

OUR (VERY) GRAND DESIGN

A 19th-century townhouse with no bathroom or kitchen was brought back to life by a Dutch politician and her finance boss husband



REPORT Emma J Page
PHOTOGRAPHS Dennis Brandsma

Home!



The library, with Sinus easy chair from COR. Opposite: the dining room, with table by Piet-Hein Eek and chairs by Ineke Hans, Peter Traag and Piet-Hein Eek



Marjet van Zuijlen; the house's exterior

For a city so closely associated with international politics and justice, it's fitting that Marjet van Zuijlen and Hans Turkesteen's elegant townhouse in the centre of the Hague was once a barrister's office. But behind its grand exterior lies a blend of contemporary art, striking sculpture and pared-back interiors that echo the hidden contrasts of this medieval-meets-modern city – a place that also features beaches, green spaces and a profusion of friendly neighbourhoods behind an array of neat façades.

"We moved here more than a decade ago after getting together and deciding on a new home to mark a fresh chapter," says former Dutch Labour party MP Van Zuijlen, whose partner is a boss at an investment bank. "We were based in a more rural area close to town, but we wanted the buzz of the city centre. This spot is known for its deep gardens, so it's like living in a park – the best of both worlds."

When the couple found this house, built by architect HJ van den Brink in 1874, it had no bathrooms or kitchen. Any alterations would be subject to much hoop-jumping since the building is also a national heritage site. But original features, including ceiling friezes, marble fireplaces, wooden shutters and an elegant elliptical staircase, proved an irresistible draw. "It took Hans minutes to figure out what tweaks would suit the house best," says Van Zuijlen. "Whereas I was too busy taking in the remnant details, including hunting trophies in the dining room and a vast collection of extremely vivid art that still lined the walls."

The renovation left the bones of the property largely intact. The couple added a doorway between the ground-floor dining room and kitchen for a more relaxed feel. On the first floor, they widened openings significantly to create a series of connected rooms, including sitting room, music room and informal dining area, where one vista leads naturally to another. The second floor houses their bedroom, bathroom and a library, while guest quarters are on the top storey.

Creating the ideal backdrop for their collection of art, sculpture and design pieces, carefully collected over 30 years, was the biggest challenge. "It wasn't easy," concedes Van Zuijlen. "Let's just say it involved much trial and error. For us, everything starts with the art and furniture. No compromises. They need space and attention."

As a result, the couple's home is carefully curated but not at the

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The first-floor living area, with plaster-pink walls. Right: the music room, with lounge chair by Eames in front of a painting by Volker Hüller





expense of character. "Neither of us enjoy a home that feels too interior-designed. We wanted it to feel expressive and alive."

Keen visitors to international art fairs, from Art Rotterdam in the Netherlands to London's Frieze, the couple prize contemporary art with a conceptual feel, from the striking plaster heads by Johan Tahon in the living area to Aboriginal statues and photography by Viviane Sassen. "I don't know if we share the same taste, but we have a rule that we both have to agree on the things we buy," says Van Zuijlen. "It's the only way for us to have a home that feels truly personal."

The colour palette plays an important part in uniting both the building's period features and its contemporary contents. Turkesteen chose a plaster pink for much of the first floor (Farrow & Ball's Calamine). "It lends a warming tone in the winter and a cooling atmosphere in the summer," says Van Zuijlen.

Elsewhere, they went back to the drawing board several times. "Originally, we chose a very light grey for the entrance hall and pastel green for the kitchen and dining room," she explains. "But we weren't brave enough and the result was insipid. We turned to charcoal



