

# HG

HOUSE & GARDEN

MAY 1990  
\$4.00

## Decorating Today



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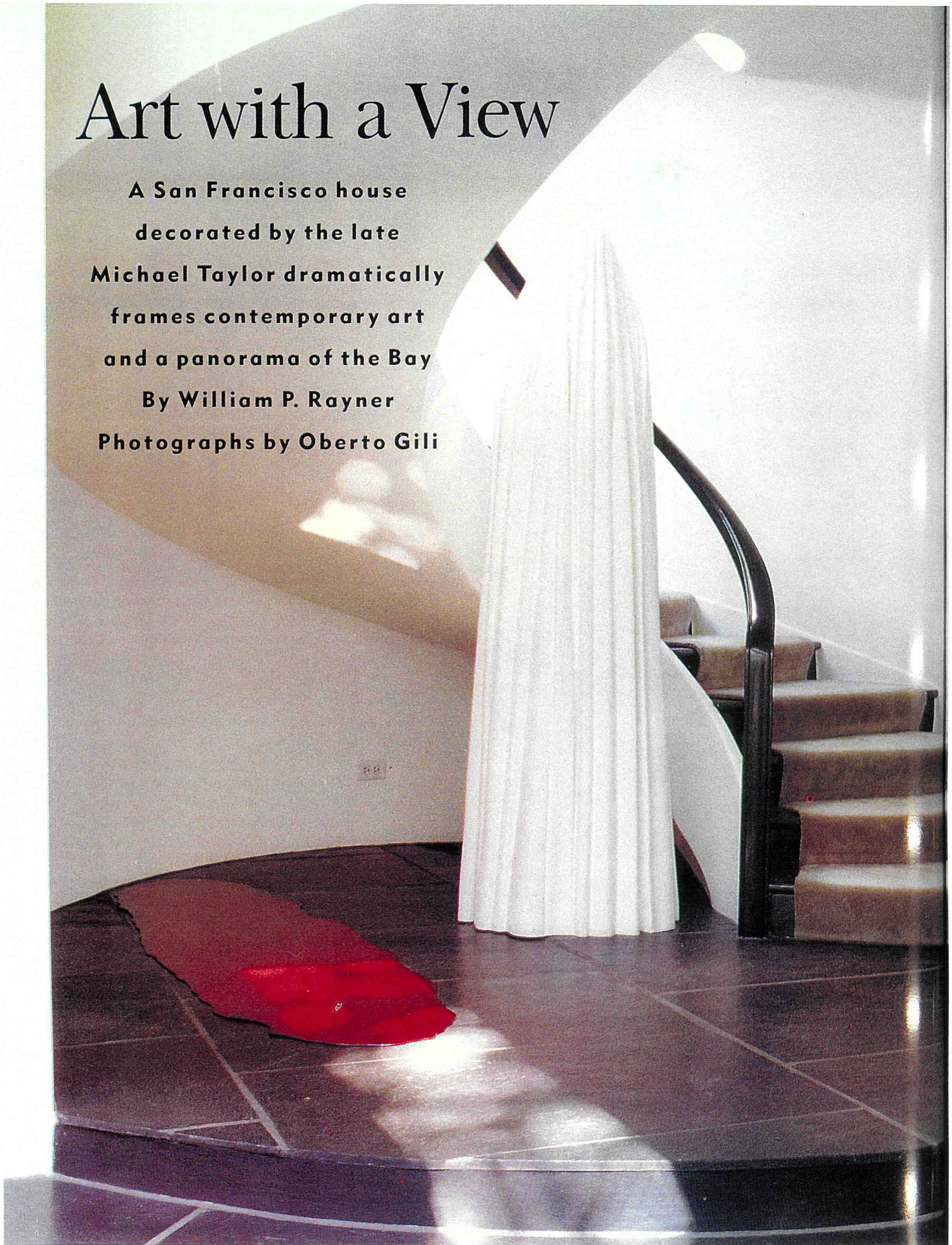


# Art with a View

**A San Francisco house  
decorated by the late  
Michael Taylor dramatically  
frames contemporary art  
and a panorama of the Bay**

**By William P. Rayner**

**Photographs by Oberto Gili**





John and Frances Bowes, *right*, on the roof of their house overlooking San Francisco Bay. *Left*: Katharina Fritsch's polyester and Plexiglas *Ghost and Pool of Blood* in the slate-paved entry hall.







In the living room, Louis XV-style armchairs from the archbishop's palace in Turin flank a Michael Taylor sofa. White chenille upholstery from Robert Crowder & Associates offsets the somber stripes of Sean Scully's *Long Night*. Between the white chaise longues, also designed by Taylor, is a pair of antique Chinese taborets. Ross Bleckner's *Knights in Nights* hangs to the left of the gilded doors, and John Duff's *Homoousian Cone II* is visible behind the topiary at right. Details see Resources.









