

DESIGN FOR THE WELL-LIVED LIFE

MARCH 2006

# HOUSE & GARDEN

## MIX IT UP!

ECLECTIC DECORATING  
WHAT WORKS—WHAT DOESN'T  
**Color** FRESH COMBINATIONS





In the entry, Sol Lewitt's modern abstract painting *Parallel Curved Line* is incongruously paired with ornate Venetian antiques such as a 17th-century walnut console and an 18th-century leather-covered chair. The painted wall pattern by Paulin Paris, inspired by garden mazes, subtly unites the art and the furniture.



# cultured palate

IN A PERFECT RECIPE  
FOR TIMELESS CHIC,  
ROBERT COUTURIER  
BLENDS INGREDIENTS  
FROM ANTIQUE TO  
MIDCENTURY MODERN  
IN A MANHATTAN  
TOWN HOUSE

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# B

e careful of the mask you choose," the French romantic writer Alfred de Musset once said, "for it reveals you more than it hides you."

Robert Couturier, an interior designer based in New York, loves to cite this verse. As he sees it, he is in the business of creating masks, ones that illuminate the sensibilities and tastes of his clients rather than obscure them under a decorator-knows-best veil. "Some people say to me what I am creating is a stage set, and it's true," Couturier says. "When you decorate your home, you are putting your whole life on a stage."

The Parisian-born decorator, who is as knowledgeable about Baroque as he is about Art Deco, has always resisted being pigeonholed. His refined but flexible approach made

him the natural choice when an affluent New York entrepreneur and his wife were looking for a designer. They had seen his restoration of Mexico's Hacienda de San Antonio for the late British billionaire Sir James Goldsmith, a major Couturier client. (The hacienda is now an Amanresorts hotel, the Mahakua.) "They liked that I mix things together and have no set style and also, I think, that I am a little extravagant," says Couturier, who resembles a Gallic John Malkovich, with a sense of mischief in his eyes. "They had no compunction about that."

The couple had recently purchased a spectacular Upper East Side Manhattan town house that came with some tragic ghosts. The previous owners had died in a plane crash, an event that created an inevitable sense of melancholy in the house. The new owners, who



Cameron spears, ca. 1930s, Rank Hiroshi Sugimoto's Elizabeth I on the second floor, left. A Louis XV cowhide-covered bench is from Luc Bouveret, Paris. ■ In the living room, opposite page, antique Irish furnishings are paired with Couturier-designed pieces by Upholstery Unlimited, NYC. Curtains were custom-embroidered by Jean François Lesage, Paris.



A work by Isabel von Bayern is a graphic contrast to the dining room's dark wood paneling, this page. Corals top a 17th-century Italian table. Curtains are in a green Scalamandré silk, embroidered by Jean François Lesage, Paris. ■ Brunschwig & Filis damasks, opposite page, cover the dining table and Régence chairs, made by Vosges New York. A crystal bole chandelier hangs overhead.



## THE MIX

### HOW IT WORKS

- **QUALITY** The living room contains a typically diverse assemblage: Irish Chippendale table and chairs, Chinese statues, French 1940s furniture. All are of exceptional quality, which is the crucial element for success, according to the decorator. A high/low sensibility can be fresh, but don't push it too far—not everything can coexist happily.
- **SUBTLETY** Don't let the convergence of patterns and periods overwhelm the senses. "I try to keep it simple," Couturier says.
- **PERSONALITY** Don't discard the past. Couturier encourages his clients to mix pieces they already own into their new decor.

collect modern art and photography and have four young children, impressed Couturier with their vitality and sense of fun. He proposed a bold design scheme filled with overscaled patterns, opulent textiles, and an unusual combination of antiques. "A lot of what I did was in reaction to the sad history of the house," he says. "I wanted to give the home a new feeling of being happy and alive."

The lighter spirit begins at the entrance, where a vivid blue painting by Sol Lewitt and pale green Fortuny curtains are paired with two superb pieces: a seventeenth-century Venetian palazzo table and an eighteenth-century Venetian chair in the original leather. The walls have been embellished by Paulin Paris, a French decorative painter based in Los Angeles, in a rose-and-cream oversized damask inspired by garden mazes. The jumbo pattern is typical of the games Couturier likes to play with period style. "I love French eighteenth-century design," he says, "but I don't like historical re-creation. After all, we don't live in the eighteenth century. We don't have seventeen people to dress us, like they did then. We can flush the loo."

Couturier believes that, by changing the traditional scale of things or taking a motif out of context, you make it contemporary. "Distortion is what gives movement," he says.

In the living room, the wall patterns grow bolder, creating a frame along the top of the room with the graphic impact of a classical fresco. The room is a showcase for Couturier's unerring eye and the confident way he juxtaposes disparate elements. He spends much of his time scouting antiques in Europe and keeps copious files on everything that has ever caught his





In the master bedroom, Couturier ordered embroidered fabric panels custom-sized from Jean François Lesage, Paris. An Anglo-Indian-style four-poster bed, left, is covered in linens by Marquise de Laborde, Paris; pillows are in a striped Scalamandré silk. \* The unique profile of a 1940s lamp by Gilbert Pollerati enlivens a corner, opposite page. A Metalia chair, made by L'Art de Vivre Antiques, NYC, stands next to it. See Shopping, last pages.

fancy. For this room, he secured some especially fine pieces, including a set of George III mahogany side chairs and an eighteenth-century Irish marble-topped table. The latter holds a Shi dynasty sandstone torso of a Buddha and a twentieth-century white ceramic lamp. Somehow, even with a French 1940s metal coffee table added to the mix and a Rococo cut-glass chandelier hanging overhead, the room feels understated and elegant.

Couturier created a color scheme based on earth tones—rose for the entrance, sand and ocher in the living room—in order not to overshadow the impact

of the couple's art collection. In the master bedroom, however, he couldn't help himself. The walls are embellished in red-and-cream hand-embroidered fabric by Jean François Lesage of Paris, who also creates textiles for couture fashion. This extravagant frame surrounds such classic furnishings as an Anglo-Indian four-poster bed and a walnut bench re-covered in Hermès sheepskin.

A leather-clad library has a mid-century spirit, with a rare set of chairs and a game table by Parisian modernist Jean-Michel Frank. When he was creating the room, Couturier checked what furniture the family was keeping in storage and came across a pair of zebra stools. The owners seemed embarrassed, but Couturier insisted on using them. "I find it startling when clients say we'll do everything new," he says. "Why? We need memories. You should always bring something from your former life." The zebra chairs found their place in the library, revealing an aspect of the past in a family's new, private mask—carefully cultivated, of course, with the guidance of their artful interior designer. □



