

CLICK AND GO
MODERN

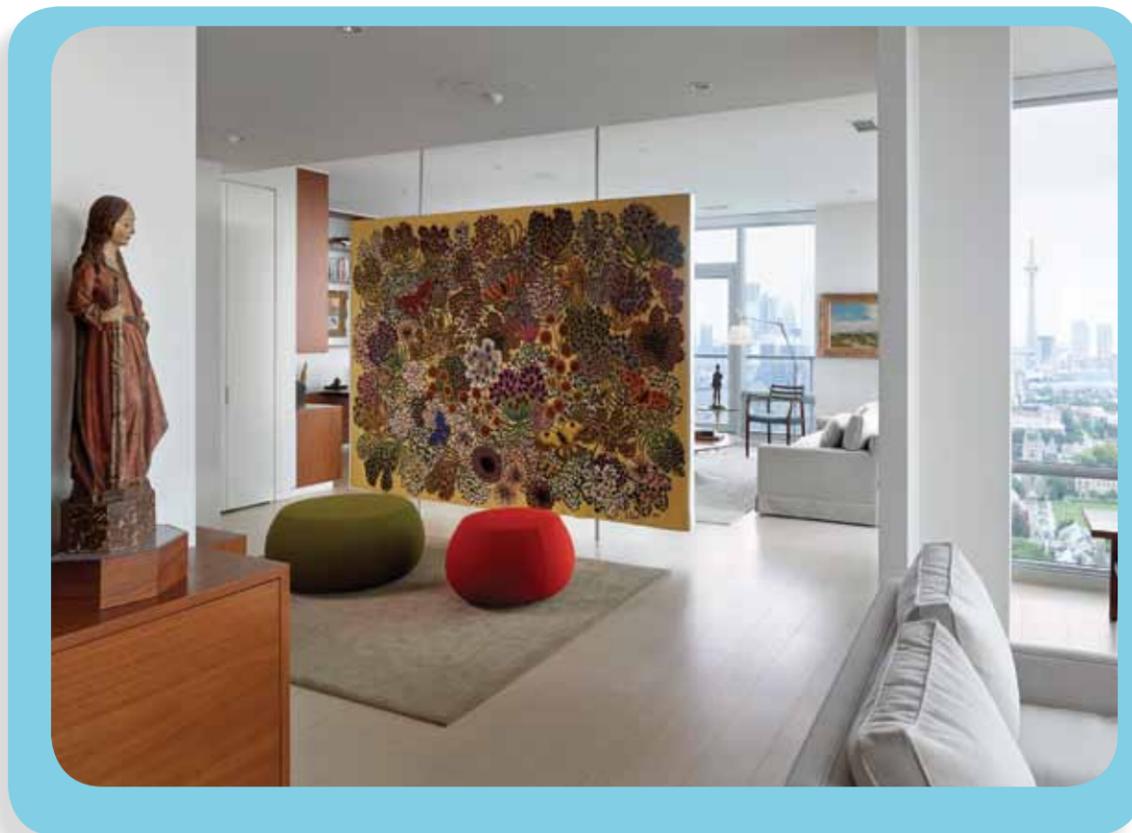
EXCEPT AS NOTED ALL PHOTOS BY SHAI GIL PHOTOGRAPHY

A Toronto apartment reflects a rich history of collecting

Art and Soul

By Will Jones

Bespoke cabinetry and iconic modernist design pieces are highlighted by the monotone color palette of Sonja Bata's sleek downtown Toronto penthouse. In addition to an Eames lounge chair and ottoman, the furniture includes two Gio Ponti Superleggera chairs, two Eero Saarinen Tulip tables, and a pair of armchairs by Danish mid-century designer Niels O. Møller. A still life by Pierre-Auguste Renoir hangs above a small Henry Moore sculpture.



A large floral tapestry entitled *Ombelles 1963*, Tapisserie by Frenchman Dom Robert creates both a grand welcome to the apartment and a screen between reception and Bata's office, beyond. The contemporary poufs are from B and B Italia.

With views on all sides, including this westerly aspect, the apartment is flooded with natural light, the perfect medium in which to appreciate Bata's mid-twentieth-century furniture. In this view looking from the living area to the dining area are a Saarinen Womb chair and ottoman as well as a Tulip table.

SONJA BATA SPENT MUCH OF HER LIFE working with her husband to expand the family shoe-manufacturing empire and even founded a museum devoted to the history of footwear. Over the years she also acquired a notable and significant collection of art and design (not to mention shoes), which filled the rambling house on seven acres in the Toronto suburbs where she and her husband lived for more than four decades. After his death, when she decided that she needed to downsize, she realized that she had quite a task ahead of her. The answer was to hire a talented young Toronto architect, Heather Dubbeldam, a rising star. The goal was to rationalize a life spent traveling and collecting and then to design the perfect new living space in which to enjoy the art, antiques, and design pieces that have come to mean home to Bata.

