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# a christmas story



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**OPPOSITE** The huge tree in the library is decked out with ornaments collected over many years. “There’s no point in having a precious Christmas tree that the kids can’t help with,” says homeowner Michele Leighton Symons. However, they pitch in after their mum has hung all of the Murano glass balls. The prints on the wall are of the Great Exhibition of 1851 in London, England, housed in what became known colloquially as the Crystal Palace, and are a reminder to Michele of her thesis on Canada’s participation in the first World’s Fair. The English Regency Gothic Revival chandelier was sourced in England as Michele planned the decor of her new house. Stylistically, it works beautifully with the late 19th-century Aesthetic Movement mirror and sconces.

**DESIGN**, Michele Leighton Symons, [michele.symons@bell.net](mailto:michele.symons@bell.net);  
**CONTRACTOR**, SevernWoods Construction; **PAINT & WALLPAPER** (throughout), Farrow & Ball.

Rich in architectural features and stunning period antiques, this stately Edwardian home in Toronto’s Rosedale neighbourhood is a showpiece all year round, but in December it really comes to life thanks to the homeowner’s beautiful collection of holiday treasures from abroad – all carefully selected and deeply sentimental.



## a treasured trove

For Michele and her husband, Ryerson Symons, the 10-foot-high Christmas tree (shown above) brings back many memories of England, since some of the decorations date back to the couple's very first Christmas there. "Ryerson's family was visiting and we didn't have a thing," says Michele, "so I went out and bought various pieces from Peter Jones, one of the old Sloane Square department stores. I still have those decorations, and every year since then I've added to them - it doesn't matter where I am, I always find something. Our collection is a true reflection of where we've been." The tree features beautiful Murano glass balls, hand-stitched items, interesting ornaments that depict the six wives of Henry VIII, and hand-painted eggs from Prague.

Michele has a story about most pieces in her home, including the round rent (or drum) table from the English Regency period in the hall. "A landlord would stand at such a table and spin it to the drawer assigned to each tenant as they queued to pay," she explains. The circa 1775 red lacquered clock is in the chinoiserie style.

Sterling silver **PUNCH BOWL**, red Mason's **COMPOTE**, Cynthia Findlay Antiques.

**BOTTOM LEFT** A black lacquered Victorian papier mâché tray with gilded detailing holds Egyptian blown-glass balls picked up during Michele's travels.



## In the dining room of her Toronto home, Michele Leighton Symons steps onto an almost 200-year-old chair to reach

a 19th-century glass vase from France. "It's decalcomania," she says, holding it out for inspection. "I keep them up here because they are extremely fragile."

More often in this home, fine English and French antiques and decorative objects from the 18th and 19th centuries are very much for living with, touching and – like the circa 1820 English Regency dining chair – maybe even standing on, albeit carefully. But then again, Michele is no ordinary antiques lover, and the house she's taken pains to restore and furnish is equally extraordinary.

When she and her husband, Ryerson Symons, moved to London, England, in 1993, they had no idea they wouldn't return to Canada until 2009, and that the years in between would feature stints in London, Paris and New York; a master's degree in art history, specializing in decorative arts, for Michele; and the addition of three children to their family. When the opportunity came to move home, they jumped at it.

But their love of traditional architecture and the soaring ceilings of English and French historic homes led to quite specific must-haves for these Toronto house hunters. It took time to find this stately Edwardian, but when Michele first stepped inside, "It was love at first sight," she says. The house had character, good flow and large rooms, so they quickly bought it.

Back in England, preparing for the move, Michele happened upon her "new" house in a book on historic Rosedale architecture. The architect, she noted, was William Limbery Symons, so she asked Ryerson if he was a relation. He didn't know, but his mother did: the house they'd bought was designed by his great-grandfather. "It was a lovely surprise," says Michele, "and a bit of serendipity that made us feel even more so that we were coming home."

Michele – passionate about and extensively educated in the decorative arts – lavished the home with curatorial care, sourcing period-appropriate pieces like antique light fixtures, solid brass electrical plates with mother-of-pearl buttons, and beautifully wrought antique heat registers. Working with Toronto-based SevernWoods Construction, Michele meticulously

restored important features, such as the living room's original mahogany doors. To give the home a more Edwardian feel, she had countless pot lights removed and each hole carefully plastered (the stunning original cornices in the principal rooms were intact).

