Metropolitan Home

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A stylish dining room that reflects your taste, p.91

Taking Her Work

Raji Radhakrishnan—designer, wife and mother—stands beside the fireplace in her family room, leaning on one of a pair of 1950s Italian lounge chairs; the *Paris Review* silk screen over the mantel is by Terry Winters. Opposite: The octagonal room features a mix of pieces, from a custom sofa to a Jean Royère floor lamp, a coffee table by Paolo Piva for B&B Italia and a kid's lamb-inspired stool; the large photograph that covers one of the windows is from a show-house room Raji designed.

Home

In a Virginia suburb of *Washington, D.C.*, a self-taught interior designer called Raji broke all the old-school rules in creating her family's eclectic modern retreat.

HISTORY OF MODERN ART
UFFIZI • PITTI

Alexander Pope cautioned that "a little learning is a dangerous thing," but Raji Radhakrishnan is proof that virtually no learning at all can be an excellent thing. The native of Madras, India, is perhaps the brightest new interior-design star in the Washington, D.C., area, and she has made her reputation not by drawing on formal training but rather by relying on her own innate sense of aesthetics and composition, a curiosity about art and design, and a talent for creating a decor that reflects a client's personality.

Raised in a house built by her architect grandfather, a devotee of Le Corbusier, Raji (who prefers to go by her first name alone) has been drawn to design since childhood, yet she earned an M.B.A. from American University and worked in the business world until some six years ago. Motherhood derailed her plans to take a degree at the Corcoran College of Art + Design, but she has no regrets. "Design is a free-form art," she believes. "Yes, there is much to learn. But above all you have to follow your instincts."

There may be no better evidence of how sure her instincts are than the interiors of the 5,000-square-foot, four-bedroom suburban Virginia house that Raji shares with her husband, Murali Narasimhan, owner of a software-development firm, and their children: daughter Shruti, 17, and son Aditya, 4. Her ability to adapt her designs to the relatively mainstream architecture—the exterior is a brick Georgian/Federal amalgam, the interior layout a mix of intimate and open spaces—testifies to Raji's flair for both grand and subtle gestures.

The personality of Raji's living room comes from the singular mix. A tufted Hickory Chair sofa finds new friends in an anonymous quirky tripod seat and two pairs of vintage chairs: modern Danish by Ib Kofod-Larsen and English Regency from a flea market in London's Portobello Road. The vintage cocktail table is by the French designer Raymond Subes, the painting by S. Baker.

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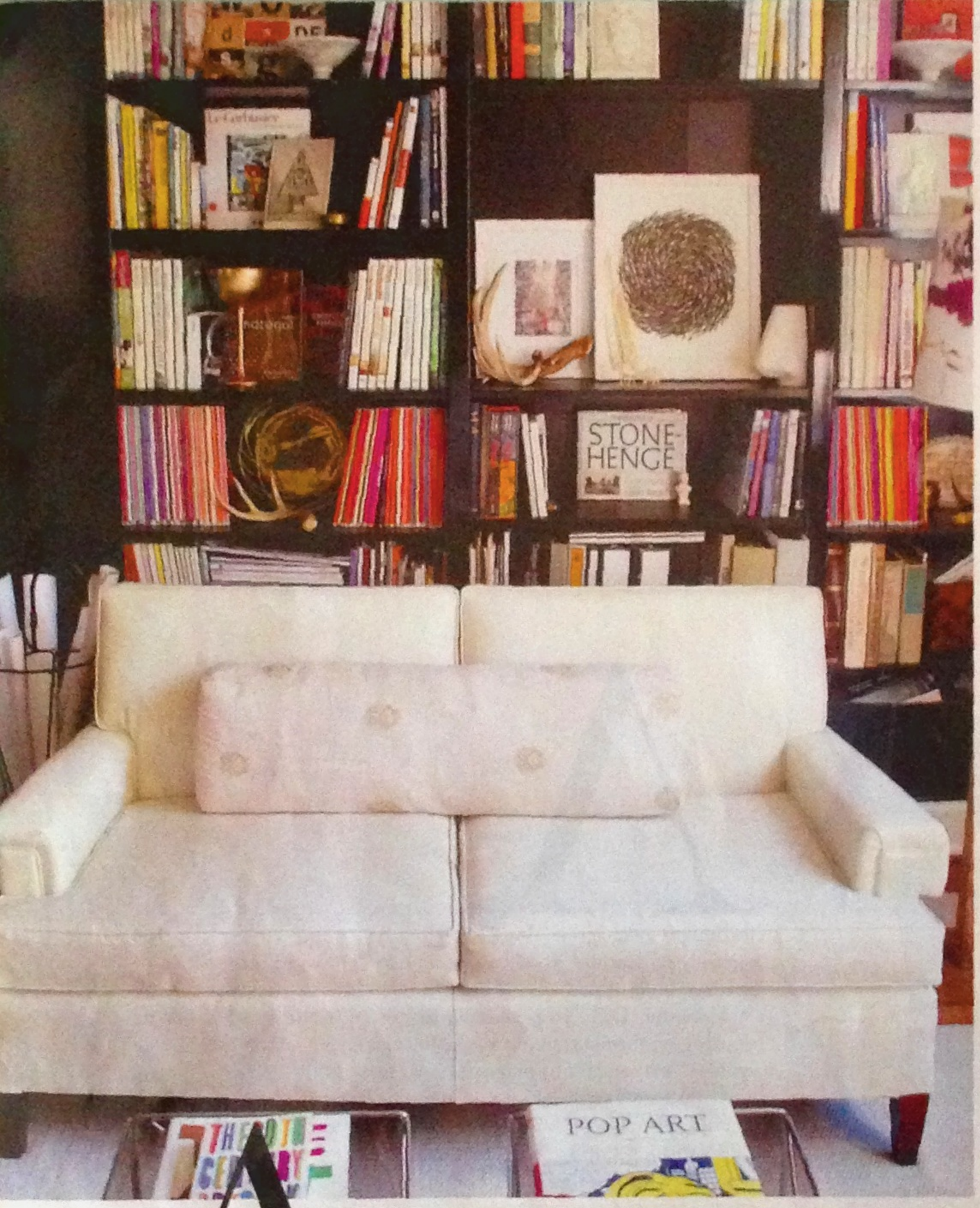


