would always feel clean, no blinds or curtains—dust collectors—hang on her windows. She laughs as she admits with her usual practicality, "The only thing missing would be white curtains to blow in the wind when you open the windows. But I decided not to do it because the dogs would hang on it."

Since her house is the meeting place for many of the children in her neighborhood, she did not want a showpiece that could not be sat in or touched. Her house is a "lived-in" place where everyone feels comfortable. She says, "When my mother wants to go to Makati for shopping, my father sits here and reads."

Brandner's masterpiece came together over a three-year period, as the things she was looking for were not items she could just buy at a store. Whether shopping here or abroad, she carefully looked for and collected each piece, not always knowing what she was looking for but always recognizing it instantly when she found it. With such a consistent and defined sense of her own taste, she knows exactly what she wants when she sees it. "When I travel, I

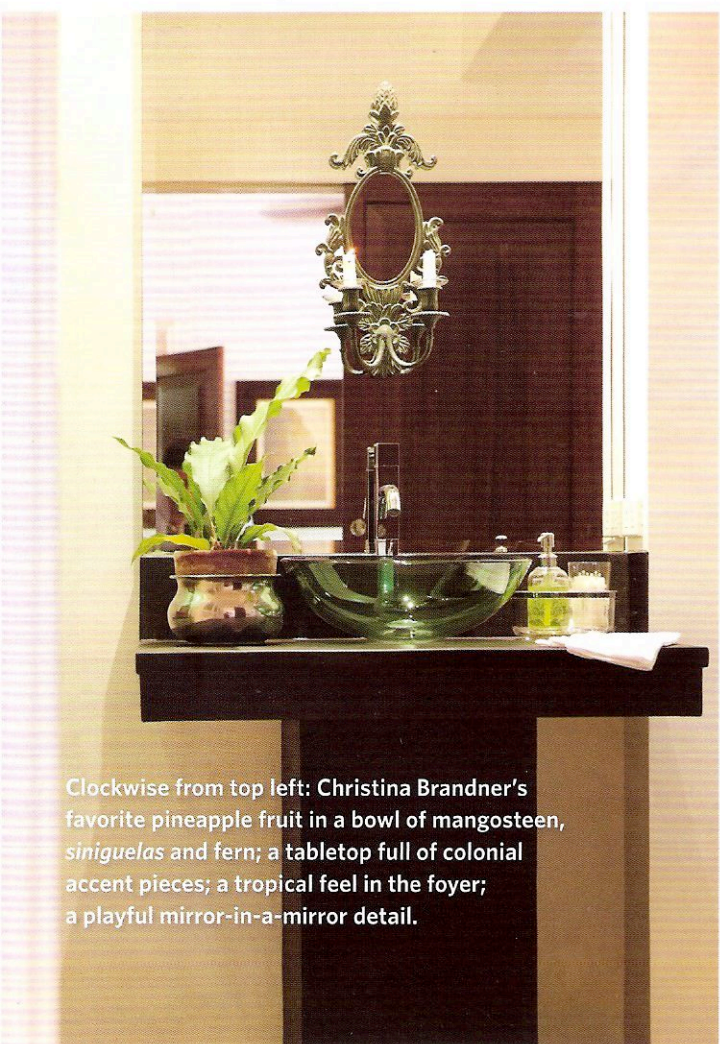
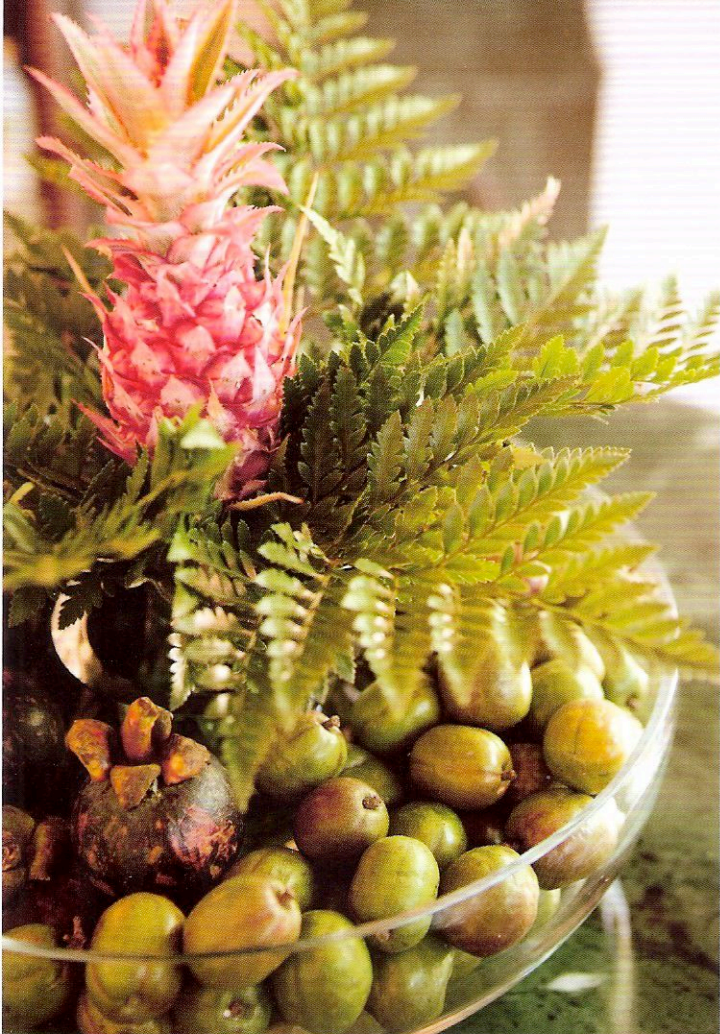


