

HOME INSPIRATION



PLAYING to the GALLERY

WORDS BY SIAN WILLIAMS PHOTOGRAPHS BY BRENT DARBY

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In a Welsh town celebrated for its artistic heritage, Val Harris's 17th-century apartment is a brilliant showcase for her own expertly curated collection of art and craft



THE DETAILS

WHAT'S THE STYLE?
A flat above a shop that dates from 1640

WHERE IS IT?
In the market town of Hay-on-Wye in Powys

WHO LIVES HERE?
Val Harris who runs her gallery The Table downstairs



Hay-on-Wye is one of those places that everyone knows but can never quite work out where it is," says Val Harris. She has a point. The town is, in fact, perched between the Black Mountains and the River Wye in the county of Powys, an hour's drive from the closest motorway with no train station in sight.

The remote location and breathtaking landscape have inspired artists and artisans for centuries and made the town home to one of the world's best-known literary festivals. And it's this creative energy that Val loves. It has helped her to make a success of the gallery she opened here in 2016. And it has also inspired her renovation of the apartment above, with its expertly curated collection of paintings, ceramics, French furniture and family heirlooms. It's like a slice of Hay's artistic heritage contained within four walls.

Val moved to this 17th-century, one-bedroom flat in 2012 from a smallholding just outside Hay. At the time, it was in a shabby state, having been tenanted for decades, with the woodwork and floors covered in dark-brown gloss varnish that reminded Val of old French interiors. "There were lots of similarities with a medieval French house I used to live in," she says. "Both were built around 1640 and this connection has definitely influenced how I've restored the flat."

The renovations were done gradually, when funds allowed, with the help of local builders, artisans and designers. One of the first rooms she tackled was the bathroom. The old bath was removed and replaced by the largest walk-in shower that would fit and a heavy stone French cattle trough was mounted as a basin: "The trough weighed a ton and took 'Gordon the flower man' and three postmen to hoist it up the two flights of stairs! But it was worth it."

Val then focused her attention on the narrow entrance hallway, laying a set of old terracotta floor tiles that she'd lugged back from a trip to France. For the walls, she added pitch-pine panelling, foraged from a friend who was renovating an old chapel down the road. Rather than removing the woodchip wallpaper, which would have brought the plaster down, Val bought four random books with varying fonts from the Honesty Bookshop at Hay ▶

THIS PAGE, ABOVE LEFT The iron benches in the courtyard were from Val's childhood home. She laid the herringbone brick floor LEFT The pitch-pine panelling was salvaged

from a local chapel OPPOSITE A new Bertazzoni Ferrari range cooker was installed in the kitchen and wall cupboards replaced by a shelf from Val's old house in France





THIS PICTURE Val has utilised the raised area in the sitting room with a bespoke seating area. Made from Douglas fir, it has seat cushions made from vintage French ticking and Welsh tapestry cushions from The Welsh Girl/BELOW The new windows were installed by a local builder who also made the window seats. The table is by Rob Barnby from Barnby Design, while the stool and stick-back chair came from Baileys Home. The utilitarian pendant lamps came from a local salvage yard



ABOVE A Daniel Backhouse painting hangs above a yellow papier-mâché bowl by Maureen Richardson, displayed on Val's revolving library. The arched opening leading to the kitchen is an original feature where Val has added shelving for storage and books THIS PICTURE An old plate rack bought from a brocante in northern France is filled with an array of Booths Real Old Willow pattern china inherited from Val's parents





5 ways to bring ART INTO YOUR HOME

- 1 **Buy what you love**, something that touches you or has a special resonance.
- 2 **Decorate a room around a key piece**, heirloom or artwork and use that as a starting point.
- 3 **Use the colours of an artwork** as a cue for the other hues you use to decorate a room.
- 4 **Go pale and interesting**. Walls in white or a neutral shade allow the most flexibility to house a growing collection of art and craft.
- 5 **Be imaginative about how you display artwork**. They could be lined-up vertically or horizontally (in relation to furniture pieces or the architecture of a room) or in a more random effect and 'patchworked'.



“There were lots of similarities with a medieval French house I used to live in”

Castle. She then spent two weeks hand-picking the pages to collage the walls.

The flat's location in Hay's conservation area meant that bigger jobs, such as restoring the building's façade and replacing the 1970s windows, required planning permission from the Brecon Beacons National Park Authority. "I wanted to see what had been covered over in the last century and then restore as many of the original features as possible," Val says. Traditional local builders Jones & Fraser repointed the original stone façade with lime mortar and restored the ornate barge boards at the front.

New sash windows were then installed, window seats were built into the newly revealed recesses and the original fireplace was opened up. All that was left to do was the painting. Although Val has painted her own properties before, this one was too small to decorate and live in at the same time. So, while she was away walking in France, she left her decorators to paint all the old varnish on the floor and the woodwork: "I came back from my trip and everything was white: it felt amazing, full of light and suddenly it was spacious and calm."

The neutral colour scheme has provided the perfect backdrop for her simple, bespoke style that combines her paintings, inherited furniture and the French brocante pieces she picked up while living in France. Val now rents the flat out to holidaymakers (she has moved just around the corner), and the walls are forever changing, showcasing original artwork for guests to both enjoy and purchase.

In the meantime, Val sits in one of her favourite spots, under the corrugated tin canopy of her woodshed in the courtyard outside the gallery, pencil and paper in hand. "After all these years of curating other artists' work, I feel it's time to create my own," she says. "As for an exhibition, we'll see what happens."

TO STAY AT the Atelier, visit atelierhay.co.uk (minimum three nights). For more information on the artists who exhibit at Val's gallery, visit thetablehay.com.

THIS PAGE, ABOVE LEFT In the bathroom, a heavy stone French milking trough was adapted as a basin LEFT The French cherrywood bateau lit was bought in Suffolk and

dressed in Egyptian cotton bed linen with Welsh tapestry bolsters OPPOSITE The courtyard woodshed, with its corrugated iron roof, is where Val likes to sit and draw

