

# Haute Couturier

Robert Couturier brings French grandeur to New York. **By Natasha Fraser**

**I**t's raining and Robert Couturier is fretting over his "little darlings"—Lili and Chuck.

"They have raincoats, which make them look like spacemen," says the interior designer, who thinks of his pets as children. "They're Chinese Shi-tzus, which traditionally were the Emperor's dogs. And all of them were shot during the revolution...imagine!"

One look at the animated balls of fur, and it's not hard to imagine them fleeing the Forbidden City with tiny suitcases clutched in their paws. Colorful and extravagant, Couturier is as dramatic as the vividly done-up rooms of his Upper East Side New York apartment. When it comes to his flourishing design business, however, Couturier can also be very practical. Both qualities have earned the 41-year-old French expatriate a legion of mostly international clients, including such Continental swells as Sir James Goldsmith and the daughters of Michel David-Weill.

PHOTOS BY THIBAUT JEANSON



Dressed in an 1830s English banyan, the decorator in his bedroom with his dogs, Lili and Chuck. Flanking the doorway: two 19th-century Irish chairs and a cabinet designed by Jean-Michel Frank for Couturier's grandfather.

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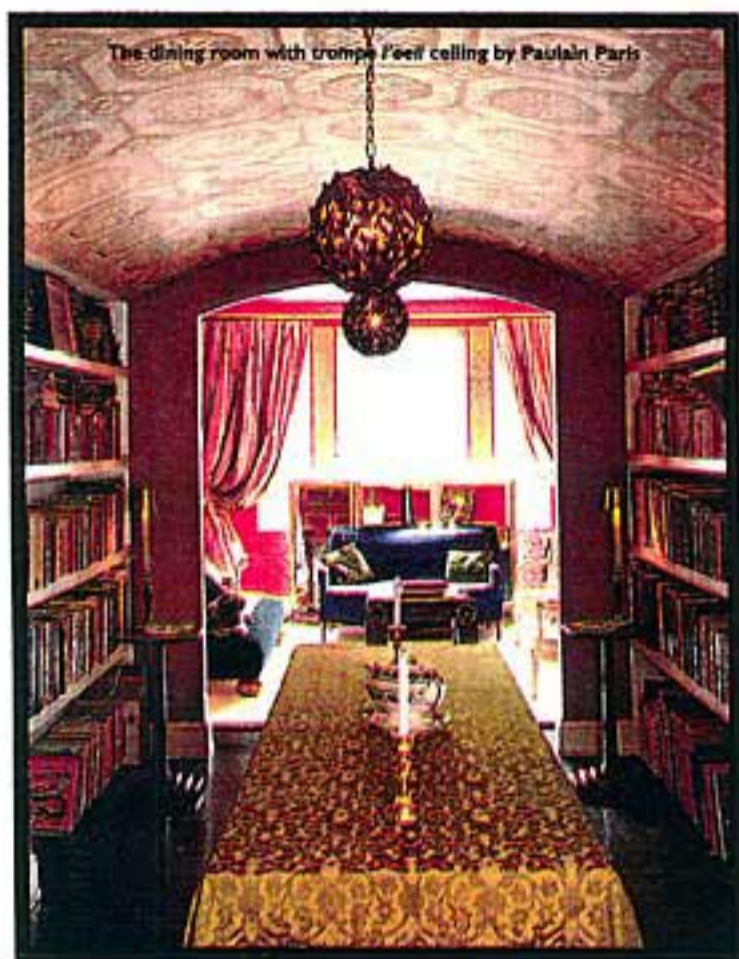
ferent civilizations and meld them into his own style," she says. The Goldsmith project was immediately followed with a commission by Francesco and Marina Galesi to do their apartment in the River House. In 1986, Couturier decided to part with Tihany and start his own company.

A year later Couturier got the biggest job of his life: to build and decorate Goldsmith's holiday Xanadu, a vast estate in Careyes, Mexico, replete with thousands of imported Indian palms and a replica of Rome's Spanish Steps leading to the beach. "We had 2,000 people working for us—it was fascinating," Couturier says. This considerable project took several years and was immediately followed by another Goldsmith commission—"a huge château in Burgundy," which was finished by the end of 1991.