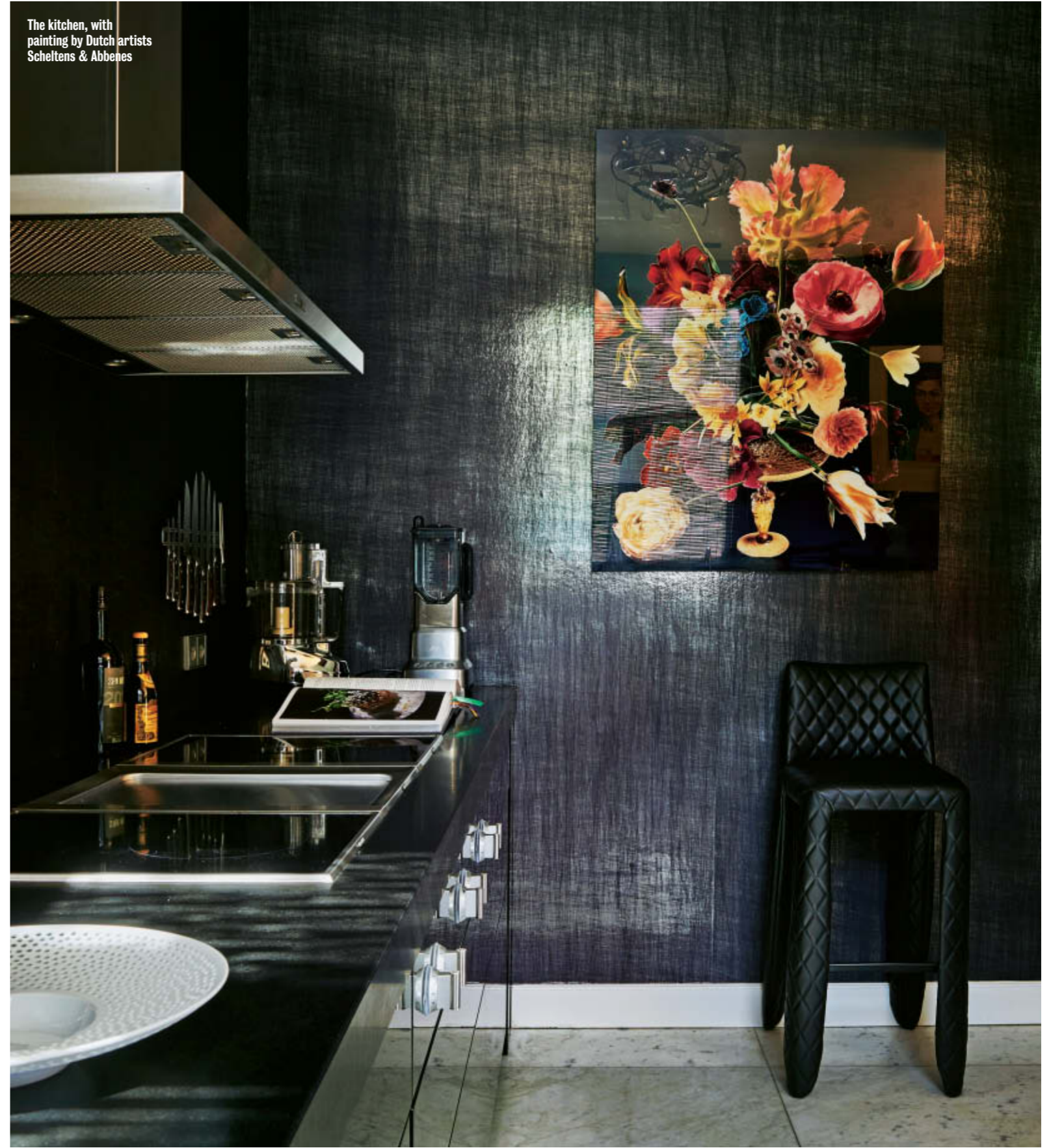
Clockwise from top left: the second-floor landing; Saarinen table, Eames chairs and a light by Flos in Van Zuijlen's office; living area, with heads by Johan Tahon at Galerie Van de Weghe, Antwerp

grey for the hall and dramatic black gloss in the kitchen for a cocooning feel and suddenly it all hung together.

"We wanted to make sure that each room was fully utilised," says Van Zuijlen. "So we don't have a routine. I might read in the sitting room while Hans relaxes in the music room, or I'll browse the papers at the table while he cooks in the kitchen. We tend to breakfast in one space and have supper in another."

Weekends involve shopping for groceries, cooking fresh fish from the nearby port of Scheveningen for friends or unwinding with a book. But of course there is always time to scope out new pieces.

"Our tastes have gradually evolved," says Van Zuijlen. "I used to love antiques, but now I prefer a directional look." An apt summary of this house perhaps, which has not so much been returned to its heyday as artfully ushered into a new era. ■



The kitchen, with painting by Dutch artists Scheltens & Abbenes