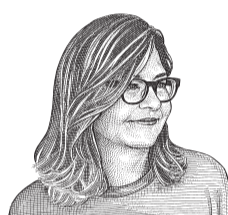


DESIGN & DECORATING



ILLUSTRATION BY JON KRAUSE

MICHELLE SLATALLA / A MATTER OF LIFE AND DÉCOR



How to Deck the Halls And Not Your Mate

THE WORLD IS DIVIDED into people who like colored holiday lights and people who like white lights. Before you marry a person, you should make sure you are compatible. My husband and I didn't.

Me: "Colored lights are tacky."
Him: "White lights are goyish."
(He is Jewish.)

This year the holiday-décor stakes are particularly high because it's time to replace all of our frazzled old string lights. The incandescent minis are dead and our strings of LEDs hopelessly tangled. Unless we act fast, this crisis could spell doom for the "magical blinking kitchen" that has made us famous in certain neighborhood circles. Plus, our friends the Goldbergs are coming to stay.

We've gone through hard times before. In previous years we've tried to find common ground by embracing fads: Christmas tree lights shaped like flickering candles. Icicle lights dripping from the gutters. Fairy lights on copper wire in a

guest bedroom. One year, in an uneasy truce, we even put a string of blinking red lights shaped like chile peppers on the 30-foot evergreen garland my husband orders annually from the Boy Scouts to create what he calls his "signature saloon look." But the weight of the bulbs

I think holiday lights should echo the old-world effect of candles. My husband thinks white lights are goyish.

brought the whole thing crashing down, and the dog narrowly escaped decapitation by décor.

We decided to settle the lighting issue by setting rules for civil debate. We agreed to compromise, avoid ultimatums and not get emotional.

Him: "I can't work with white

lights."

Me: "Oh my God, what are you even talking about?"

We needed the cool-headed advice of a neutral third party. ("A therapist?" my husband asked. "A professional holiday decorator," I said.)

I phoned Brandon Stephens, president of the Décor Group, with more than 300 Christmas-décor franchises in 49 states and professional holiday decorators who work on 45,000 properties a year.

"If you want a 16-foot-high Christmas ornament with benches inside that can comfortably seat six people, we can make that," Mr. Stephens said. "Two 6-foot nutcrackers to flank a doorway? We do that too."

"Actually, I just want to know how often you have clients who can't agree on whether to decorate with white or colored lights," I said.

"We do run into it occasionally," he admitted. "It's usually a good-natured disagreement."

"How do you settle it?" I ask.

"Usually the wife wins," he admitted again.

Maybe. But in this case we're dealing with a situation where my husband claims that his earliest memory is of "colored Christmas lights in the neighbors' yard. I must have been 3, maybe 4." Even if this recollection is suspect on its face—scientists say that most early childhood memories are generally replaced by events that occurred after the age of 6—it would make me feel like Scrooge to stomp on it.

Sometimes I lie awake at night and wonder if the battle over holiday lights has been causing friction ever since the earliest instance of Christmas tree electrification.

What's known about the very first display in 1882 is that Edward H. Johnson (who worked for Thomas Edison), attached 80 red, blue and white walnut-sized bulbs to an evergreen tree mounted atop a spinning wooden box, enabling onlookers in his Manhattan parlor to admire the effect from all angles. A newspaper

reporter who witnessed the spectacle was awe-struck ("one can hardly imagine anything prettier").

What is not known is how Johnson's wife, Margaret, felt about the garish display. "Don't you think that next year all-white bulbs would look pretty, like candles?" she probably said.

Candlelight is, after all, the most flattering light that exists, for my complexion or for yours. Candles—the original way to light up Christmas trees—created a magical, otherworldly glow in the decades before electricity caught on. The downside was you had to keep a bucket of water nearby to douse sudden house fires.

I do not advocate a return to those days, when the cotton-wool beard donned by the family Santa sometimes went up in flames. But I do think the whole point of modern holiday lights is to echo the old-world effect of candlelight—and strings of incandescent white lights are the best way to achieve that effect.

For years, public opinion, if not my husband, was on my side. As recently as 2010, white lights accounted for more than 70% of the hundreds of thousands of strings of holiday lights sold annually by Alpharetta, Ga., company Christmas Lights Etc. (which bills itself as "America's most-shopped online Christmas lights store").

But times are changing, said Frank Skinner, the company's marketing director. Nowadays colored lights account for more than half of the company's holiday-light sales.

How is this even possible?

Said Skinner: "People decorating in red-white candy-cane themes, or blue-white winter-wonderland themes, has become more popular."

When I reported this statistic to my husband, he suggested a candy-cane theme for the guest bath. "The Goldbergs will love it," he predicted.

I must have looked sad, though, because then he asked, "What's your earliest memory?"

A Christmas tree, of course. With a piney scent, shiny silver tinsel, and glitter-glued glass ornaments from the drugstore. I see my father up on a ladder, grimly trying to wire a papier-mâché angel to a branch so tall it brushed the ceiling (my mother liked a Christmas tree to make a statement).

"What about the lights?" my husband asked.

"Old-fashioned, flame-shaped ceramic bulbs," I suddenly remembered. They were red, orange, blue, and green, and whenever one blew out, my mother made my father replace it with the same color to preserve the rainbow pattern. There was muttering if he had to go to the store for bulbs. It drove him crazy, year after year after year.

"A rainbow pattern," my husband mused. "I could work with that."

"Deal," I said.

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THE ARRANGEMENT

Protea petals evoke the dress, and foliage the cat's green eyes, in Cecilia Beaux's 'Sita and Sarita' (1893).

Vessel: David Moldover, price upon request, thenewburghpottery.com

FLOWER SCHOOL

Looking for a Black Cat

Floral designer **Lindsey Taylor** captures the feminine and the darkly feline in a 19th-century American portrait

IN SEEKING an inspiration to riff on for this month's arrangement, I was drawn to "Sita and Sarita," a transfixingly intimate 1893 painting by American artist Cecilia Beaux (1855-1942). While the original lives in the Musée d'Orsay, Paris, visitors to the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., can see a 1921 replica the artist created. In her prime, Beaux was known for her in-demand society portraiture in a style similar to John Singer Sargent's. Her cousin

Sarah Allibone Leavitt sat for this painting, and some say the cat (look closely) nods to Edouard Manet's "Olympia" (1863), in which a similarly obscured cat eyes the viewer.

You may ask: What has any of this to do with December? Here's my thinking: While people are madly strewing their homes with holiday decorating, they often overlook the sort of intimate floral arrangement that makes sense for a guest room. In the mood and palette of Beaux's work, I saw a blueprint for just such an arrangement.

I chose a vessel from Newburgh, N.Y., ceramicist David Moldover to represent the milk-chocolate brown of Beaux's backdrop. To hug the vase's rim and pick up the hues in the sitter's face and dress, I cut short stems of blushing-bride protea, with its painterly petals and soft pink and warm white tones. Delicate, pale blue larkspur and a deeper hit of blue thistle mimic the airy pattern in the armchair's fabric, and the foliage of wax flower became the piercing green of the cat's eyes. To suggest the presence (or non-presence) of the nearly invisible cat and give the arrangement movement and interest, I made sure to allow for some negative spaces.



THE INSPIRATION