

The Artifacts of Life

Helen Marden's living room is a richly illustrated album of her journeys. As PILAR VILADAS discovers, it is a life well traveled.

For some people, home is where the heart is. For Helen Marden, home is where the heart has been. Marden, a painter, mother of two and the wife of the artist Brice Marden, has been hitting the road regularly since she made a trip to Morocco after college. "Traveling alone is one of the great pleasures in life," said Marden, who has also traveled extensively with her family. And the living room of the Mardens' Manhattan town house — she calls it "my cave" — has become a richly illustrated album of those journeys. Though the room contains furniture ranging from early American to Eames, and art by Franz Kline, Richard Tuttle and Marden herself, it mostly reflects Marden's longtime fascination with India. "I could go there every year, and I'd be happy," she said. "It's so ancient and it's so sensual." So it would seem, from the room's profusion of sinuously sculptured deities, sexually explicit Tantric paintings and ritual phallic symbols. But what is really seductive about the room is its evocation of a life well lived. ■

Pilar Viladas is the design editor of The New York Times Magazine.



A bronze Art Nouveau lamp, the base of which is in the shape of a frog that holds up the shade with its forelegs.

When worlds collide: A chair by Jean Prouvé stands next to an African monkey figure.

A four-panel painting by Helen Marden hangs above a mid-ninth-century temple frieze from Java.

A painting by Richard Tuttle hangs under a Tantric painting.



A medieval Indian carved stone dancing figure with a body so voluptuous that it makes the contemporary "bad girl" painter Lisa Yuskavage's pinup-proportioned lovelies look malnourished.

A seventh-century, pre-Angkor Cambodian stone statue of Ganesha, the elephant-headed Hindu god who is the remover of obstacles, and one of the few male deities in the house. Marden is attracted to images of strong, powerful women. So much so that her husband said recently, "This is a woman's house."

A 1950's settee that Marden found in Allentown, Pa., and liked so much that she had her upholsterer make a copy. It reminded her of the loveseat that Charles James designed for John and Dominique de Menil's house in Houston.

A Sri Lankan puppet hangs behind a vintage wire chair by Charles and Ray Eames that's draped with a Sumatran wedding cloth — the kind of multicultural mix the Eameses had in their own house.

One of Marden's first acquisitions, a Mughal-era white marble bed. Placed in the middle of the room, on a fragment of a 19th-century Indian rug, it looks like a giant coffee table but there's no place to put your drink. It's crowded with, among other things, carved lingams, phallic symbols used in the worship of Siva, the Hindu god of destruction and reproduction.

Marden didn't paddle this carved wood boat back from southern India herself; she got it in London. Though she likes souvenirs as much as the rest of us, her pricier artifacts generally come from top dealers in London and New York.