

Chic on a shoestring

BY AMY LAUGHINGHOUSE PHOTOGRAPHS BY COLLEEN DUFFLEY PRODUCED BY JOETTA MOULDEN

Holly Mathis sorts swatches in her upstairs workroom, her base from which she brings budget-friendly decorating ideas to life.

The living room walls showcase bargain finds such as a racket and cane from English street markets and a trio of discount-store plates.



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orget X-ray vision. Holly Mathis has a much more

practical superpower: Armed with gallons of paint and reams of fabric, this up-and-coming interior decorator has the uncanny ability to take what others consign to the trash and transform those finds into treasures. That talent extends to the house that she shares with husband Elton and their baby son, Drew—as well as nearly everything in it.

When Holly spotted the 1941 clapboard cottage for sale in Elton's hometown of Hempstead, Texas, its white picket fence, tidy brick porch, and snug dimensions appealed to her unassuming style. A newlywed with a tight budget, Holly knew she would have to be resourceful in decorating, drawing upon her gift for finding beauty in everyday objects. "A chipped picture frame, a dough bowl, rickety shutters—everything has a story and a purpose," she says.

Well, almost everything. The yellow shag carpet, avocado-green appliances, and rust-color faux-marble counters that clad the interior had to go. But Holly saw through the disco-era disguise. "The home had a lot of character," she says. "Elton said, 'I cannot see it,' but he trusted my vision."

Holly, in turn, trusted the power of paint. She and Elton hired a contractor to install drywall over the old

Elton Mathis enjoys a moment with baby Drew on the front porch (*top*). The couple did little to change the exterior, aside from adding black shutters and painting the door vibrant red. Holly stitched on black-and-white check borders as an attractive way to lengthen her living room's too-short toile curtains (*left*). A hand-me-down rocking chair got a coat of black paint.



White painted paneling and a checkerboard vinyl floor lend the kitchen vintage charm. Granite tile—a less expensive option than granite slabs—covers the countertops.





TRY THIS

If you have a fixture that detracts from a room's appearance but can't easily be moved, create a decorative element around it instead. Closed, the shutters hiding this air-conditioning unit

lend the illusion of a doorway; open, they allow air to flow freely.



wallpaper on the walls and on the ceiling downstairs. They painted the walls themselves, choosing fresh, neutral colors for most rooms. Upstairs, Holly and her mom tore down wallpaper and an underlying layer of cheesecloth, then clipped hundreds of threads that clung to nails in the horizontal wood paneling beneath. Because she knew the wood would soak up paint fast, "I bought the cheapest paint I could find," Holly says. By the time the paneling was coated, she'd used every gallon of her chosen white shade that the store had in stock.

When she decided to paint the imitation marble countertop in the master bath too, some might have suspected that she'd been around paint fumes too long. But she couldn't afford a new counter, so she simply primed the old one with a deglosser and covered it with stone-color latex paint, using a roller with a heavy nap to hide her strokes. She then sealed it with several coats of water-base polyurethane.

Holly slathered bright white paint on the old green kitchen cabinets and hired a carpenter to attach molding around the doors to give them a paneled look.

In the dining room (above), old shutters framed with molding disguise an unsightly air-conditioning unit. Holly's collection of white dishware, much of which she scavenged at thrift stores, fills the pine hutch. Empty frames on the dining room wall (right) are an affordable—and striking—alternative to traditional artwork.





The carpenter also cut large openings in three of the cabinet doors and added sheets of glass and additional molding to simulate more expensive divided panes.

The hardwood floors beneath the discarded shag carpet needed only to be sanded and refinished to restore their warm luster. Where there was no hardwood—in the kitchen, foyer, and downstairs hall bath—Holly and Elton installed black and white vinyl tiles in a checkerboard pattern. “It’s classic,” says Holly, who carried this simple black-and-white theme, accented by touches of red, throughout the entire house.

“Black is an elegant color. You can paint a really ratty piece of furniture, and that elevates it,” she says. She counts a 1970s faux-wood entertainment center, scrounged from a junk store, as one of her most dramatic makeovers. It was so hideous that Elton refused to let it in the house until it was cleaned and painted. Now it enjoys pride of place in the master bedroom.

Holly mixed thrift-store finds with mahogany pieces in the master bedroom (*right*). “I don’t like matchy-poo bedroom sets,” she says. A pair of \$6 equine lamps, painted black, illuminate the bedside tables (*left*). When Holly found that the matelassé shower curtain she bought for the downstairs hall bath was too short, she hung it from ribbon loops to extend it (*above left*). Assorted mirrors are framed like artwork in the master bath (*above right*). Cake stands and plates create attractive storage on the painted countertop.

Paint is one of the least expensive,
most effective tools for covering
any number of a home's flaws.





In Holly's view, whatever paint can't fix, fabric probably can. White slipcovers camouflage furnishings that range from a dated orange velvet ottoman in the master bedroom to a brown floral chair in the nursery. When she raised the curtain rod in her living room, which made her red-and-white toile curtains too short, she simply added a border of black-and-white check fabric at the bottom of each panel. In the master bedroom, an antique screen, its panels retrofitted with floral bed sheets and mounted to the wall, serves as an ingenious headboard. Matching sheets, turned so the ruffled border sweeps the floor, make easy no-sew curtains that attach to the rod with ring clips.

Holly's wall art is equally unorthodox. In the bold red dining room, she hung a collection of inexpensive empty picture frames, which she spray-painted black or rubbed with raw umber to dull their finishes. "It's a narrow room, so you couldn't get far enough away from a piece of art to really enjoy it," she explains. "I appreciate just the lines of the frames."

Holly remains modest about her knack for taking ordinary objects from battered to beautiful. "When you're young, you just try to make do," she says. "But if you make it a priority and know what look you want, you can pull it together with work." Her house is proof that a big effort pays off with an even bigger personal reward. ♪

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Slanted walls in the guest room form a cozy nook for Holly's childhood bed (top). The nightstand was part of an old waterfall dresser, flanking a dropped vanity. In the nursery (left), Holly dressed lampshades with polka dots, buttons, and beaded trim.