Swiss-born, Bata, now in her eighties, met Thomas J. Bata, son of a well-known Czecho-

slovakian shoe manufacturer, while studying architecture as a young woman. The couple married in Europe and then moved to Canada in 1946. After Thomas died in 2008, she began to search for a new place to live within the city of Toronto. A thirty-second-floor condo in the heart of downtown, overlooking the Bata Shoe Museum, seemed ideal, but the developer's proposed layout for the as yet raw space didn't appeal. "I wanted a condo with lots of open space and light, but that proved difficult to find," Bata says. "The one I purchased was well situated but the developer's plans for small rooms and enclosed spaces were rather unappealing."

After toying with the idea of redesigning the space herself Bata decided to enlist Dubbeldam, and the duo embarked on a journey that would see them working side by side to completely transform the space and integrate Bata's eclectic collection of twentieth-century

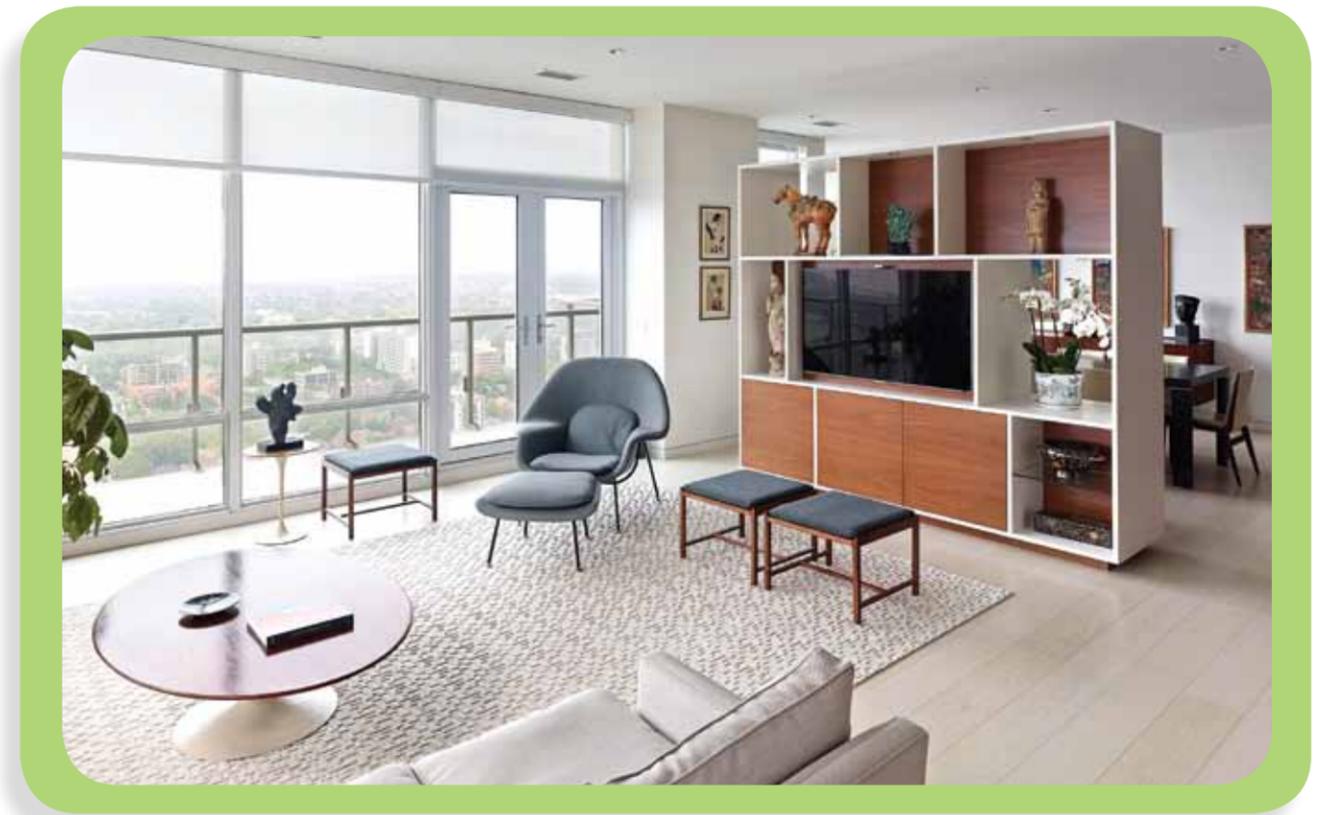
art and modernist design treasures assembled during a lifetime of travels.

