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INNER LIFE



A MEETING PLACE AGAIN: David Tourjé and wife Linda gather around the dining room table of his design with their son Kyle, right, and friends in the 1907 home, a former art salon.

An art house revival

A would-be teardown in South Pasadena is inspiration for a modern-day salon framed by its eccentric past.

By DAVID A. KEEPS
Times Staff Writer

WHEN Dave Tourjé bought the decrepit 1907 farmhouse nearly 10 years ago, he didn't have a clue it would become South Pasadena Cultural Landmark No. 44. Rescuing the structure from certain

teardown status was more about math. “It was twice the amount of money I wanted to pay and five times the amount of work I wanted to do,” he says. “But in that neighborhood, houses that were half the size were way more expensive.”

At the time, the 47-year-old construction firm owner – who for the last two decades has spent the better part of his work week as an artist, reverse-painting rebuses on acrylic panels – found it only mildly interesting that the house had belonged to Nelibertina “Nelbert” Chouinard, founder of one of the earliest and most prestigious professional art schools in Southern California. Only when he mentioned the name to his father did he learn that his aunt had been a Chouinard student.

After talking with that aunt, Tourjé felt the Chouinard legacy begin to resonate within his walls. The story it told – of the charismatic Minnesota-born painter who started her own Los Angeles art school in 1921 – suggested how the Monterey Colonial farmhouse might live on for a new generation. In its heyday, the home had served as a salon for local artists, a place where Chouinard faculty, students, graduates and their artist friends could exchange ideas and admire one another’s work. Tourjé’s goal was to restore that spirit, to re-create the essence of Chouinard’s salon but in his own way.

“The primary reason the house was nominated as a landmark in 2000 is cultural, not architectural” says Glenn Duncan, president of the South Pasadena Preservation Foundation. The property was significant because it played a critical role in “fostering a collegial atmosphere for local artists and for students.”

LIKE a scholar, Tourjé researched the school, which operated near MacArthur Park in L.A. before it



DISPLAY: A painting by the late Chouinard instructor Emerson Woelffer hangs over a Tourjé cabinet. Tourjé’s ceramics sit on the mantel.

closed in 1972, three years after Chouinard’s death. He reached out to former teachers and students such as painter Ed Ruscha, minimalist sculptor Larry Bell and Ojai potter Otto Heinno. By 1999, a year after moving in and completing the first round of renovations, Tourjé had become a guardian of Chouinard’s history, the house his chief artifact.

“I was surprised to learn that something so important had existed in a city that I conceived of having no history,” he says. “I wanted to make sure it was remembered.”

Tourjé joined forces with Robert Perine, a former student and historian of the school, to create the nonprofit Chouinard Foundation and revive interest in the institution and its illustrious graduates, who include costume and fashion designers Edith Head and Bob Mackie, Echo Park ceramist Peter Shire, surf and rock graphic artist John Van Hamersveld, Warner Bros. cartoonist Chuck Jones and a host of Disney’s original crew of animators.

Many of these former students donated work to the foundation, which, after resurrecting the school from 2002 to



WIDE OPEN SPACES: The Tourjé’s home, originally built on 20 acres of citrus groves, evokes the spirit of a Southern country house with its second-story terrace and large front yard.

2006 in South Pasadena, now runs classes in conjunction with L.A.’s recreation department at the Exposition Park Intergenerational Community Center. The foundation also runs a program allied with the arts group KAOS Network in Leimert Park.

These recent efforts have stayed true to Chouinard’s vision, says Charles Swenson, a 1963 graduate of the school’s animation program and former creative producer on the TV cartoon “Rugrats.”

“She believed that art was for everybody and education



BELTS OF STEEL: A steel conveyor belt chair made by Tourjé.



PERSONAL GALLERY: Dave and Linda Tourjé in the living room, which, like the rest of the house, is filled with Chouinard artists' work and pieces by the Tourjé's and friends.

should be affordable," Swenson says. "She believed that art would make you a better person. If you studied you might not become the greatest painter in the world, but you'd be a better gas station attendant because of it." Tourjé, Swenson adds, "brought Chouinard house back to blossom as a salon.

"It is not cold and austere like a historical house, but someone's home where art and artist's gather. It's such an inviting place. The French doors of the living room open out into the front yard and the world, beckoning people to come in."

That, however, was not how Tourjé found it. The Glassell Park native was living in Eagle Rock when he first drove by the South Pasadena house.

"It was a completely impenetrable thicket overgrown with trees and shrubs and vines," Tourjé says. "I actually said, 'God help whoever buys this thing.'"

He passed the house again a few months later as the owner, a real estate broker, was leaving.

Tourjé got a better look, noticing a tree that was one of the biggest flowering pears he had ever seen – "so old, it must've been planted with the house." He noticed a small concrete pond and fountain studded with Batchelder tiles. Inside the house, he found Douglas fir flooring, old doorknobs, copper hardware and other period details.

"At that point," he says, "the house really started to communicate to me."

It spoke in an architectural polyglot. The home, originally on 20 acres of citrus groves, is defined by a colonnaded side porch facing the street. A terrace runs the length of the second story, giving the house the profile of a Southern country house. The Batchelder tiled fountain on the back patio has the decoration of the Arts and Crafts movement popular in turn-of-the-century Pasadena. A 1919 addition to the house is Spanish-influenced, with a winding staircase leading from a second-story sleeping porch to the garden below.

"The house is an eclectic mix of early 20th century styles, an organic work in progress that evolved as Nelbert Chouinard needed it to," preservationist Duncan says. "And it is stamped with her own creativity."