Although Couturier is eternally grateful for the Goldsmith patronage, it clearly had a downside. "A sense of unreality was built around my name. It was very damaging indeed," he says. "Remember, I'm not Jimmy Goldsmith" was a remark that Couturier grew accustomed to hearing. "Potential clients were scared that if they wanted to spend a total of \$500,000 on a project that I might spend that on one commode!"

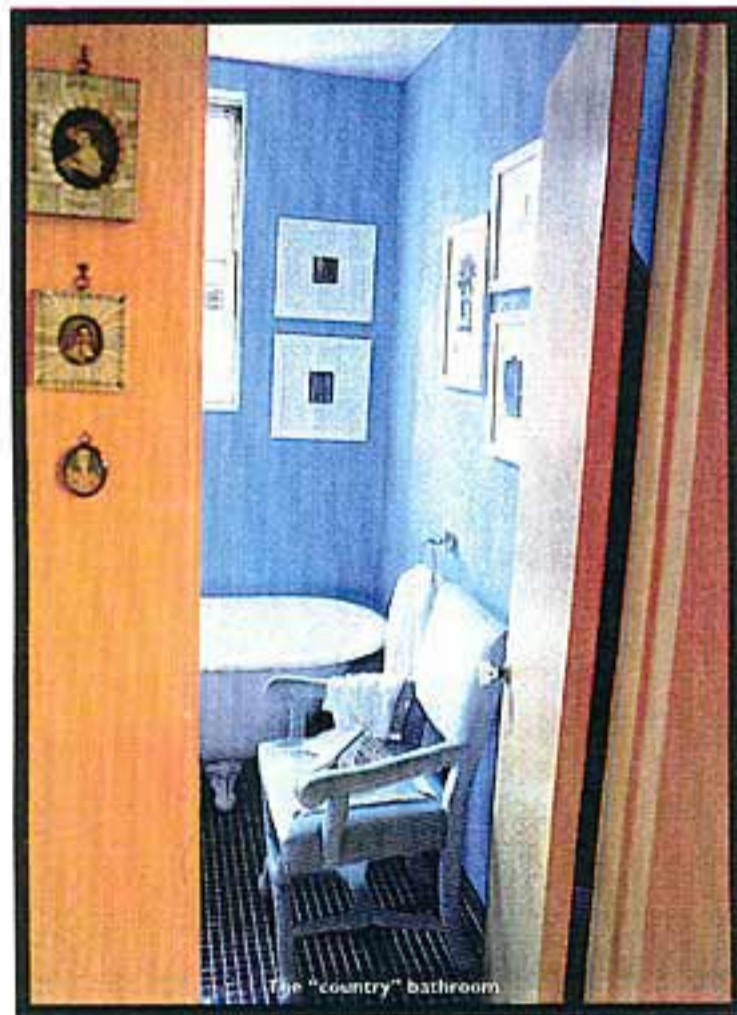
There have always been enough clients, however, whose budgets—while not the size of Goldsmith's—are big enough. Beatrice Stern and Natalie Merveilleux du Vignaux, the daughters of Lazard Frères head Michel David-Weill, commissioned Couturier to work on a country house and a townhouse respectively. "It was like working with a brother," says Stern. "Robert doesn't bend you to his will like some decorators do. When he thinks you're making a mistake, he's usually right." Stern's sister is just as enthusiastic. "Robert understands very quickly what you want," du Vignaux says. "He won't try to do Versailles in a small place, which some decorators tend to do."

Although the decorator's reputation for working only with rich



The dining room with trompe l'oeil ceiling by Paulain Paris

"Clients were scared I might spend \$500,000 on a commode!"



The "country" bathroom

Europeans persists, he insists that it couldn't be further from the truth. "The nationality is irrelevant. And if the client and I get on, I don't mind working with a small budget," he says.

