



GREY MATTERS

By draining colour from the walls of his South London home, interior designer Michael Nicholas is better able to showcase his striking furniture and artworks

Michael Nicholas jokes that the mid-grey walls of the dining room in his South London home are the brightest in the house. "It gets darker as you go up through the floors," he says, and he is right. The top floor bedroom is such a deep shade of charcoal it is almost black.

Although dark and dusky, all this grey does not make the house gloomy. The lovely proportions of the early Victorian terrace allow plenty of light to brighten the rooms, while the high ceilings make them elegantly spacious. Then there are the tricks that Nicholas, who worked as a chartered surveyor before becoming an interior designer, has used to play with and amplify the light.

The plans for Nicholas's home were well developed before he moved in. "For a number of years I lived in a similar house in this road, so I knew the style and configuration well," he says. His plans included making a first-floor dining room and kitchen. "Many houses in this street have basement kitchens, which involves a lot of running up and down stairs. As I don't have a family or need that extra space, I opened up the two rooms on the first floor and made them into one."

By closing up the original doorway from the hall to the rear room he created an uninterrupted expanse of wall for the sink and units, as well as space for a return unit that acts as a visual break between the cooking and dining areas. Nicholas also excavated the rear chimney breast, clad the inside with steel and used it to house the stove. "The chimney acts as a very efficient flue," he says.

The kitchen units are faced in grey laminate wrap; the doors to the hall are painted deep grey, and even the floorboards are stained American black walnut. But then Nicholas's flashes of genius pick up the light. The doorknobs are shining orbs of glass with silver mounts; the backs of the panelled window shutters are in-filled with panes of mirror; on either side of the fireplace, which supports a large film poster for Luc Besson's *Nikita*, there are Art Deco mirrors; and, on a side table, family photographs in silver frames, papier-mâché horns covered in silver gilt, and antique silver cigarette boxes all reflect the daylight that shines through the windows at the front and back of the room.

The mix of furniture is also interesting. In the dining room a round Victorian rosewood table with an ornately carved pedestal base is surrounded by four Pierre Paulin Little Tulip chairs from 1965. In the sitting room on the floor above, a contemporary sofa is teamed with a pair of early Victorian library chairs. A vintage Louis Vuitton travelling trunk doubles as a coffee table, and a pair of modern mirror-panelled cabinets house the TV and hi-fi. "When you put contrasting or opposite pieces together it allows each to shine," Nicholas



Clockwise from top left: the sitting room with mirrored cabinets; Nicholas coming through the bi-fold doors; the en suite bathroom that was once a bedroom; a throw on a chest; the garden; a glass doorknob; the main bedroom with dark walls





'When you put contrasting or opposite pieces together it allows each to shine - it's a more interesting group'

says. "Matching chairs and tables or a three-piece suite would be a less interesting group."

The wall colours also provide the perfect backdrop to Nicholas's artworks. "I often buy at auctions for clients, and sometimes pick up something for myself. Many of these paintings have gilt frames because they were originally displayed in rooms without electric light. Their reflective surface would help to mirror the candle or lamp light and direct it on to the picture." A similar effect is achieved by the shades on a pair of black table lamps on either side of the bed in the main bedroom, where a gold lining enriches the light from the bulbs.

"The house was built without bathrooms," says Nicholas. "I made an en suite to the main bedroom by converting a small bedroom, and added an extension to the back of the second floor for a guest bathroom." These two rooms are both clad in slate - grey slate, of course.

Looking over the fence to its mirror image next door, it is easy to see how Nicholas's garden must have looked before he remodelled it. Where Nicholas has neatly laid stone pathways, a round pond and raised beds filled with architectural shrubs and trees, the other is an overgrown tangle of greenery.

Nicholas's house is restful and attractive during the day, but he says that it comes into its own at night. "With the shutters closed, and candlelight reflecting in the mirrors and mirrored panels of the closed shutters, it takes on a different mood and atmosphere," he says.

A change of mood is something Nicholas is used to as he packs his bag of drawings and swatches and heads off to the south of France, where he is working on a client's villa. The skies there may be blue, but he knows that at home his own grey heaven is waiting. ■

michaelnicholasdesign.com



The first-floor kitchen and dining room with its grey walls and steel-clad chimney recess. The Victorian table is surrounded by Sixties chairs

