

DESIGN & DECORATING

ANATOMY LESSON

A Mantel for This Season

An interior designer's guide to nailing a celebratory but refined display for the holidays

By YELENA MOROZ ALPERT

WHEN Jennifer Jones visited her local Michaels, she and her 12-year-old son skipped the craft shop's flocked nutcrackers and glitter-bombed knickknacks and headed for the faux-floral aisle. "It felt more tasteful and less literal than the Christmas-decor section," said the principal designer of San Francisco's Niche Interiors. She wanted her fireplace mantel's holiday decoration to hint at wintry themes rather than veer into Santa's workshop territory. Avoiding explicit references, she reasoned, would help her achieve a modern, elevated display.

So the pair picked up faux flora—white berries and a string of dusty-green eucalyptus—to supplement Jones' collection of vintage objects at home, including a 1950s gouache-and-charcoal drawing that hangs over her mantel. At home, Mom, Dad and son started by using craft wire to blend the artificial greenery they bought with fresh cedar fir garland, which Jones had sourced from a local Christmas tree lot. "Adding eucalyptus to the pine garland adds a contemporary touch," she said.

Frosted pine cones and the draped sprays of store-bought berries, which tie in to the white fireplace marble, further evoke winter. She and her son spray-painted and dusted the pine cones years ago, and they get packed up every year with the other ornaments.

More sculptural objects she already owned, such as brass candlesticks, vintage brass deer and hard-bound books, came next. "I think the idea of collecting things, of making things more layered, is part of the story too," said Jones.

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That said, some figurines had to overwinter in storage, because restraint was key here. "Set up an arrangement, then take away one or two items to see how it changes," she advised. Jones nixed white glass modern miniature Christmas trees she often uses on her holiday mantel; they made the vignette look busy. "The trees were competing with the deer, and it started to feel a bit too literal, like a winter forest tableau or Nativity scene," she said.



FESTIVE BUT EDITED San Francisco interior designer Jennifer Jones mostly stuck to green, brass and neutrals.

Taking care to leave negative space helped her delicate "landscape" work. "The objects are outlined, you see the shape more," said Jones of letting the deer

graze in front of naked white walls. Two worn, gray books elevate one of the deer, giving the arrangement a sense of movement. The eye travels along the variously

sized candlesticks and then to the vintage deer.

"This creates more interest than having things at the same level," said Jones. Another factor that introduces subtle contrast: Jones used metal pieces that are tarnished to different degrees—each distinct but still in conversation with each other.

The modern black-and-white artwork serves as a balancing backdrop to the traditionalism of the mantel tableau, and doesn't disrupt the pared-down palette of green, brass, black and white. "Too many colors is a huge mistake," said Jones, who warns that succumbing to the urge to bundle a lifetime of ornaments can result in "rainbow throwup." A limited palette makes the vignette new and sophisticated, she says.

After establishing her strict color story, however, Jones let herself jolt the quiet composition with three bold and graphic buffalo-plaid stockings she sourced from a small local maker. Hung to one side, they include an unexpected splash of red.

The process wasn't terribly time-consuming, says Jones. The trip to Michaels took the longest, but the mantel came together in about an hour. "It's nice having a kid who helps decorate."

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Leo Gestel Woman's Head With Bird (1935) 12 Inches by 16 Inches Framed Canvas Print, \$64 at Fine Art Canvas

McGee & Co. 6-foot Faux Winter Evergreen Garland, \$83

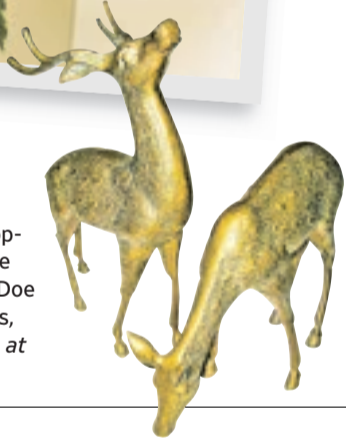
Ashland 6-foot Eucalyptus Garland, \$10 at Michaels



Faribault for Target Wool Holiday Stocking, \$51



Pottery Barn Booker Taper Candleholders, from \$10



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