The resulting 2,600-square-foot penthouse apartment is spacious and filled with light. Dubbeldam has maximized the ceiling heights by reducing the space between ceiling and roof to a minimum and designed an interior in which all living and entertaining spaces are open plan, while the kitchen, bedrooms, and bathroom are located off a corridor to the northern side of the apartment. "The keys to the design are light and interconnectivity," says Dubbeldam. "The flow of natural light throughout the main living spaces, and similarly the ability to move and make visual contact between them, creates the perfect informal environment for Sonja, whether she wants to relax, work, or entertain."

Views between each space are intriguing: through a freestanding cabinet, around a column, above and below a tapestry, and always

past some art or design treasure that will stop visitors in their tracks. Throughout, the walls, ceilings, and bleached oak floor are white—Bata and Dubbeldam in turn describing them as a blank canvas or a monochromatic backdrop on which to paint the story of Bata's life and travels via her expansive collection. The interconnectivity creates an ambiance, a flow that both speaks to Bata, and of her life. Even the corridor to the kitchen, bathroom, and bedrooms is enlivened by a bespoke forty-foot-long spine wall of walnut cabinetry that takes guests on a journey through South America, India, and the Middle East through Bata's collection of antiques.

Key to this winning combination was the time spent by the two in planning where each piece of art and furniture would be located within the apartment and in relation to its surroundings. To achieve such harmony Dubbeldam photographed every artwork and design



Mrs. Bata with Heather Dubbledam.

Custom cabinetry provides both separation and connection between the dining area, with its Ligne Roset table and 1960s rosewood chairs by Toronto designer Leif Jacobsen, and the living room area. Among the objects on the shelves that tell of Sonja Bata's travels are a Chinese pottery horse from the Tang Dynasty, a twentieth-century Indonesian carved wooden figure of a mythical deity, a Georg Jensen fruit bowl and candelabra, and carved Indian ivory figures.

piece, then scaled them down and used the images as jigsaw pieces, designing the cabinetry and rooms around them. "Putting each piece in its perfect place was a complex puzzle that we spent many hours and iterations upon" Dubbledam says. "Sonja is very precise and discerning, and the design is a true collaboration. We worked together well because we are both perfectionists."

A Henry Moore sculpture shares shelf space with a quirky trio of Nigerian tribal figures. All peer out from beneath a still life by Auguste Renoir, which shares a vantage point with them on the wonderfully crafted walnut cabinetry and overlooks a pair of 1950s Gio Ponti Superleggera office chairs, plus an example of the omnipresent Eames lounge chair and ottoman. "There are very expensive pieces and knickknacks that I picked up at local markets, sitting side by side," Bata says. "Each holds a special mem-

ory for me and as such, all are equally important." Then, picking up one of the office chairs, she brandishes it, saying: "Look, they are so light, so functional, great for me to be able to pick up and move easily. So perfect, you'd think they'd been designed yesterday."

Almost all of the furniture in the apartment comes from Bata's previous home. Long an avid collector, she has such modernist furniture as dining chairs by Toronto designer Leif Jacobsen, Hans Wegner kitchen chairs, and Eero Saarinen's Tulip tables—as well as the aforementioned pieces by Charles and Ray Eames and Gio Ponti. Artworks include examples by Italian sculptor Marino Marini and painter Marc Chagall.

"Condos are like hotels and their interiors so often look like they have been designed by a professional: clean and crisp but without personality," Bata says. "Every house and especially a condo needs personality in order that it can become a home. For me the mementos of my travels, the wonderful design pieces, and pictures of my husband and family; these memories that are so cleverly elevated by Heather's design make my condo my home." As she speaks, Bata looks lovingly at a framed photograph of her late husband that greets her as she enters her apartment. "Everything here has relevance and importance to me. Everything is done for a reason. The space is beautiful but also functional. In it I see my life, my travels, and my love."

And therein lies the secret to the magic behind Bata's new apartment. Her vision in being able to pick beautiful artworks—be they masterpieces, trinkets, or pieces of twentieth-century furniture that hold a timeless appeal—is matched by Dubbledam's creativity in bringing everything together with an architectural flair that neither overshadows Bata's collection of memories nor pales into insignificance beside them. **M**

Will Jones, an English-born writer living in Canada, has written widely on modern architecture.



VIRGINIA MACDONALD PHOTOS