

HOME TOUR

A Chicago Apartment With An Eye Toward Belgium

Interior designer Michael Del Piero artfully combines European antiques and personal treasures in her Gold Coast home

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Raw and luxe, layered and spare, primitive and modern. Everything Chicago designer **Michael Del Piero** lays a hand on becomes an artful study in contrasts. And fittingly so: her life has also swung rather seamlessly from one end of the professional spectrum to the other. For 20 years before she found her passion for decorating, Del Piero was a one-woman executive consulting firm, kept on retainer by Fortune 500 companies and flown around the world for business meetings. But dozens of trips overseas did more than land her on the cover of *Crain's*—they sparked an obsession with collecting that would lead her to start her career over.

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FOR ME, BEING AT
HOME IS ABOUT
RELAXING YOUR
BRAIN.

—MICHAEL DEL PIERO



Michael Del Piero in her Gold Coast, Chicago, home.



A mix of tabletop finds embody the designer's collecting style.

Exploring the world-class flea markets of France and Belgium led to a part-time gig exhibiting and selling fine art and antiques. Applying a signature decisiveness honed in her previous career, it soon became

obvious, even to the ilk of art buyers with which she was now regularly dealing, that Del Piero's talents extended far beyond selecting oil paintings and antiquities. "I had so many requests from clients to help them with their homes," she says. "I always declined because I wasn't trained. Then one woman said to me, 'You don't always have to hire someone with formal training. You have an eye and a sense of style.'" She took the job.



In the main living space, a round table is draped in vintage Fortuny curtains, and a built-in bookcase holds a collection of personal mementos from around the world.

Considering where that eye was trained, it's no surprise that Del Piero's designs—private residences, notable show houses, and an enviable [Bucktown storefront](#)—don't follow the typical decorating formula. Sparse, shapely furnishings, rich textiles, and artfully crumbling artifacts are arranged within milky-toned walls that lend every room a romantic, distinctly European air. Her apartment, in a rehabbed three-story greystone on Chicago's Gold Coast, has more in common with a country estate outside Antwerp than most city residences. The living room's overscaled pedestal table, for example, is something of a Del Piero signature. The intentionally disruptive piece acts as a side table, is dressed like a formal center table, and is the size of a traditional dining table. It's a confidently thrown wrench that breaks up a static seating area and gives the designer a platform for a bold statement. In this case, it's to showcase a standout textile: an antique Fortuny curtain picked up at a flea market and reworked as a tablecloth.

Assembled mementos from Del Piero's travels make up the home's most eye-catching feature: a bookcase shrouded in layers of sculptural fragments, natural curiosities, and yellowed books. "That is my life, actually," she says matter-of-factly of the collection, which has found a place in each one of her homes. "They're all pieces that were gifts or that I found while traveling." Despite their divergent sources, their shared tone gives the built-in the feeling of a cohesive installation. It's a contained moment of whimsy that



An eye-catching wire sculpture flanks the black fireplace.

doesn't overwhelm the careful sense of calm.



Del Piero artfully frayed the wing chair's Schumacher upholstery.



She's uncharacteristically stumped by the question of how to describe her interior aesthetic. "When people write about my style, the word *serene* often comes up," she explains. "For me, being at home is about relaxing your brain. I do like things that are serene, though I also like layering. It's elegant without being traditional." It's a loaded description, but one that works: despite the haughty provenance of many of its furnishings, Del Piero's home manages to create a transportive feeling that's not overly camp or precious. In the den, a Holly Hunt sofa is slipcovered in a distinctively ruched heavy cotton found in Belgium, a 1960s garden stool acts as a coffee table, and French Rye baskets from the Netherlands hang as sculpture on the wall. The architecture of the early 1900s home also creates a worthy canvas. "I love the crown molding, the height of the ceilings, and the long windows," says the designer.



In the master bedroom, Donghia's Samurai print lends a graphic touch to the headboard.



A heavy cotton picked up in Belgium slip covers the skirted sofa in the Den.

“

I STARTED GOING TO FRANCE AND BELGIUM 30 YEARS AGO, AND THAT INFLUENCED A LOT OF WHAT I [LOVE ABOUT] DESIGN.


—MICHAEL DEL PIERO

The space feels collected over time, but the truth is that the apartment's recent redesign happened in one fell swoop. "Because I was living in the space, I constantly had an idea of what I wish I had done differently," Del Piero explains. "I like to purchase everything at once. I have a vision for the entire space, so I plan the whole thing all together. I don't really do one room at a time. Once you decorate a room it affects the sightline of another." The newly smoky walls, previously in her preferred white, render the elusive feeling of permanent twilight and set the tone for the whole space. "The only thing that stays is the round table," she says with a hint of sentimentality and more than a bit of pride. "It's a super-traditional idea, but the way I do it...it feels different. Timeless." In the end, it's no surprise that her description of that arresting centerpiece also seems to be the perfect elusive description of her personal style.



A large-scale equestrian artwork is casually tacked onto the sofa wall. Del Piero picked up the 1960s ceramic garden stool at Architectural Artifacts in Chicago.

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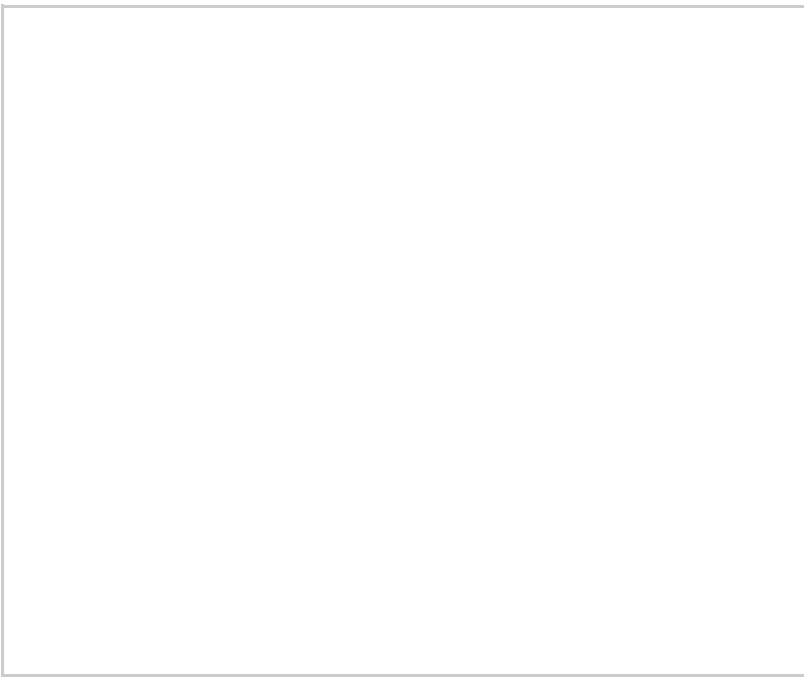
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