

# ELLE DECOR

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## Hilary Swank's Manhattan Retreat

When she's not in Hollywood, actress Hilary Swank heads to a spare, serene apartment overlooking downtown New York where the views take center stage

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As a girl, Hilary Swank could see the whole world from her bedroom—at least in her mind's eye. Living in a trailer park with her mother, she devoured books, which she checked out by the armload from the bookmobile that made the rounds of her Bellingham, Washington, neighborhood. By 15, an age when the average girl's most fervent fantasy is to kiss some silly pop star, Swank had envisioned a rich and important life for herself.

So perhaps it's no surprise that this lauded actress (she was one of the youngest women ever to win two Best Actress Academy Awards) is content to inhabit a New York apartment that is modest in size and chicly understated

in its decor. For Swank, a home needn't be as extravagant as a dream. "I feel comforted in smaller spaces," she says. "They're more nurturing."

Her tranquil 1,400-square-foot New York City nest also has practical benefits. It came in handy, for example, during the filming of *New Year's Eve*, a sprawling ensemble project directed by Garry Marshall, opening December 9, in which Swank plays Claire Morgan, the woman in charge of making sure the Times Square ball drops on time. (Other cast members include Robert De Niro, Michelle Pfeiffer, and Sarah Jessica Parker.) "It's a funny movie with a lot of heart," says Swank, whose character is afraid of heights—unlike the famously daredevil actress, who has played both a boxer and Amelia Earhart. "It's about second chances and forgiving yourself and life as a journey."

For Swank, whose primary residence is a rambling villa on the West Coast that she shares with her boyfriend and his son, retreating to her Manhattan hideaway doesn't mean shutting out the world. "I feel like I'm in a tree overlooking the city," she says. Though her building is situated close to the Hudson River, her view takes in only a thin slice of that mighty waterway; mostly, she gazes out on the intriguing rooftop tableaux of downtown Manhattan and Brooklyn, and Queens beyond. "I have started collecting art," says Swank, "but there's no piece of art that can compete with the cityscape. I love New York."

To help her craft an interior worthy of the view, she hired designer Mark Zeff, with whom she'd worked previously on a New York brownstone and her California house. The two have a natural sympathy. "Hilary is very intense and also very pure," says Zeff. "She knows what she likes. She doesn't live in fantasy. I wanted to create a place that would give her a sense of grace and harmony."

His options were limited, however, as Swank didn't want any demolition or reconfiguration of the apartment, which is in a new building on the site of a former printing plant. Walls had to stay where they were; kitchen and bathrooms remained largely as is.

Zeff's first step was to furnish the rooms with serene, clean-lined pieces, many of which he chose from the Calvin Klein Home collection. "Calvin's furniture has a strong modern sensibility without any tricks," he explains. Then he layered in elements—historical, cultural, emotional, symbolic—to offset any sterility. Softly weathered barn wood reclaimed from a Pennsylvania farm clads one wall of the living area. The study's shelves—custom-made built-in cabinetry designed by Zeff—are lined with artifacts: African headrests, hand-forged scissors, and sculptural Indian molds.

"I like Mark because his work has a worldly feel," says Swank, who once spent a month doing community service in India as a break from the pressures of Hollywood, and who has a particular affinity for Africa and its peoples. "He's from South Africa and has traveled all over, so he brings that sense of culture to his work. That is huge to me, to have those elements in my home."

When it came time to select art for her apartment, Swank turned to the Jack Shainman Gallery, known for championing artists from around the world. In her foyer, *Nuit de Noël* greets visitors; the 1963 photograph was

taken by Malick Sidibé, a Malian artist who documented Bamako culture in the 1960s and '70s. “They seem so innocent and happy,” says Swank of the dancing couple. In her bedroom and living room are dreamy, metaphysical paintings by Carlos Vega.

For both Zeff and his client, collaborating on every decision was important. “I’m very hands-on,” says Swank. “I’ve worked with people who roll their eyes when you make a suggestion. Mark doesn’t do that. He knows that it’s your living space, your home, and you need to have an energy in there that feels right to you.”

And their nearly decade-long alliance has paid off handsomely in the actress’s new retreat. “My home is my safe haven, where I can rejuvenate and rest,” Swank says, “so I can get up the gumption to go jump out of an airplane again.”

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