Doors painted by Armand Albert Rateau in 1925, left, open into the dining room. The 1930 rosewood table and chairs are part of a set by French cabinetmaker Eugène Printz. A painting by Sigmar Polké dominates the far wall. Right: Italian chairs of the 1940s are pulled up to a French Art Deco desk in the master bedroom. The center window frames a view of Alcatraz.

FROM THE MOMENT FRANCES BOWES first saw her new house on Russian Hill, overlooking San Francisco Bay, she knew she hated it. That is, she knew she would hate it for 24 hours until she figured out how to love it—and her solution was to gut the house and start from scratch. Frances moves with determined dispatch when things need to be done. The same may be said of her husband, John, who, rather than suffering cardiac arrest at the thought of demolishing and rebuilding an entire town house, opined, “What a great idea. You take charge of the interior and I’ll watch over the architecture.” They are past masters at creative collaboration. During the 31 years they have been married, they have always acted as a team, whether raising three daughters, remodeling and decorating a variety of houses, or acquiring an ever-expanding collection of contemporary art. There is not a sluggish bone in their bodies. They walk fast, talk fast, think fast, make up their minds fast, and, best of all, smile fast.

What was not so fast was getting their new house in order. That took two and a half years, and even then, when they moved in, it still “looked like a battle zone.” The four-story masonry structure was built in 1938 by Alice Driscoll, an eccentric doyenne of San Francisco society. Apparently in no mood to spend her declining years worrying about the San Andreas Fault, Mrs. Driscoll hired Joseph B. Strauss, the engineer who designed the Golden Gate Bridge, to work

out the details of her house. According to one of her acquaintances, “It looked like a white fortress surrounded by a Victorian village.” The house has since changed hands several times. The last owners had a winery and kept the cellar as a rathskeller. That cellar has been transformed into a gallery for the Bowes’s art collection, which is now the focus of most of their energy. At the drop of a catalogue they will jet to New York, Paris, London, or elsewhere to attend an auction. I recall talking to John on the telephone and casually remarking that a friend had a David Salle for sale, and before you could say “art” he was on the other line to the seller.

While Frances and John may be a team, they don’t always see eye to eye on every aspect of their collection. Take the Katharina Fritsch polyester and Plexiglas sculpture in their entrance hall. It is entitled *Ghost and Pool of Blood*. Frances likes the blood, John the ghost. One thing is certain: you have to be secure in your position to greet the guests with a ghost and a pool of blood.

The common ground at home where Frances and John resolve any questions of taste is a series of sparkling white-walled rooms remodeled by the archi-

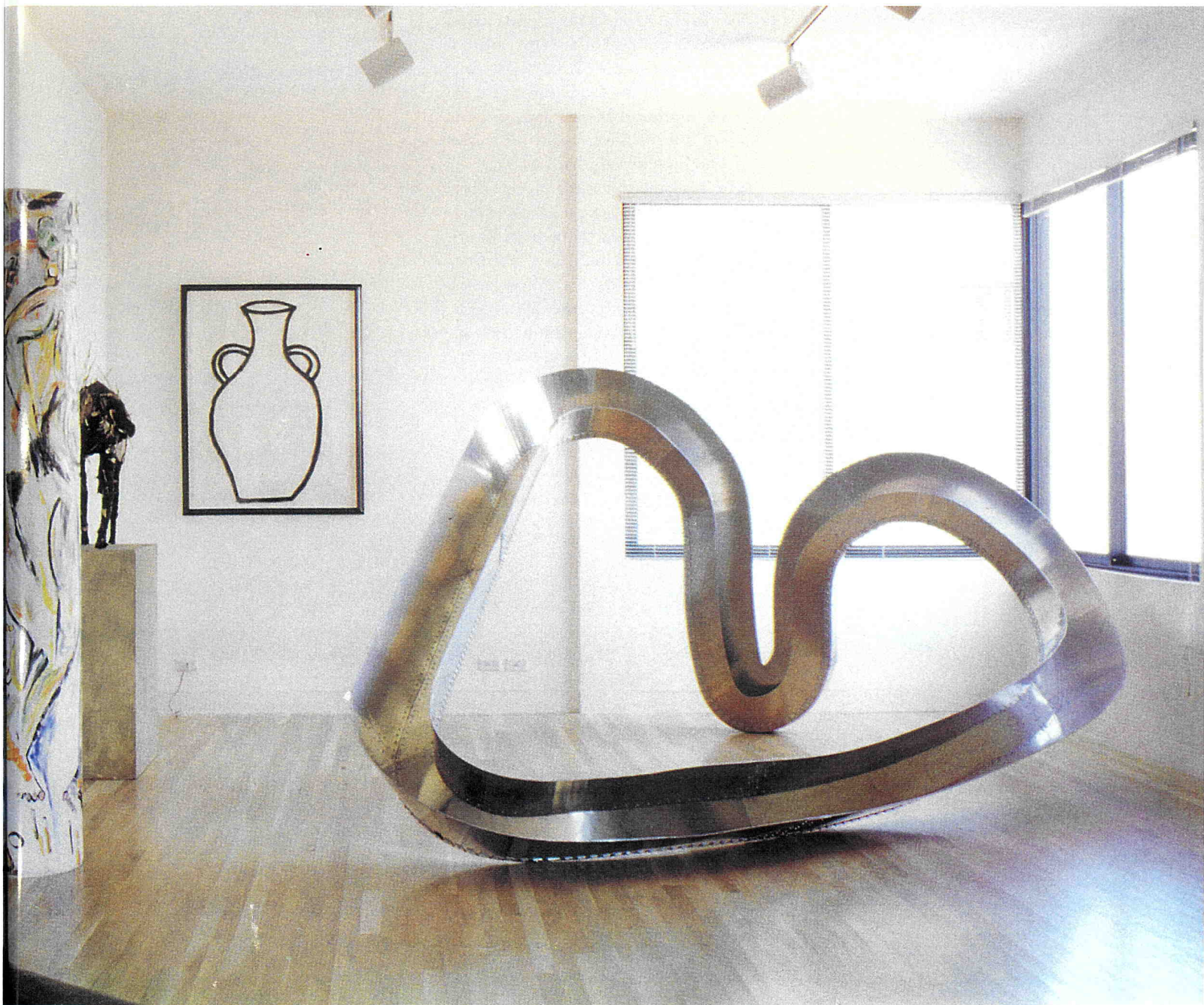
The bold curves of a Richard Deacon metal sculpture in the gallery are gently echoed by Jack Hanley’s *Vase* on a nearby wall. A Stefan De Jaeger painted column partially conceals a Deborah Butterfield horse on a pedestal. The nine-foot-high canvas by Lois Lane is untitled.