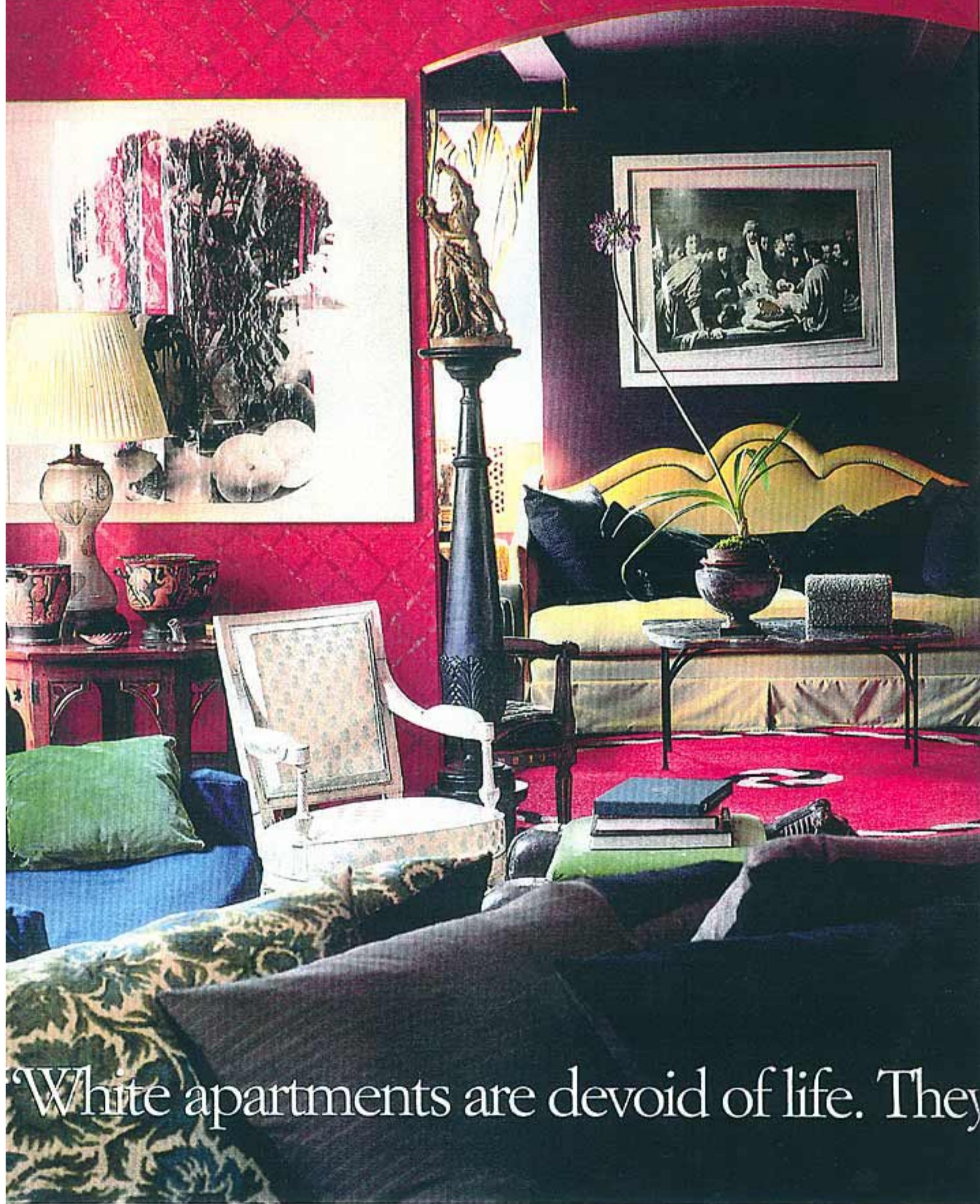
Couturier, whose relatively modest headquarters are downtown, employs a team of only five, including an architect, two interior architects, a decorator and a secretary. Despite the increase of projects, he doesn't have plans to take on more staff. "The idea of 75 people working for me would be a nightmare. I'm too much of a control freak," he says. The Couturier team aims at doing nine projects at a time: three starting, three in progress and three being finished up. "Sometimes we have 12 if they are smaller jobs, such as single rooms," he adds.

If Couturier has a goal these days, it is to attract more American clients. "I have a wonderful base coming from Europe, but it's not where I live," he says. Being in America has taught him about an easy way of living. "I mean, a house in France may be flawless in style, but it's not always comfortable. An American home, on the other hand, is geared around that," he says. Couturier is full of praise for American plumbing and electricity—"the bathroom and kitchen always function, and you don't have to run around turning off every lamp—one switch does it all!"

Couturier has also noticed that his American clients have a healthy attitude toward making mistakes. One couple, whose house in Connecticut boasts the original Colonial exterior, "wanted a lot of upholstered furniture. But I told them that if they did that it would look fake. 'Do you want your home to look like a country club?' " I asked. He describes their reaction as being calm and mature: "OK, that was a mistake. Let's wipe it out and start again."

