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The House That Pacita Built

A George Santmyer creation, “the house with the red door on 16th street,” was a refreshing oasis in otherwise conservative Washington, DC

LIVING | HOME TOURS

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*Pacita Abad is an internationally recognized Filipino American artist known for her bold colorful art exhibited all over the world including the Tate Liverpool, Hong Kong Arts Center, Galleri Stockgard (Finland), Pulitzer Art Gallery (Amsterdam), National Museum (Jakarta), and the National Museum of Women in the Arts (Washington, DC). In the Philippines, her work was shown at the Ayala Museum, Luz Gallery, Silverlens Gallery, CCP and many other places. Her experiences are reflected in the themes and materials in her work. She is best known for her **Trapunto** – a style of painting that includes quilting into the canvas – and her social commentaries in her art, including the identity of women and the immigrant experience in the United States. She lived in Washington, DC twice. First when she pursued an art degree from the Corcoran School of Art in the seventies, and then from 1986 to 1993. Her home with husband Jack Garrity was featured in the Washington Post. Pacita passed away in 2004.*



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"I am a painter who paints from the gut but has a strong social conscience."-
Pacita Abad

Our #APAHM highlights continue with prolific Ivatan and Philippine American painter #PacitaAbad! Abad is best known for her large scale, colorful, abstract paintings- and for being the first female recipient of the Ten Outstanding Young Men Award for Art in the Philippines in 1984.

Swipe through to see Abad speaking and teaching at her 1994 NMWA exhibition "Artists + Community: Pacita Abad," which showcased ten of her mixed media paintings!

·
Pacita Abad, "One Night Stand," 2002

·
Pacita Abad leading a Visual Arts Day Mask Making Workshop at NMWA, as part of the exhibition "Artists + Community: Pacita Abad"

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“Look for the house with the red door on 16th street.” Those were the only directions friends needed to find Pacita Abad and Jack Garrity’s home in Washington, DC. The Abad-Garrity home on [5315 16th St. NW](#) was a refreshing oasis in conservative Washington.

The Search

After leaving tumultuous Manila in 1986, Pacita and her husband Jack spent six months looking at 150 houses while they searched for a new home in metropolitan DC. Pacita wanted to be close to the DC art scene but also wanted a warehouse type home to display her artwork and to also serve as her studio. Pacita described the challenge of finding the right home to the Washington Post, “When you live in Washington, you think of houses, you don’t think of lofts.”

Pacita who lived in Washington in the seventies while studying art at the Corcoran School of Art was familiar with the ins and outs of the city. She gravitated towards the “Gold Coast,” one of the more integrated neighborhoods popular among the affluent African American community. Pacita and Jack finally found their house in the 16th Street Heights neighborhood, close to many area landmarks such as historical churches, Rock Creek Park and the Carter Barron Amphitheater.

The house Pacita liked was built in 1923 and attributed to famed architect George Santmyer, who was known for designing prominent apartment buildings around DC including [3901 Connecticut Avenue, NW \(1927\)](#); and [2101 Connecticut Avenue, NW \(1929\)](#) that are listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Though the house was traditional in style and decorated with romantic Laura Ashley wallpaper, Pacita saw the possibilities in the three-story 4,563 square foot house with its open floor plan and high ceilings. The stone material appealed to her, reminding her of the stone houses in Ivatan where she grew up.

"Pacitafied"

Pacita made several changes to their new home. The exterior was not spared. The turf in the front and backyard were replaced with Spindle trees whose leaves turned bright red in the autumn. A parking garage was built in the back of the house with blue walls and a small artificial waterfall on top was an imitation of a Korean garden Pacita saw from a visit to Seoul, Pacita told writer In-Duk Kim.

Inside, the heavy satin drapes were removed, and the Laura Ashley wallpaper painted over with the bright beautiful colors that Pacita loved. Pacita's husband Jack fully supported the makeover and chose the paint for the house, comparing the colors to his morning coffee, telling the Washington Post that "I like it pure, strong and a lot of it." The dining and living rooms were painted a deep red, a backdrop for Pacita's floor to ceiling paintings, and the various artwork they collected from their travels. Inspired by a visit to Frida Kahlo's home, the kitchen was colored sunny yellow and blue. Orange dominated the sun porch, and many a guest was reminded of the sea when they looked up to the turquoise ceilings. Compared to the main level, Pacita's second floor light-filled white walled studios were serene spaces, providing a break from the sensory overload of colors and images downstairs.

Like her art, Pacita's home reflected her travels around the world. Mexican hand-painted tiles; Turkish blankets; Kilim -handwoven and one-of-a-kind rugs- from Morocco, Afghanistan and Turkey; Mulberry bark from the South Pacific; and mirrored cloth from India decorated the first floor. Beneath the stained glass on the foyer, a mahogany wild boar from the Philippines welcomed guests, a nod to Pacita's Filipino ancestry.

Gatherings

Pacita and Jack loved to entertain, inviting twenty to a hundred guests at a time.

Frequent invitees were members of the **Philippine Arts Letters Media Council of DC (PALM)** of which Pacita was a founding member.





The first time journalist [Jon Melegrito](#) entered the Abad-Garrity home, he thought he was “walking into an enchanting and magical place” that was “a whole new world exploding with vibrant and radiant colors” as the “ceiling to floor trapunto murals closed in on you when you walk through the front door.” All senses were entertained, with lavender and lemon scented candles and oil littered around the house. Despite the unconventional surroundings, guests were made comfortable, “plopped down on the floor rug banked with pillows” according to writer Noree Briscoe, describing how “the room rocked with laughter and *tsismis*.”

Aside from the delicious meals, parties hosted by Pacita and Jack were accompanied by lively conversations about culture, politics and the community. Their home was not a place for the prudish who would have been uncomfortable with the sometimes naughty and risqué jokes openly shared. Pacita, like her paintings was larger than life, her sense of humor and lively personality livening up discussions. Jon described how she would turn on the turntable, playing Latin and Caribbean music, inviting guests to dance.

There were many memorable moments. One time, the living room was turned into a disco with Pacita leading the dance, making the more reserved guests to loosen up and join in the fun. At one Christmas party, instead of a traditional Christmas tree, Linda Yangas remembers seeing a narrow floor to ceiling painting of a Christmas tree with its decorations hung on the wall with presents piled underneath in the dining room, while visible from the living room, a pine tree with colored lights could be seen.

Postscript

Though the house on sixteenth street has new owners and the colorful walls are back to neutral shades, memories of Pacita Abad remain vivid like the brilliant colors that decorated her former home. Just as she travelled around the world, her work now travels around the world, provoking and inspiring discussions among its viewers just like the dinner parties she once held.

This story is based on the collective memories of Pacita Abad's fellow PALM members, Noree Briscoe, Jon Melegrito and Linda Yangas. The author is grateful to Jack and Kristi Garrity for sharing materials about their 5315 16th St. home.

To learn more about Pacita Abad, please visit pacitaabad.com. For those interested in Pacita's life in Washington, DC, PALM members will be sharing their memories in an Istorya session on June 17th. Register [here](#).

Article by Titchie Carandang

Banner and thumb images courtesy of Jack Garrity and @pacitaabad.

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PACITA ABAD

JACK GARRITY

MAKEOVER

ARTIST HOME

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