An Estate in Montecito

Setting of Charm for the Stewart Abercrombies

PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHARLES S. WHITE

"I THINK doing houses is a disease," says Katherine Abercrombie. "Once you begin, there is no stopping, no cure." She is speaking seriously, but with a degree of humor, as she surveys the colorful yet serene environment she and her husband, Stewart, have created at *Constantia*—one of the most charming of all the large estates in Montecito, California.

"Doing it yourself" many times has negative connotations in the design world, with implications of amateurism. But Mrs. Abercrombie gives

Refurbishing their Montecito estate, Constantia, proved a collaborative adventure for Mr. and Mrs. Stewart Abercrombie. LEFT: A mountainous background dramatizes the cultivated formality of a garden with a jewellike reflecting pool. TOP: Constantia's bell-shaped gable and graceful scrollwork recall Dutch Colonial design. ABOVE: An Aubusson rug and orchids from Mr. Abercrombie's greenhouse enliven the Entrance Hall.

PRECEDING PAGES AND OPPOSITE: Bright-hued walls, a beamed ceiling and oak flooring create an inviting backdrop for two seating arrangements in the spacious Living Room. At one end, near the fireplace, pillow-laden sofas flank a glass-topped table surmounted by a polychromed *santo* and Waterford crystal. At the other end, pre-Columbian sculptures and an Oriental ancestral portrait survey a grouping of commodious armchairs upholstered in Scalamandré silk. The collection of whimsical grisailles, signed *Sauvage*, instill a unifying element. ABOVE: Candlelight and a fire on the raised hearth are the sole sources of nighttime illumination in the Dining Room. *Faux-marbre* woodwork and a marble fireplace surround provide a transitional tone between pastel silk wallcovering and draperies, and the aged wood of authentic Renaissance curule chairs.

new meaning to design by oneself for oneself. She has had a long-standing interest in interior design, and excellent technical training. Before going to Purdue University as an engineering student, she went to New York to work with Dorothy Draper, and during World War II the United States government employed her to design interior spaces for ships. She has owned many fine houses before Constantia, a few of them in Cuernavaca, Mexico. In the houses in Cuernavaca she acted entirely as her own architect and interior designer.

Although Katherine Abercrombie is thus no stranger to refurbishing large homes, Stewart Abercrombie was a total innocent. A former cattle rancher, he had never before experienced the joys and agonies of carpentry, upholstering walls, wallpapering and painting. His initiation was almost dictated by his wife's desire to have things done as she envisioned them: "Somehow, other people don't really seem to fulfill what you want to express. Their expression, of course, is often their own. But I think that anyone who walks into this house knows that it is *ours*."

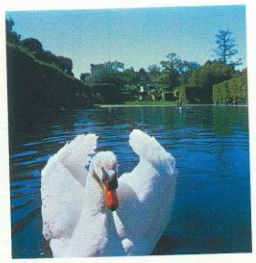
When the Abercrombies first saw

the Dutch Colonial estate, designed by Ambrose Cramer in 1930, their reactions were mixed. They were taken with the beauty and seclusion of the setting, but surprised at the amount of work and restoration needed. Katherine Abercrombie has a great love for Spanish and Italian architecture and had hoped to find a house in one of these styles. "I told Stewart I wouldn't know what to do with Constantia. I wanted him to give me permission to cut off the top floor, and then I thought we could buy it. He agreed. I was going to make it an Italian house, which is really what I was looking for. Fortunately, I love the exterior now." Her husband was skeptical but open-minded. He saw great possibilities in improving and bringing back to life the original landscaping by Lockwood de Forrest. On the other hand, he was overwhelmed by what the structure required. "The house was in need of so many changes, it discouraged us. We decided it was too much work. But when we came back and saw the construction—the woodwork and brass hardware, the tile roof—we were completely convinced."

Mr. and Mrs. Abercrombie's expressions of admiration for the house may seem overly reverent, but their affection comes from an intimate knowledge of how Constantia is put together. They had not originally intended to learn by doing. Mrs. Abercrombie remembers: "When we bought this house, we swore we weren't going to do *anything* ourselves. We were going to get the best craftsmen available, and we did. We found the best stonemason, and we found the best carpenter. They came

RIGHT AND COVER: For the Master Bedroom, Mrs. Abercrombie devised a fanciful treatment of Scalamandré silk taffeta and fringe for an ornate canopy bed with a painted and gilded medallion headboard. An antique mirrored chest nearby reflects this flowery profusion, which is complemented by walls and window shutters upholstered in the same blossom-strewn fabric. A Hispanic Baroque painted secretary adds an imposing note to the cheerful bower, while a heavily fringed rug, handloomed in Mexico, contributes to the mood of softness.

For the Abercrombies, their house is a theater for creativity.



ABOVE: A mute swan—with nothing to complain about—takes a peaceful turn about the shimmering reflecting pool it shares with others of its kind. RIGHT: Gingham and pottery dinnerware lend a country flavor to alfresco dining in the Sunken Garden.

in with their crews and started taking off old tiles with an air hammer. They made a tremendous amount of noise and broke all the fine old tile. We compared this work to the delicate craftsmanship we had known in Mexico, and we decided we could do better ourselves. We also decided we liked having things done now, not six months down the road."

Stewart Abercrombie discovered that it was more efficient for him to be enthusiastic about carpentry, and he later found that he could also learn to like upholstering walls. For the owners of a house that is full of architectural traditions, neither has been afraid of experiment. In fact, when the house was first purchased, Katherine Abercrombie had no fixed concept of how she wanted the interiors to look. Drawing on past experience, she worked room by room. Sometimes she achieved the balance of color and texture she liked, and at other times she had to alter her original plans. One of the most romantic rooms in the house is the dining room. Entirely lighted by candles, warmed by antique silver, crystal, and walls hung with silk, it looks like a dream from another, kinder century. But creating dreams can often be a matter of trial and error.

"I had never had a blue dining room before," Mrs. Abercrombie says, "and I thought I would like to have one. So Stewart painted the room blue, but at night a blue room is just nothing. Then over one weekend we decided to put the silk on the walls. It came from the canopy beds in our bedroom in Mexico."

For the Abercrombies, their house is a theater for creativity. Because they are not afraid of change, rooms and grounds will continue to evolve. Katherine Abercrombie is a passionately artistic woman, who states without hesitation: "I think creativity is the greatest thing in life. If we want to create something here and are stimulated, we can get up one morning and be so enthusiastic about a project that we do it right then!" □

—*Carolyn Noren*