If Couturier does have a complaint about some of his New World acquaintances, it concerns the lack of a "healthy disregard" for the antiques of the Old. "America is a new country, but there's such a blind adoration," he claims. "And it's not touching, dear; it makes for rather pale copies of European houses. I'm always surprised that more

A pair of Louis XVI chairs made by Jacob for Fontainebleau, Ingrid Dinter photographs and 1940s French lamps flank the entrance to the purple living room.



White apartments are devoid of life. They

Not that the interior designer is available to everyone. "I do stick to a certain set of rules," he says. "I always know when I should or shouldn't take on someone as a client. It's a question of instinct."

Couturier stresses that he needs to work with people he likes. This might be explained by a miserable childhood, which he refers to often. "I was extremely lonely and brought up by nannies that I didn't particularly like. It forced me to make my own private world," he says. He dismisses his father as being "very cruel and extremely violent" and his mother as never showing much interest. "Last Christmas, she sent me a letter and signed it 'Madame Couturier,'" he discloses with hardly a trace of irony in his voice.

When he announced to his rigidly haute-bourgeois family in 1974 that he wanted to become an architect, there was a slight uproar. "You'll have to come through the servants' entrance," was my grandmother's chief concern!" he remembers. However, by the following September, he was packed off to the Ecole de Nissim de Camondo to study interior architecture and environmental design. During his five-year course of study, Couturier left briefly for New York. "I loved my school but I couldn't stand Paris," he recalls. It was in New York that he met Adam Tihany, the Israeli interior designer, who employed him for a term.

After Couturier returned home, he finished his studies and immediately started working with clients such as his old school chum Philippe

de Nicolay (the son of Marie-Hélène de Rothschild from her first marriage), Olivier and Pascale Roussel and Caroline Pigozzi. Couturier was also responsible for designing a ball given by Jackie de Ravenel in 1979. "That was a wonderful experience. Jackie is a queen bee without the sting," he enthuses. However, despite this *succès fou*, Couturier wasn't happy. "I felt stifled, which is why I decided to move to New York," he says. A fellow interior designer jokingly offers another explanation: "Robert left Paris at just the right moment, because one more month