In much the same way, Tourjé had to approach the restoration of the house with all the imagination he could muster. The previous owner had passed on dozens of low-ball bids on the house when Tourjé proposed leasing and fixing up the house for 18 months, with rent going towards his future purchase of the property. As the proprietor of a firm that specializes in foundation and hillside repair, however, Tourjé could do much of his own contracting work, which kept initial upgrades to around \$100,000.

One thing he didn't attempt was a structural overhaul. The 2800-square-foot house has five bedrooms and 2 ½ baths, plenty of space for his kids Camelia now 21; Kyle, now 17; and Alana, now 15. "We just settled in

and dealt with the house on its own terms," Tourjé says, adding that Chouinard's additions were made with humble materials and without regard for architectural conventions. "The house really has a sense of her blithe spirit. It's like an old shoe, worn in and comfortable."

The kitchen, which had been modernized by the previous owner, needed to be gutted. Tourjé, who has made stainless-steel and concrete furniture since the 1980s, poured concrete countertops and used structural rebar to support a cantilevered breakfast bar, under which sit 1950s-style metal and rattan stools from Pier 1. He also made a dining table topped with concrete that's imprinted with eucalyptus from the backyard.

"Everything I took out of the house or found on the property I tried to use again," Tourjé says. He stripped doors, replated hardware and disassembled the arched glass facade of a china hutch and installed it as a kitchen window overlooking the backyard. Original pantry cabinets that had long been consigned to the garage were dusted off, sanded down and repurposed. The uppers now sit as a console in the front entry hall; the lower cabinets, complete with a mahogany top, found new life as a vanity in the master bathroom.

ALL OF this work was done with few photographs or resources to provide directions. "The good news was that the house hadn't been touched," Tourjé says, laughing. "That was also the bad news."

To get the original color for the exterior, he had to scrape off 10 coats of paint on the siding and computer-match the right shade of vintage taupe. Inside, on the assumption that the house might host art shows, Tourjé installed dozens of recessed lights in the freshly finished ceilings. "I destroyed the entire paint job."

It was a wise move, though, as the house soon filled with Chouinard artists' work displayed alongside pieces by Tourjé, his family and friends.

The smoking room, and enclosed space that was likely a porch where men enjoyed their pipes, has a bench designed by Tourjé and sculptor Brad Howe. Elsewhere, walls are covered with framed works, including head studies drawn by Disney animator Don Graham and the iconic poster for the 1966 surf film "The Endless Summer," designed by Chouinard graduate Van Hamersveld. A collection of World War II-era snapshots with handwritten captions by Tourjé's father hand in a cluster on the upstairs landing. In the master bedroom, Otto Heino pottery sits on a Scandinavian-style dresser.

The living room's 1985 painting by the late Chouinard instructor Emerson Woelffer hangs over a black walnut cabinet built by Tourjé, topped with low-fire pottery from Nicaragua and a 1930s-era Dada machine sculpture. Tourjé's high school ceramics sit on the mantel, and the wall above it is covered by totems he made from sticks, rocks, cans and wire.

"It's about creating some kind of aesthetic harmony with things that are just laying around," he says. "I pick up a

scrap of something, find materials that communicate with it and construct a piece that works."

Tourjé has done just that with the house, building a home that not only preserves the memory of the school and its founder, but also creates a livable space for his family. That is perhaps the greatest difference between now and then: the presence of children.

"My Aunt Nelbert wasn't a kid person, and it wasn't really a kid house," says Chouinard's great-niece, Karen Lawrence, a New York-based commercial artist. "She was pretty formidable, truly a diva. She used to charm all these important artists into teaching at the school, and she did it all with blarney because she couldn't offer them a thing."

South Pasadena historian Duncan says Tourjé's restoration has given a future to a relic of the past.

"Nelbert Chouinard was a widow. Her children were the students of the school," he says. "Dave's kids are living, breathing contemporary teenagers who made a house that was on its last legs come alive again."

The house has been approved as a Mills Act property, a designation that provides tax breaks for restored landmarks. Tourjé says the family is mindful of their obligations living

in a house devoted to art and filled with history, but they haven't struggled with it.

"There was really no way with three kids, three dogs, two cats and a bird that we could live in a house that constrained our lifestyle," he says. "We were able to fall into it naturally and be ourselves."

On a recent Sunday afternoon, as the teens rummaged through the refrigerator before dinner, daughter Camelia recalls those days back in '98, when she was 12 and the family had just moved in.

"I wasn't sure I wanted to live there," she says. "But art is a common interest for everyone in this family, and it brought us closer together."

She moved out this year to live closer to the school at which she teaches, but she frequently finds herself returning to her family home and all that it represents. "Although it's an artistic house and landmark, we were always able to use it, to have gigantic birthday parties on the front lawn and friends stay over. It was a great place to grow up, and even more of a home because of all its memories and history."

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Suppliers

Some of Dave Tourjé's key resources:

Lumber: Hard-to-find millwork and vintage wood is from George L. Throop Co. in Pasadena, (626) 796-0285, www.throop.com.

Seating: Old-fashioned library chairs around the dining table are from Hodgson Antiques in South Pasadena, (626) 799-0229. The red leather sectional in the living room is from Plummers, www.plummers.com.

Window, door glass: Harry's Glass Shop, Pasadena, (626) 796-4625.

Hardware: Vintage-style glass knobs are from Restoration Hardware, www.restorationhardware.com.

Picture framing: City Art, Van Nuys, (818) 997-8300, www.city-art.com.

-DAVID A. KEEPS



ART SCHOOL AESTHETIC: Pieces done by Tourjé decorate a living room wall, left. A lamp, center, made from a beer keg lights the second-story porch. Decorated guitars, right, dress up a bare corner atop restored Douglas fir flooring.