At the drop of a catalogue, they will jet to New York or London for an auction







tect Sandy Walker and decorated by the legendary Michael Taylor. The Bowes house was Taylor's last project, and Frances's sister, Victoria Fay, who is also a decorator, took up where he left off. As Frances recalls, "When Michael first saw the house, he thought we were crazy, but when John and I saw the view of the bay, we knew it was worth the risk." And indeed it is spectacular. A series of floor-to-ceiling windows bracketed by nine-inch white pilasters takes in a 180-degree panorama of the harbor. By day it is an ever-changing pageant of sailboats, oceangoing vessels, and ferries. At night the automobile lights on the Golden Gate and Bay bridges look like millions of orderly fireflies homeward bound. Beyond the bay are the shores of Marin County and, farther still, the coastal mountains green with sequoias.

Even though Frances and John never conceived the house as a machine in which to display their collection, it is an ideal environment for art. Apart from the gallery itself, there is an abundance of wall space on which works in various media may be seen to best advantage. The entrance and adjoining hallway comfortably accommodate a Salle, a Richard Diebenkorn, a Günter Förg, and a Claes Oldenburg, besides the Fritsch sculpture and other pieces. In the office from which she used to conduct her public relations business Frances has a handsome Kitaj. An Ed Ruscha, two Donald Sultans, and an immense canvas by Sigmar Polké are dis-

played in the dining room.

Never meant to be encyclopedic, the Bowes collection is intensely personal and includes women artists such as Lynda Benglis, Elizabeth Murray, Susan Rothenberg, and Helen Levitt. John and Frances are on the board of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, so they have ample exposure to the latest works in progress. Their own latest work in progress is a country house in Sonoma, currently being designed by the Mexican architect Ricardo Legorreta.

Like the Bowes's art, the decoration of their rooms speaks of a particularly eclectic aesthetic. They have sconces by Giacometti; screens by Dunand and Jacques Adnet; tables, lamps, and chairs by Jean-Michel Frank; doors by Andrée Putman and Armand Albert Rateau; bathroom fixtures from the duke of Portland's London house; andirons by Gilbert Poillerat; and a dining room filled with Eugène Printz furniture.

But it is not so much the objects they have assembled that give these collectors pleasure as it is the excitement of locating them. Their enthusiasm is like that of a child finding a new toy. Perhaps this is in part due to John's profession, which is, appropriately, making and selling toys. If response to physical surroundings is affected by daily routine, then the world would be a lot more fun if there were more toy makers. John and Frances Bowes are proof of that. ▲

*Editors: Carolyn Englefield and Dorothea Walker*



An Elizabeth Murray drawing rests on the master bedroom mantel, left, beneath Lynda Benglis's *Cabriolet*. At left is an untitled monoprint by Francesco Clemente. Michael Taylor modeled the fringed armchair on a design by Syrie Maugham. Above: Shoes in Frances Bowes's closet await their marching orders.







**A** Susan Rothenberg horse gallops above the guest room bed. *Left:* In the library the painted wood chairs, parchment-covered table, cross-legged stool, and plaster urn lamp are Jean-Michel Frank originals.