But the home is no museum. "You've got to use a home and enjoy it," she says. "The kids come in and play the piano every day. There's no room that's off-bounds. They sit on antique chairs. We use it."

That's especially true during the holidays. "Similar to my mother, I like to have a very busy house at Christmas," says Michele. "Friends come and people are in and out daily over the Christmas period."

Even the palette of the principal rooms – red and gold – seems made for the season, but the colours are what Michele has always gravitated toward. "I like richness and colour," says Michele, who worked with Farrow & Ball to choose a paint palette for the house, taking her fabric swatches to the London showroom and finalizing decisions with the Toronto location. The cross-the-pond decorating technique has resulted in a seamless interior. In fact, that every piece of furniture and artwork has been collected over many years in Europe and not hand-picked for the Toronto home is surprising. "I have a certain set of principles that are just in my head, and over the years I apply those same aesthetic ideals to whatever I buy. Somehow it all works."

That's her heartfelt advice: buy what you love. It's a sentiment that explains why Michele, who can happily share historical facts about her many collections (tole, *verre églomisé*, china and glass), gives more importance to how each piece makes her feel. "Everything here is a reflection of my life, my experiences, so they all have an extra dimension, rather than just being a chair or a furnishing in a house," she says. "That's what makes it rich for me."

It's her credo and it's what turns her extraordinary house and collections into a home that, whatever the season, is designed for friends and family to take pleasure in. "A space like this is meant to be enjoyed and shared and lived in," says Michele. "And we do."



A photograph of a living room. In the center, a black grand piano sits on a white platform. A large, ornate chandelier hangs from the ceiling. To the left, a brown sofa is adorned with patterned cushions. In the foreground, a red and pink damask armchair is draped with a white fringed throw. To the right, a dark wood chair with a tufted seat is visible. The room is decorated with framed pictures on the walls and heavy curtains on the windows.

“When buying antiques, **we**  
**always bought what we liked,**  
regardless of whether we  
had a place for it at the time.”

MICHELE LEIGHTON SYMONS, HOMEOWNER

One of the first things Michele did in the living room was measure the space for her mirror. It fits perfectly, hung to sit on the cornice. “That’s how the French put their mirrors up. They never put them flush to the wall – they’re always tilted so you can see the room,” she explains. For a lush garland at the mantel, Michele mixed fresh greenery with her collection of dried Christmas decorations, which she brought from England. The antique English sofas were bought at a fair in New York. “They had been re-covered in pink satin damask, so they were very boudoir-esque,” says Michele. Now upholstered in Michele’s favourite colours, the pair anchor the formally arranged living room.

Gold **TOSS CUSHIONS** (on sofas), damask **TOSS CUSHIONS** (on chairs), cashmere **THROW**, Angus & Company.

The English Regency dining table and chairs had been sitting in Michele's basement in London, waiting for the perfect home. The table can seat up to 16, and at Christmas, Michele sets up a second table allowing her to seat 25 for dinner. The late 18th-century English Georgian linen press holds family heirlooms and other table linens Michele has collected. Three pieces of fragile decalcomania are displayed on top.





“I take great **joy in decorating for Christmas.** It’s incredibly time consuming, but it creates a wonderfully festive home.”

MICHELE LEIGHTON SYMONS, HOMEOWNER

**ABOVE** Michele sets her holiday table with her collection of red and green Murano glass. “I don’t set a table that’s perfectly matched,” she says. Her glass collection also includes Austrian and a wide range of Victorian ware.



**TOP RIGHT** An early 20th-century French mirror bounces light from the window into the dining room. The walls are covered in Farrow & Ball’s The Ringwold Papers, which is based on a silk pattern designed in the early 18th century.

**BOTTOM RIGHT** In the living room, the black lacquered English Regency chair with gilded detailing dates back to about 1820 and is the style that was used to furnish the set in the BBC *Pride & Prejudice* series.

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