Although many find her rooms incredibly pleasing to the eye, beauty is not Raji's goal. "I never seek to make beautiful spaces," she says. "I want to create places that are interesting and intriguing, that get people talking."

And that is true of both the public and the private spaces in her own home, which is defined by an unmistakably personal, Raji-esque mix. The small, quiet living room has classical detailing—mullioned windows; plaster crown moldings of Raji's design—yet it incorporates furnishings and art that span more than two centuries of style. Two Regency spoon-back chairs hold court with an Expressionist oil painting of the Roman Forum; the marble-and-brass coffee table is by the art deco master Raymond Subes, but the metal tripod chair covered in graduated bolsters of black patent leather is by an unknown modern designer.

The family room is a soaring, sunny space that incorporates a double-height bay and opens to the breakfast area and the kitchen. Raji has designed the space as a place where she, her husband and the children can all gather at once, and it is to her credit that the vast room projects warmth, comfort and friendliness without skimping on visual delights, like a vintage drafting table and chair as well as art by the likes of Roy Lichtenstein. Raji actually works at that midcentury Friso Kramer *Revolt* drafting table at the center of the window bay, and her son draws while sitting on the lamb-shaped stool from the French design firm ibride. Off the family room is a combination library and home office that comes complete with a door for quiet reading, lounging or work. The formal dining room is at the front of the house, across the foyer from the living room.

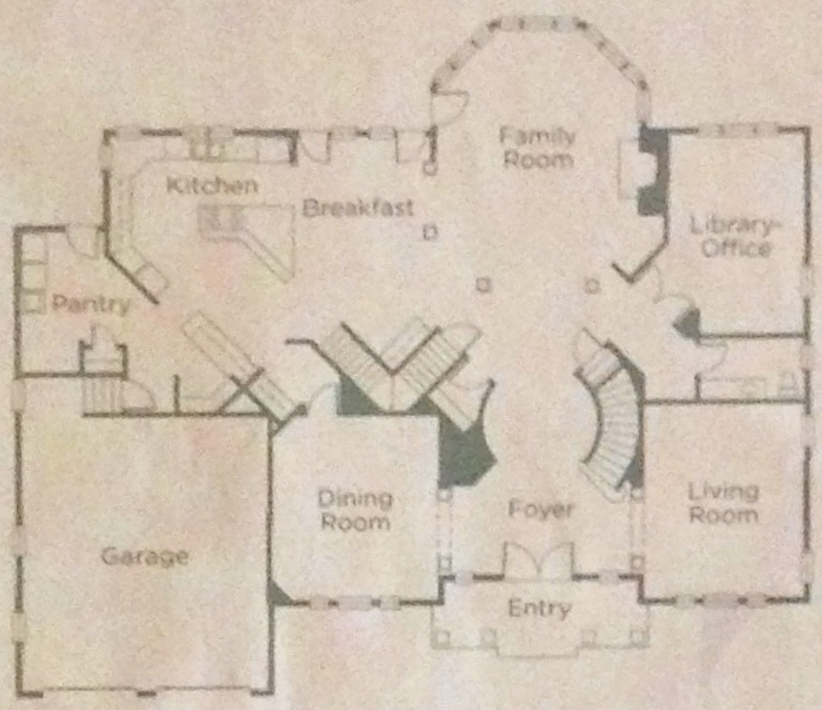
Above: The one dark room in the house is the office-library, which has black walls and bookshelves and a contrasting pair of settees from the 1950s covered in kidproof vinyl. Opposite: The art deco dining table and chairs (from an estate sale) are amboyna wood, a Southeast Asian burl; the Gio Ponti console table holds Claes Oldenburg's "Geometric Mouse"; the midcentury painting is by Tom Hayward.

