

FLAIR home & garden

RICHMOND SYMPHONY DESIGNER HOUSE I

Play TIME

Find puppets,
stuffed animals,
Parcheesi board

BY JANET CAGGIANO
TIMES-DESPATCH STAFF WRITER

The ornate puppet theater, complete with squirrel, alligator and clown characters, goes a long way in identifying the small, second-story room at St. Joseph's Villa.

But if this whimsical display isn't enough, the giant Parcheesi board is a dead giveaway.

Welcome to the child's playroom, one of 25 areas transformed by decorators and artists just in time for the 2001 Richmond Symphony Designer House. Open Thursday through May 17, the 8,000-square-foot house features several bedrooms, a study, a sitting room, a gentleman's library, family activity center, kitchen, butler's pantry and a sunroom.

The playroom, no doubt, will be a favorite for the children. But decorative artist Lara Koplin had the adults in mind too when she tackled the project.

"That's what is so great about a playroom," she said. "Who doesn't love to have fun? You are never too old for that."

Originally built in 1931 as a home for orphan girls, the Designer House was known as Seton Cottage and was decorated in shades of light green. Designed to house 24 children, two nuns and a matron, the structure featured six bedrooms for the girls, the nuns' room, the matron's room and the infirmary, each with its own bathroom.

Most recently used as classroom and office space, the former Seton Cottage will become Brook Road Academy school when the Designer House closes.

"I'm thrilled with it because the space is very large and very different from the things we've normally done," said Sue Dedian, chairman of the Richmond Symphony Designer House. "Typically, we do residences of 4,500 square feet."

No matter the size, it's difficult to locate a Designer House year after year, Dedian said. Few owners are willing to give up their houses for the time it takes decorators to complete the work.

"We take over for three months," Dedian said. "That makes it tough. Plus, you've got to have [a house] that has 20 to 25 rooms to make it worthwhile for the designers."



ALEXA WELCH EDLUND/TIMES-DESPATCH

Decorative artist Lara Koplin designed the child's playroom at the Richmond Symphony Designer House. It's in a former home for orphan girls at St. Joseph's Villa.

The former Seton Cottage is the perfect choice because of its size and accessibility. It is one of 20 structures on the 82-acre campus at St. Joseph's, a non-sectarian agency providing services to children in need and their families. "When we first looked at it, it



Koplin designed the puppet theater, complete with ornamental molding and velvet swag curtains, after the Byrd Theatre.

looked very institutional," Dedian said. "But it certainly is not."

Case in point is the 12-by-15-foot room that Koplin renovated. Once a bedroom with plain white walls, the area now is alive with bright colors, plush stuffed animals and entertaining games. "I realized early on in the pro-

A villa in the country

What: The 2001 Richmond Symphony Orchestra League's Designer House

Where: St. Joseph's Villa, 8000 Brook Road

When: Thursday through May 17, Tuesdays and Thursdays, 10 a.m.-7 p.m.; Wednesdays, Fridays and Saturdays, 10 a.m.-4 p.m.; Sundays, noon-4 p.m.

Admission: Adults, \$15; seniors, \$12; volunteers, \$5; individual unlimited entrances, \$25

Group tours: Pre-arranged tours of 10 or more are \$12 per person

Cafe: Luncheon from 11 a.m.-2 p.m. and tea from 2-4 p.m.

Boutique: Features gifts



Some of the toys are on loan from area shops, including this sculpture by artist Jamie Pocklington.

and decorative items for the home and garden

Special events: Gala preview party Wednesday (\$75-\$300); Glorious Interiors lecture series (Mondays at 11 a.m.); designer showcase; fashion shows and more

Proceeds: Fund-raiser for the Richmond Symphony

Details: (804) 421-3550



KIP DAWKINS

Lara Koplin (left) and assistant Amy Hicks gave the child's playroom a warm glow by using stencils shaped like Persian ornaments, spackling and green paint on the walls. It took about two weeks.

Designer

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ess that I wanted to do a playroom because it has so many possibilities," Koplin said. "It's something decorative that has a use."

And recreation is not its sole purpose. As a new mother, Koplin also recognizes the importance of games that teach.

"What a neat way to expose your kids to the arts through play," she said.

Koplin, the mother of 7-month-old Miles, began brainstorming plans for the playroom late last year. When she stumbled across a few puppets in an antique store in December, she zeroed in on her theme. She patterned the puppet theater on the Byrd Theatre, using ornamental molding and velvet swag curtains to complete the look.

"I think this really interests me because it has a lot of architectural integrity as well as being something kids can play with," said Koplin, who lives off Monument Avenue with her son and her husband, Kip Dawkins. "I want people to see an interesting

approach to dealing with decor."

Once the puppet theater was complete, Koplin went to work on the Parcheesi board. Made of canvas, the 8-by-8-foot game board doubles as a floor cloth. Koplin used latex paint and four coats of polyurethane to reproduce the game board, then painted giant plastic game pieces that can be moved with the roll of the dice.

Parcheesi, known as "the game of India," sets the mood for the rest of the room. Koplin spent nearly two weeks giving the room a warm glow by using stencils, spackling and green paint on the walls. Stencil patterns shaped in the form of Persian ornaments cover the walls and spill slightly to the ceiling, giving the room a covered tent feel.

Koplin placed brown wooden columns on either side of the rear window, then hung door beads in the place of curtains. In one corner sits the puppet theater with eight child-size Windsor chairs, in another a small antique piano and miniature pipe organ. Stuffed animals, including a camel, fill the room.

"I'd be kidding if I didn't say

that this [design theme] relates to me being a new mom," Koplin said. "But if I weren't a parent, I think I'd still do this. I just love the whimsical quality toys have."

This marks the second time in three years that Koplin has worked on the Symphony House. Designers are not paid, but the exposure makes it all worthwhile, she said.

"There are not a whole lot of avenues for someone like me to show their work," she said.

A graduate of Virginia Commonwealth University, Koplin worked for other designers for a few years before starting her own business, Lara Koplin Decorative Artist, in 1995.

"I have always loved the arts," she said. "I remember when I was a child, I'd do my homework and redo it so my penmanship was better."

Today, that passion for perfection is evident in her brush strokes as well.

"I love what I do," she said. "It's challenging. It's problem solving. I focus on the end result, and that gets me there."

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