In keeping with the light and airy feel of the house, the furniture pieces are made of glass, wood or wrought iron. Opposite page: "Sometimes I like things that are not so colorful." Louis Vuitton wool mix and razmir gown, Greenbelt 4, 756.0637. De Capricho diamond earrings; diamond cuffs; rubelite ring, Makati Shangri-La, 813.5019.



Brandner likes history and she collects pieces that have a story. She finds many of her most beloved pieces in old houses—such as this old wooden standing mirror.





Clockwise from top left: Christina Brandner's favorite pineapple fruit in a bowl of mangosteen, *siniguelas* and fern; a tabletop full of colonial accent pieces; a tropical feel in the foyer; a playful mirror-in-a-mirror detail.

try to find a piece that would fit as a remembrance. It all has a certain look that fits together. I would not even touch something that I know I would not love."

A glance at the decorative pieces that are strategically scattered throughout her shared living-dining space shows her attraction to certain shapes. Explaining her love for curves, she says, "They are more feminine. If it's too pointed, it's too harsh for me. I even have round stones outside and one that looks like a watermelon!"

Her attraction to stones comes from a source much deeper than the gemology course she took years ago. Stones are in her blood. Picking up a beloved citrine ball that forms part of her collection, she reveals, "I love stones. I guess I inherited that passion from my father and my grandfather. They are both in the mining business but they are dealing with stones for the building industry." She recalls family outings where everyone would go to the mountains with a hammer: "It was like a treasure hunt, and it was so much fun looking for stone deposits. We were looking for pure white stones in particular because they were quite rare."

Brandner's relationship with color reveals much about her own character. Although she likes colors, she uses them purely as accent because she sees them as a luxury that should not be everywhere. She says, "Sometimes I like things that are not so colorful. Color is too powerful for me and I feel uncomfortable if it's too much."

She is, she admits, a very emotional person inside but extremely controlled about expressing her feelings. "Color is emotion and that is dangerous for me. Emotions can be up and down and I can't take that sometimes. Neutral is always comfortable," she says. She is known to wear only black, white, beige or blue—"I can't even wear a red dress or something with flowers on it. You will never see me in a colorful outfit."