To better display her art collection, Raji painted most of the house white, but not all the rooms are the same color. The living room, for example, is Donald Kauffmann DKC #28; the family room, Metro Shell White from Duron; the dining room, Benjamin Moore's Calming Cream. She also follows the beat of her own drummer in displaying the art. In the family room, a bright-red Takashi Murakami lithograph is hung across parts of two windows, maximizing its visual impact. But that's nothing compared with the photo in the family room.

In one window of their most-used room, Raji installed a supersize print of a photo she took, retinted blue, of the pediment of the British Museum. The technique is put to stunning use in the master bedroom, too. There, a blown-up detail of a mural at Versailles, given a sepia tone, covers the wall behind the bed (from the Design Centro Italia). The grandeur of the backdrop is tempered by a flirty Mathieu Mategot bench and two club chairs Raji reupholstered in a patchwork of textile remnants.

One day, thinking about her family and childhood, she got an urge to paint. "I love to paint, but on things like furniture or lampshades—never on canvas," she says. "That makes it too serious." Using materials including acrylics, crayons, old lipsticks and mud made from a sample of the russet dirt of her hometown, Raji went into the guest room and created her own abstract mural (see Detail No. 9, next page). The resulting work is joyous, nostalgic, a total expression of love—and something that they certainly don't teach in design school.

In the master bedroom, Raji proves she is a master of scale, managing to balance a pair of Giacometti bedside table lamps (from an auction at Christie's) with a supersize photomural, a low-slung contemporary Design Centro Italia bed and a pair of club chairs in a suite of fabric fragments. The bedroom also makes clear Raji's deftness at prompting the eye to keep in motion, shifting focus from object to object.



What the Pros Know

Raji sought to showcase her collections of singular furnishings and modern and contemporary art in spaces that were by turns formal and casual. At the same time, she didn't want the transition between rooms with different ambiences to be in any way jarring. She accomplished her goal in two ways. First, the traditional detailing in the formal rooms at the front of the house, such as ornamental moldings and window mullions—which provide a sympathetic setting for antiques and art deco–era pieces—disappears as you progress to the bright, airy rooms at the rear of the house. Second, and more important, Raji made the transition subtle, as she explains, "by keeping the 'shell'—the wall and ceiling finishes, the flooring—neutral and continuous." Every room is painted in white tones, and polished oak floorboards run throughout the house. The bonus, Raji says, is that "the uniform backdrop gave me great flexibility when choosing where to place furniture and display art."

Details

(1) Location, location, location: Raji and her husband chose their attractive if unprepossessing house in suburban Virginia because many of their relatives live nearby; the area has good schools and offers an easy commute into Washington, D.C.

(2) Raji excels at creating captivating tableaux, such as this one atop a dresser in the master bedroom, where she has arranged pieces from her collection of Cloutier Frères ceramics against the backdrop of an anonymous estate-sale painting. "I love the colors and the animation of the Cloutier pieces," Raji says.

(3) The breakfast area features a table and bench from Crate & Barrel and chairs by midcentury Dutch designer Friso Kramer; the lithograph mounted over the windows is by Takashi Murakami.

(4) A print of Gerhard Richter's "1025 Farben" adds color to the black-walled combination library and home office. A vintage partners desk by Arne Vodder is the nerve center of the space.

(5) Addition by subtraction was the method Raji used to improve her kitchen. She removed most of the upper cabinets (installing them instead in her laundry room and garage) and took the doors off those she left in place to showcase her serving pieces. The appliances include a Sub-Zero refrigerator, a KitchenAid wall oven and a Gaggenau cooktop set into the kitchen island.

(6) Elsewhere in the kitchen, Raji hung a pair of floating shelves to hold everyday china and part of her collection of glassware. The tripartite bud vase—a German piece, with a sterling base—was found at a flea market in Georgetown.

(7) Closing a passageway from the living room to the office-library allowed Raji to double the size of her minuscule ground-floor powder room. The mirror was taken from a wardrobe and repurposed; the countertop was once part of a bench. The sink and faucet are from Mexico and were purchased on eBay; Giancarlo Piretti's *Plia* folding chairs for Castelli sit at the counter.

(8) This master-bedroom vignette includes a circa 1940s French desk and chair and a Jean Boris Lacroix desk lamp. Raji shares many display tips on her blog, Design Dossier, and offers 20th-century furniture and objects through her online gallery, Maison et Toi (many of the objects in her home are from the gallery). Both can be accessed through her design firm's website, RajiRM.com.

(9) An exuberant artwork painted directly on the wall by Raji highlights the guest room. The custom headboard is covered in Pierre Frey's *Ocean* from Hines & Co. The Louis XVI–style bench, an online purchase, is covered in Watts of Westminster's *Bentinck* fabric. ●

See Resources, last pages.

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