

# Santa Barbara

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Eileen Haber at her  
Montecito home



Arming of the Knights, as they depart in Quest of the Holy Grail, at third, in the year, 1081.



## Vidya Gauci

DECORATIVE PAINTER

Many people work at beautifying Santa Barbara's homes, but few bring the unique experience to their work that Vidya Gauci does. Prior to becoming one of the area's most sought-after decorative painters, Vidya was a nun for five years at the Vendanta

## SB PEOPLE

Temple convent in Montecito. I first met her about a year ago at the Santa Ynez estate of Tom and Caryn Cantella, where she was adding a delicate border to a stucco fireplace. Her calm, focused demeanor immediately struck me. "She's a spiritual person," agrees Santa Barbara architect and designer Peter Kavoian, who has worked with Gauci for the last seven years. "She has this intuitive connection to her work that really makes it rise above the rest."

Clients like her so much that they hire her to do a project and end up asking her to add more and more elegant touches to their homes. That was the case with John Marsch, a telecommunications executive who owns the Montjoie estate on the Riviera. Vidya worked for him on and off for a year, creating a trompe l'oeil in the entryway, decorative detailing on doors and moldings, and a mural in the living room (inspired by Edward Burne-Jones's Holy Grail tapestries, see page 105).

Last fall, Vidya invited me to her home studio near downtown Santa Barbara. Decorative art draws from a long tradition of art history, so creating a design requires meticulous research and preparation. After the client approves what she will create, Vidya draws the initial design to scale in miniature. Depending on what the outcome will be (stenciling, ornamentation or a mural), she then transfers her work to a wall, door or other surface and completes the painting. "I tend to be very detail oriented. But once all the planning is out of the way, the actual painting process often taps into the same quality as meditation. It's very enriching," says Vidya, who never starts the day without meditating.

For Vidya, her artistic pursuits and her spiritual life have always intertwined. She grew up on Long Island and studied art as an undergraduate at Long Island

University and Marymount Manhattan College. But prior to completing her degree, she took a leave of absence that changed her life. Then 19 years old, she flew to the Bay Area to visit friends in Berkeley. "They were into classical Eastern mysticism. It was all based on Vedanta philosophy," she recalls. (Vedanta affirms the oneness of existence, the divinity of the soul and the harmony of religions.)

While in California, she met a boyfriend and the two lived in Colorado for a summer. But soon after, eager to take up her art again, she returned to New York. There, her art teacher, who had become a yoga instructor, took her to a Vedanta and yoga retreat. "My intention had been that I would get married to this man [from Colorado]," she recalls. "But by the time he came out to see me at Christmastime, I had decided to lead a contemplative monastic life. It was a deep sincere calling."

But her superiors at the Vedanta Society of New York wouldn't let her become a nun right away. "They said, 'You have to finish your degree first,'" remembers Vidya, who went back to school, living at the society as a monastic resident. "I had a four-by-six-foot room with my art table in it," says Vidya, whose given first name is Carmen. Her chosen name means "divine knowledge" in Sanskrit. "It's something to remind me to aspire to," she says.



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After completing her arts degree, Vidya transferred to Montecito's Vedanta convent in 1985 and officially became a nun. There, she continued to lead a monastic life and created sacred images for special occasions and calligraphy for the bookstore. But after five years she decided to leave. "I was ready to embrace living life on my own," says Vidya, who tried to go back to the name Carmen. "So many people knew me as Vidya that it didn't work."

In 1996, she saw an artist friend at the Vedanta Temple. "He's a mural painter and he said, 'What are you doing right now?' I said, 'Nothing.' And he said, 'Come and paint with us.'" Since then, she has pursued her art career full-time. In the late '90s, she worked with Marc Paint (now Marc Decorative Finishes in Summerland), and in 2000 went out on her own as an independent contractor.

## "MY STUDIO IS A PERSON'S HOME."

Last summer, her boyfriend, Gary Colman, proposed to her. "This is the first time I'm going to be married. It feels right," she says. A few days after saying yes, she took off for Italy to mark her 50th birthday. "I said, 'I'm going to the Florence Academy of Art to celebrate,'" says Vidya, who enjoyed 10 days sightseeing with her sister before classes started. "I spent a month studying still life painting in the old masters style."

Inspired by the experience, Vidya is busier than ever painting the town. And while she may have left behind her life as a nun, a gift of grace still follows her. "Monastic life gave me a terrific foundation. When you live in a community, you have to be honest and have integrity. I find that's really appreciated in business too," she says, adding, "Creating beauty motivates me. It makes my heart sing."

-DEGEN PENER