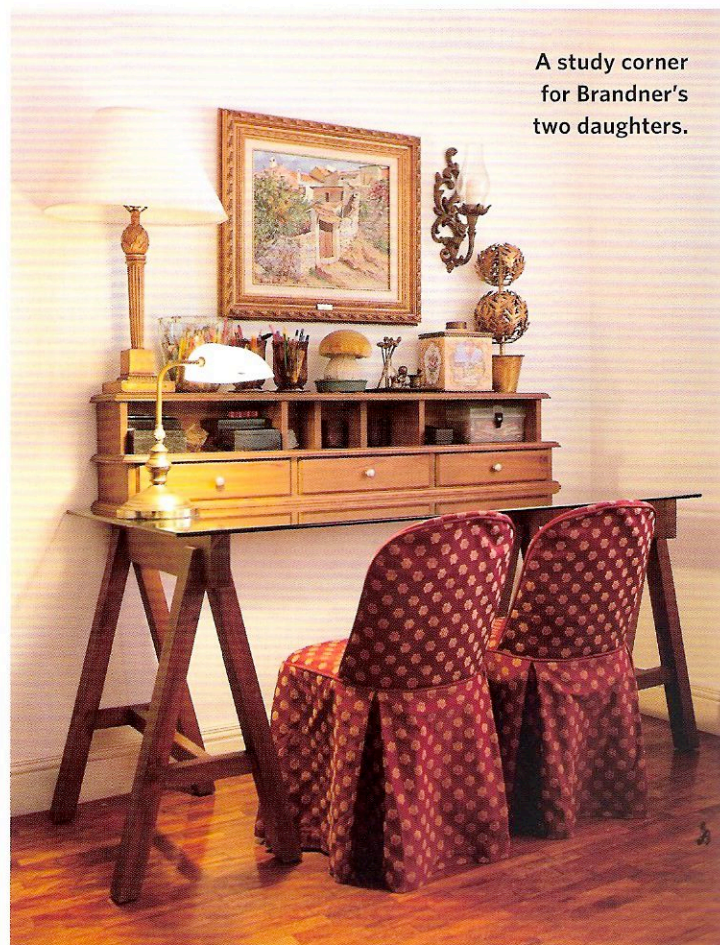
As if to illustrate this point, many of her walls are adorned with sandstone artwork from Spain and Bali, their earth tones blending perfectly with the white upholstered couches, dark wood furniture and green plants which serve as the backdrop to her serene life. The only paintings are of parrots, another favorite motif, but even the birds are symbolic: "Birds in my paintings are always free. I don't like anything in cages. Even my dogs run free. I believe in karma—if I put something in a cage, I might be caged one day. I could not live like that."

Brandner's home is her sanctuary, a place to which she loves to return and which she shares only with those very close to her. A collection of silver frames with carefully chosen photos hints at those allowed to share her carefully nurtured space. Explaining why she does not like "strangers" in her house, she says, "I built this for me and not for anyone else. My children and I feel comfortable in it, and that is all I wanted." She adds, "It's where I can turn off everything that happens outside. If you don't have a place

to escape to, you will always be on the run." Then, after pausing for a moment, she declares, "This is the first time I have made my own home."

Having been seasoned by a wide range of new experiences and dealt with them on her own terms, she can now state, "I feel more like a woman. I am not defined just as a wife or mother anymore. I know myself now and I see how it is not to exist but to really live and to be alone." More relaxed now and no longer afraid of anything, she has developed a powerful confidence. Although she is not averse to falling in love and having a partner with whom to spend the rest of her life, she is undeniably content. "I have been lucky enough," she says, "to have done so many things many people have not. My life is very complete."

For someone who lived the first thirty-five years of her life with a man to depend on—first in her father's home and then with a husband—the journey to her life in the Philippines has been an invaluable personal transformation. One can best appreciate the beauty of a stone when one takes a closer look at the many facets of its shape and examines it in different types of light. The enchanting glow of Brandner's home is the only light one needs to understand that what was once a rough stone has become a polished, precious gem of her own. ❖



A study corner
for Brandner's
two daughters.

Brandner's home is her sanctuary, a place to which she loves to return and which she shares only with those very close to her.

Louis Vuitton chiffon blouse; wool skirt; platform sandals; Greenbelt 4, 756.0637. De Capricho pearl, amethyst, emerald and carved aquamarine earrings; gold and diamond bracelet, Makati Shangri-La, 813.5019. Makeup by Patrick Rosas. Hair by Gyno Ferrer. For shopping details, see Fashion and Shopping Information.