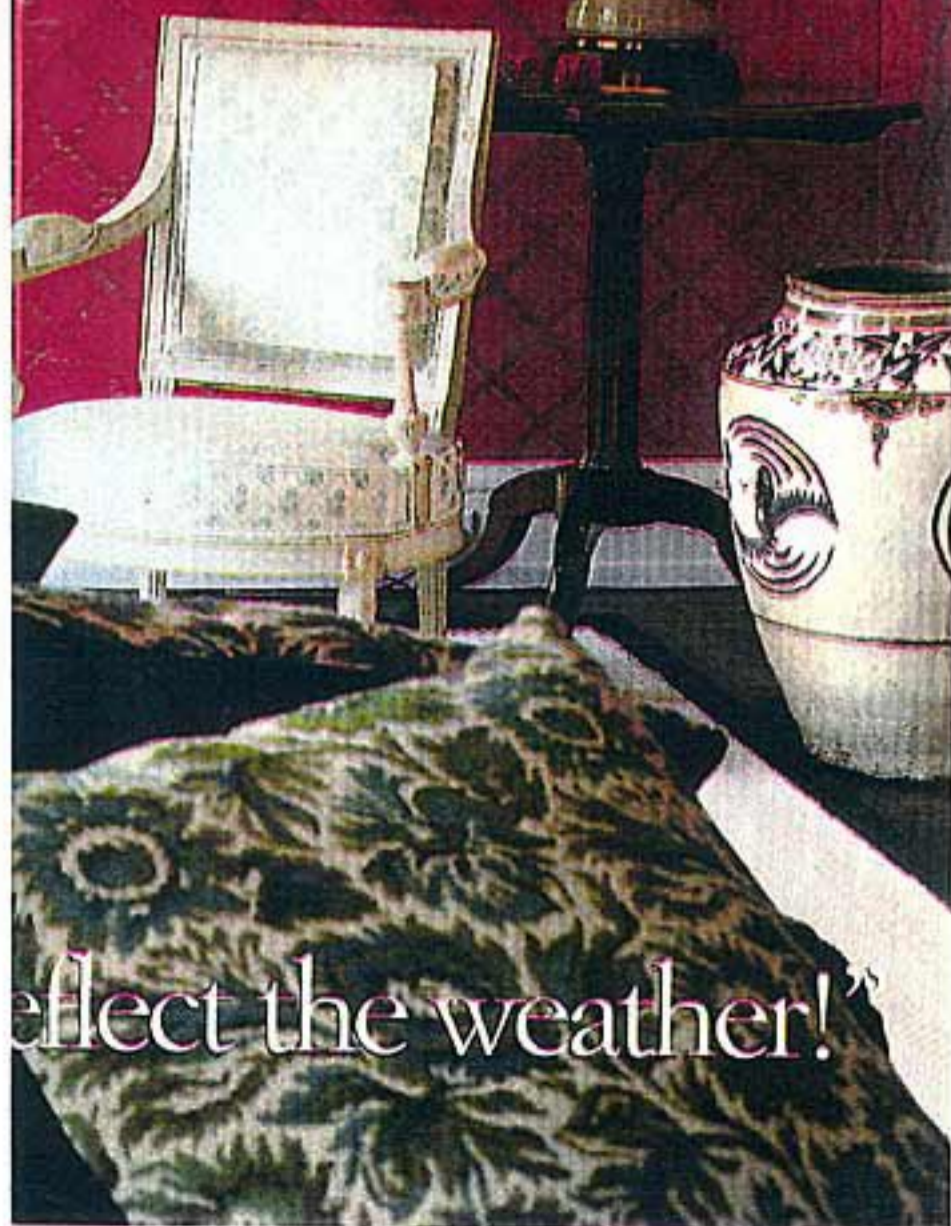
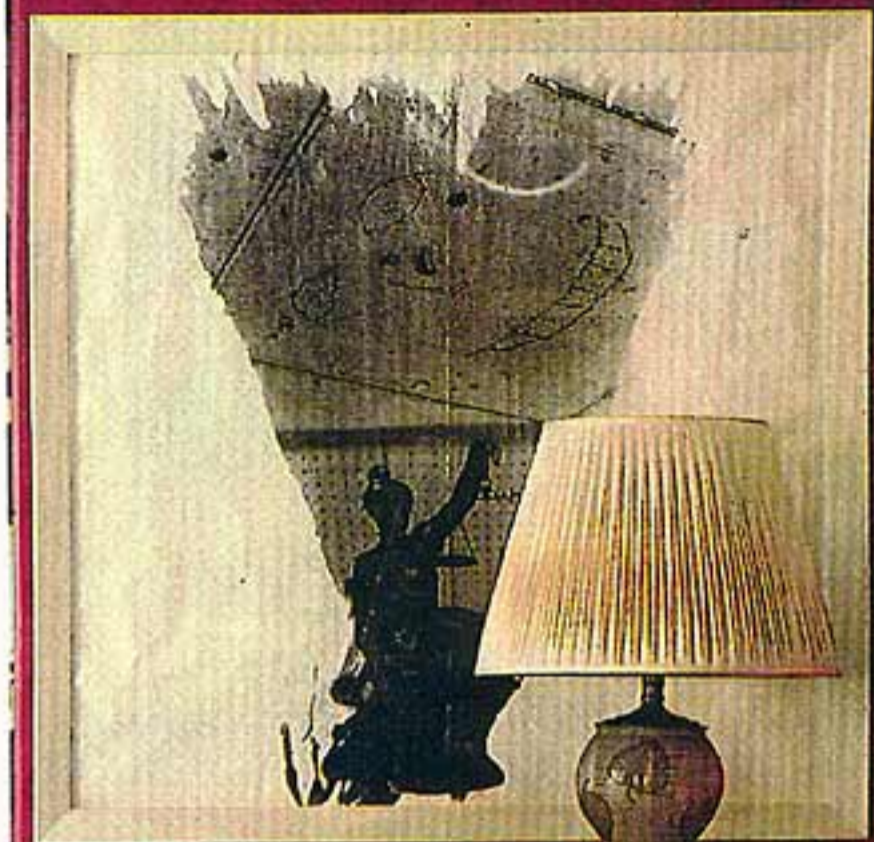


19th-century English alabaster "naughty" statues by a vase of pink peonies

and he would have been kicked out of the city." Couturier giggles at this remark. "I guess I was gossiping a bit too much and behaving rather like a spoiled child at that time," he offers with a mischievous grin.

