





# WHITE MAGIC

Dressing up a cottage  
for Christmas with  
sparkle and serendipity

BY STEFENE RUSSELL  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALISE O'BRIEN

Part cottage, part château, part Joseph Cornell shadow box: That's how writer Bowen Hinton describes this house. "I can only say this—the house is like a being in and of itself, it truly is," she says. "It just has an aura.

When I speak of my home, I speak of the home itself... I think of myself as a steward. It just has too much interconnectivity with past stewards—and I would say potentially future ones—so yes, it's just magical. It's magical for lots of reasons, I think."

By the tree, Hinton uses  
ornaments and objects she's  
collected over the years—  
some not strictly seasonal—  
that naturally flow with the  
house she's after in any given  
year. She also likes a full, tall  
tree that spreads up into the  
open second story across  
from the house's loft space.



For tabletops, Hinton likes a natural look. Here, she's combined a number of elements, including family silver and Waterford crystal; white cloth napkins and white chargers from Pier 1 Imports; and antique Italian china patterned with gold turkeys, purchased from Ray Althoff's booth at Watson Woods Antique Gallery.

## THIS IS POETIC, AND ENTIRELY ACCURATE—

you can find the Cotswold-style cottage on page 258 of *Missouri's Contribution to American Architecture*, published in 1925, two years after the house was built. The book's been passed down from owner to owner, beginning with Marion Niedringhaus, who commissioned St. Louis architect Beverly L. Nelson to design it in the first place; illustrator Mary Engelbreit, who lived here in the late '90s and early aughts, was in that chain of handing down. In *Home Sweet Home*, a coffee-table book that gave Engelbreit's fans a peek inside the house, she describes how she stalked this charming little cottage-in-the-

urban-woods for years. It was a swifter process for Hinton and partner Tom Condon, co-head of the football division of Creative Artists Agency, who relocated to St. Louis from Kansas City in the fall of 2007.

"When Tom purchased the home, I had never been in it," Hinton remembers. "We had seen it together for the first time, but I had not been inside. The first time I walked through it, I said, 'This house loves people. It loves to have people here. I want it full of people—strangers, family, guests.' It's not meant to be grand. It's not meant to be anything other than inviting." And it is: "Everyone who walks in is just touched by this house."

That means it's a classic Christmas house. But Hinton's approach to dressing it up for holidays is entirely original. There is nothing

prefab, nothing pulled out of a box, ready to go. She scouts, saves, gathers, and makes by hand. You'll see a crow motif running through the house's decor; it's a bird that she identifies with for its love of color, sparkle, and novelty. She also loves Joseph Cornell, the New York artist known for his astonishing assemblages in shadow boxes. Though labeled a surrealist, he always rejected the term: He felt the movement's images, charged with chaos and *amour fou*, were "black magic." He strove instead, he said, to produce *white* magic, unusual but radiant images that used tropes such as parrots, glass pharmacy bottles, ballerinas, and the night sky. Hinton has a similar talent for pulling together assemblages of harmonious but surprising elements.

"It's serendipitous how I put things together,"

"I always have studded oranges with cloves, ever since I was a young girl in Girl Scouts," Hinton says. "I usually have cinnamon and cloves and oranges mulling on the stove, really probably from Halloween on, so that's just the fragrance that I like, as well as the aesthetic effect of the oranges on the room, before they really start to turn into pomander balls in the middle of March!"





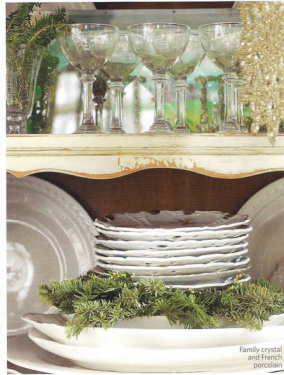
A tree made of pink cat paper—with hydrangeas from Hilton's yard



Vintage-style ornament wreath



Vintage picks give the tree a playful, cheery and classic feeling.



Family crystal and French porcelain



Hinton changes out her vignettes seasonally.



ONLINE: For more resources, go to [stlmag.com/athome](http://stlmag.com/athome).



Vintage ornaments, jewelry tree and green baubles.

**"IT'S SERENDIPITOUS HOW I PUT THINGS TOGETHER,"** *Hinton says.*  
**IT'S A KIND OF INTUITION.**

Hinton says. It's a kind of intuition. Put objects together in vignettes, and see how they talk to each other. "Certainly in this house, it seems to lend itself to dramatic little vignettes," she says, "because it's open."

That's especially true in the living room, which is open to the second story; you can see the rafters. Hinton and Condon like to have a big, tall tree that stretches out into that spaciousness. Hinton decorates the tree with pieces she's collected over the years, many of them vintage. "I have things on the tree that you wouldn't even say would be seasonal," she says, "but they seemed to go with this ethereal, dreamlike, phantasmagorical-type tree. And with a piece, maybe it's there one year, and I won't have it there the next year... There's never really a theme."

Hinton also loves natural elements like boughs of greenery, dried hydrangeas from her garden, and clove-studded oranges. "You can have a little bit of wordplay there—'scentimental,' with or without the C," she says, laughing. "It's both. I've always done that since I was a little girl, and it's scentimental because I love the fragrance... It just seems like Christmastime to me."

That evocation of Christmas atmosphere spills out into the yard, too. The wishing well is roped in white lights from Thanksgiving until Valentine's Day; the trees in the back yard are illuminated, as are the gazebo and the pool house. The couple also covers the front fence with lights, adding wreaths and bells to create what Hinton calls a fanciful "retro postcard" look, which she hopes gives neighbors a little mental lift as they drive by.

Hinton's design instincts are fresh and inventive, but they also spring from a love of history and tradition. The tree in the hall, made of pink paper feathers, is hung with little clocks to allude to the passing of time, not in a heavy vanitas sort of way, but in a way that's wrapped in the coziness and nostalgia of the holidays. And though different ornaments come out from year to year, she definitely has her holiday rituals—including the last one, taking down the tree.

"That's a solo celebration. Not with a bottle of champagne—but I probably *should* have one," she says, laughing. "I have my saw and my little ladder, and the dogs sit there and watch in amazement. And it goes back out the door." ❧