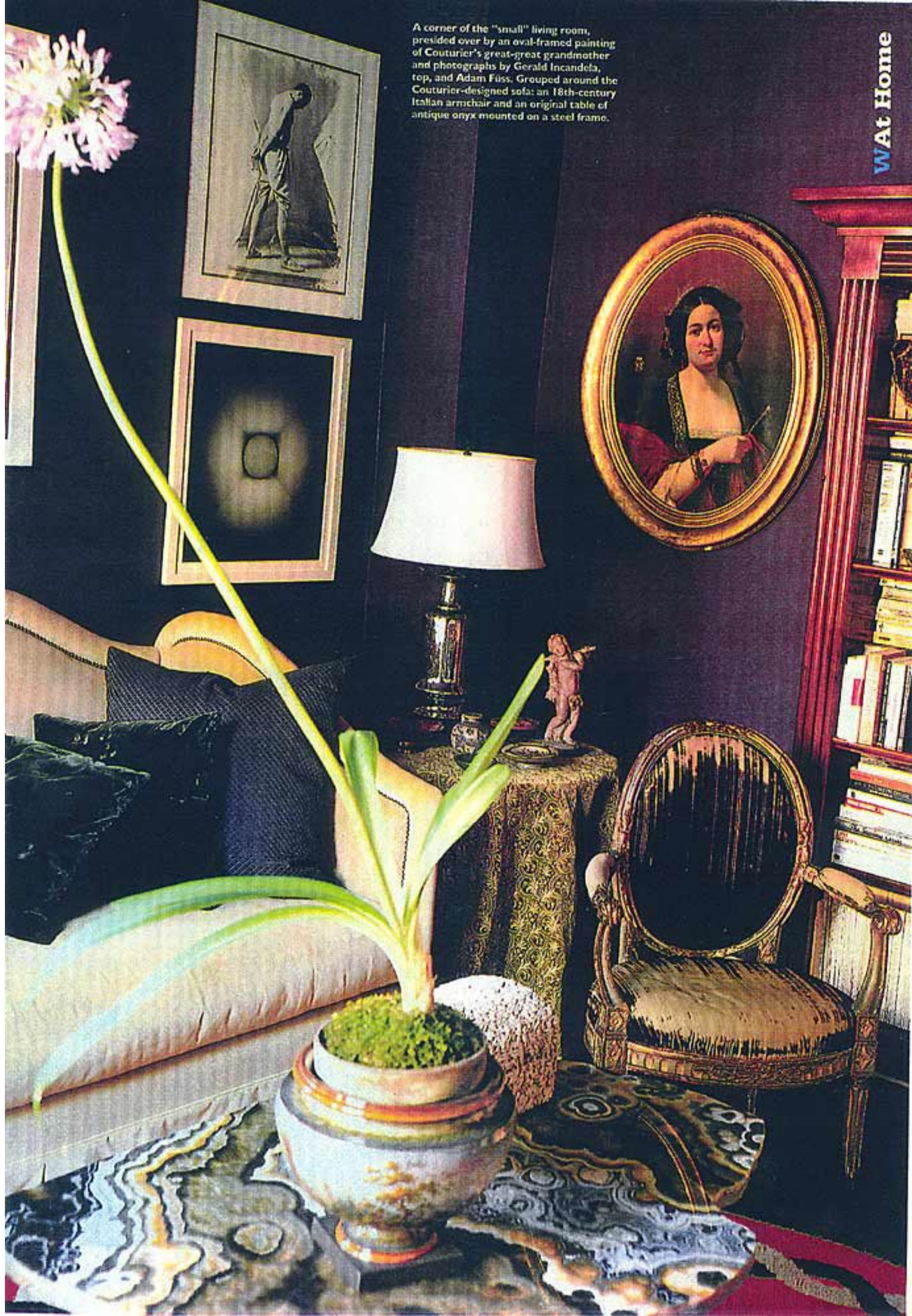
Couturier returned to New York in 1981 and was reemployed by Tihany. "I did restaurants like Club A, Bice and La Coupole, but, although I was making Adam and the clients happy, it wasn't that satisfying," he claims. It didn't help that Couturier was broke. "Every day, it was a question of deciding between lunch or dinner," he recalls. Luckily, it was at this moment that he met Laure Boulay de la Meurthe, then an editor at *Paris Match*. They were both at a buffet given by Prince Michael of Greece. "I was gorging myself, and Laure looked at my plate and burst into laughter. 'What an appetite you have,' she said. I noticed that her portions were hardly dainty and shot back, 'And so do you.'" They sat together, had a good laugh and became fast friends. Although he knew her name, he had no idea at the time that she was Sir James Goldsmith's mistress and the mother of two of the tycoon's children. "That's very French; people don't talk about their personal life," Couturier claims.

A few months later, Boulay de la Meurthe called and asked him to look at the townhouse that Goldsmith had bought in New York. Today the editor in chief of the Goldsmith-owned magazine *Point de Vue*, she is eager to stress Couturier's professionalism. "No one can draw as well as Robert does. His pencil is driven by an acute sensitivity and a remarkable knowledge, which enables him to gather the essence of dif-



reflect the weather!"

A corner of the "small" living room, presided over by an oval-framed painting of Couturier's great-great grandmother and photographs by Gerald Incandela, top, and Adam Fuss. Grouped around the Couturier-designed sofa: an 18th-century Italian armchair and an original table of antique onyx mounted on a steel frame.







Prized possessions in the red living room: A statue by Clodion, right foreground, and an 18th-century cabinet by Avril, center rear

Americans aren't aiming for something new and interesting." On the other hand, Couturier does enjoy not having to deal with much inherited furniture. "Look at a European house and you'll see a lot of inherited mistakes! That doesn't happen here; it's very refreshing," he insists.

Couturier's own opulently decorated apartment is perhaps the best testament to the decorator's no-holds-barred style. He started by knocking down every single wall. "I couldn't bear the layout as it was," he recalls. "Now I have a long living room with windows facing the back, which means that I have the sun all day long." The French artist Paulain Paris hand-stenciled the red walls of that room and painted a *trompe l'oeil* of a 16th-century coffered ceiling for the dining room, which was created

Regarding the choice of palette, Couturier readily admits that he is indebted to Todd Gribben, an ex-assistant who used to share the apartment with him. "He helped enormously because he had such a new and young sense of doing things," he says. One room that escapes the riot of color is the master bedroom. "All those purples and reds, I don't want nightmares, and I already have problems sleeping," he says with a laugh. "Besides, since I hardly ever leave the city, I wanted a 'country bedroom'—something quite plain."

Considering the grandeur of the apartment, it might seem odd to some that Couturier has chosen to cover his walls with photographs by Robert Mapplethorpe, Gerald Incandela and David Seidner. "It's the

**"I'm surprised more Americans aren't aiming for something *new*."**

out of what was formerly the hallway. "I have a long, narrow table, which allows guests to sit and talk to each other with ease," he says.

An eclectic range of styles is evident throughout the apartment in such pieces as original Louis XV gilt corner consoles, 1830s English stools by Bullock and cabinets by Jean-Michel Frank, which were made for Couturier's grandfather in the Thirties. "I do believe that there are strict rules as far as architecture is concerned, but not when it concerns decoration," he says. "I don't think that good or bad taste exists. I find that anything goes if it is done with style and if it's true to you."

For some, the rich color scheme *chez* Couturier might be too vibrant, but that's what the designer loves. "I have to confess that I find white apartments devoid of life," he argues. "They reflect the weather too much—an icy day in New York can be seen in the walls."

needed modern touch. If I had oil paintings, they would upset everything," he insists. "The apartment would become too theatrical. I mean, already it's pretty stagy!"

Among his many prized possessions—including an 18th-century cabinet by Avril and a terra-cotta statue by Clodion—Couturier is particularly fond of a pair of pale gray Louis XVI *fauteuils* made by Jacob for Fontainebleau. At least one friend, editor Carolina Irving, complains that they are "too Neuilly for words," referring to that decidedly stuffy Paris suburb. But Couturier remains very attached to the pair. "They remind me of two blue-haired dowager duchesses sitting in a drawing room," he says. "I like mistakes in my own house—it makes it more livable. Besides, the best rooms always have mistakes." ●