

ALEXA HAMPTON

The LANGUAGE of INTERIOR DESIGN



ALEXA HAMPTON

The LANGUAGE
of INTERIOR DESIGN



With JILL KIRCHNER SIMPSON

Photographs by SCOTT FRANCES



CLARKSON POTTER / PUBLISHERS
NEW YORK

FOR PAVLOS,
MICHALIS, MARKOS, AND ALIKI

Copyright © 2010 by Alexa Hampton

Photographs copyright © 2010 by Scott Frances, except where noted below.

Pages 206, 208, 209, 210–211, 212–213, 215, Sargent/*Architectural Digest* © Condé Nast Publications

Pages 26, 28, 29, 31, 32–33, Katz/*Architectural Digest* © Condé Nast Publications

Pages 18, 30, 45, 52, 56, 67, 81, 97, 106, 119, 130, 149, 159, 160, 170, 173, 177, 185, 199, 204, 214, 225, 236, 240 © 2008 Steve Freihon

Pages 102, 104–105, 106, 107, 108–109, 110 © Gianni Franchellucci

Page 111 © Fernando Bengoechea

All rights reserved.

Published in the United States by Clarkson Potter/Publishers, an imprint of the Crown Publishing Group, a division of Random House, Inc., New York.
www.crownpublishing.com
www.clarksonpotter.com

CLARKSON POTTER is a trademark and POTTER with colophon is a registered trademark of Random House, Inc.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Hampton, Alexa.

Alexa Hampton : the language of interior design / Alexa Hampton. —1st ed.

p. cm.

Includes index.

1. Hampton, Alexa—Themes, motives. 2. Interior decoration—United States. I. Title.
NK2004.3.H36A4 2010
747—dc22

2010014308

ISBN 978-0-307-46053-0

Printed in China

Design by Rita Sowins / Sowins Design

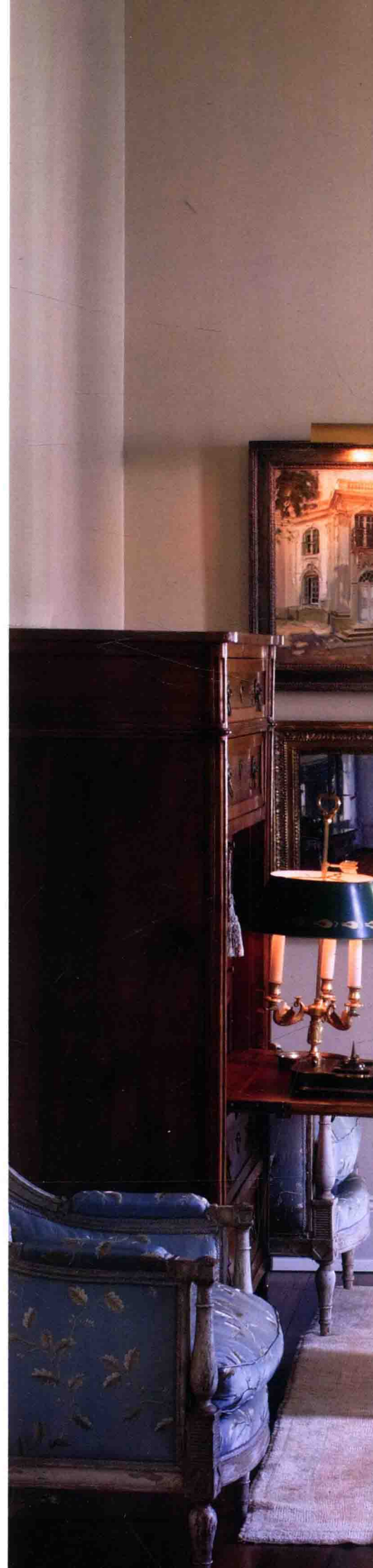
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3

First Edition

FRONTISPIECE: A sweeping staircase punctuates the magnificent rotunda that serves as the entrance to this grand neoclassical New Orleans house. (Its story begins on page 145.)

RIGHT: The tall, rectilinear secretary in the living room counters the sinuous curves of the piano opposite it. The Walter Gay paintings we acquired on the left were the start of a collection.

OVERLEAF: Cadmium-yellow silk damask creates a rich, warm backdrop on windows and walls in this New Orleans living room.



CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	8	COLOR	140
CONTRAST	14	NEW ORLEANS GRANDEUR	143
CHIAROSCURO	17	THE PARTICULARS OF PAINT	164
BUILDING ON TRADITION	27	FEARLESS COLOR	167
UPTOWN/DOWNTOWN	35	SHADES OF LIGHT	179
CITY RETREAT	47	THE FABRIC SCHEME	190
A LAYERED LOOK	61	BALANCE	194
FIRST STEP: THE FURNITURE PLAN	70	A FRESH APPROACH	197
PROPORTION	74	PALM BEACH ROMANTIC	207
TUDOR REVIVAL	77	NEOCLASSICAL RESTRAINT	217
LANDMARK RESTORATION	95	TAILORED ELEGANCE	231
CLASSICALLY COMPOSED	103	A GREEK REVIVAL	239
SLEEK GEOMETRIES	117	SELECTING SEATING	250
A COUNTRY COTTAGE	125	THE RIGHT LIGHT	251
ALL ABOUT CURTAINS	136	ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	253
		INDEX	254

ALEXA HAMPTON

The LANGUAGE
of INTERIOR DESIGN



ALEXA HAMPTON

The LANGUAGE *of* INTERIOR DESIGN

ALEXA HAMPTON

With JILL KIRCHNER SIMPSON

Photographs by SCOTT FRANCES



CLARKSON POTTER / PUBLISHERS
NEW YORK

FOR PAVLOS,
MICHALIS, MARKOS, AND ALIKI

Copyright © 2010 by Alexa Hampton

Photographs copyright © 2010 by Scott Frances, except where noted below.

Pages 206, 208, 209, 210–211, 212–213, 215, Sargent/*Architectural Digest* © Condé Nast Publications

Pages 26, 28, 29, 31, 32–33, Katz/*Architectural Digest* © Condé Nast Publications

Pages 18, 30, 45, 52, 56, 67, 81, 97, 106, 119, 130, 149, 159, 160, 170, 173, 177, 185, 199, 204, 214, 225, 236, 240 © 2008 Steve Freihon

Pages 102, 104–105, 106, 107, 108–109, 110 © Gianni Franchellucci

Page 111 © Fernando Bengoechea

All rights reserved.

Published in the United States by Clarkson Potter/Publishers, an imprint of the Crown Publishing Group, a division of Random House, Inc., New York.
www.crownpublishing.com
www.clarksonpotter.com

CLARKSON POTTER is a trademark and POTTER with colophon is a registered trademark of Random House, Inc.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Hampton, Alexa.

Alexa Hampton : the language of interior design / Alexa Hampton. —1st ed.

p. cm.

Includes index.

1. Hampton, Alexa—Themes, motives. 2. Interior decoration—United States. I. Title.
NK2004.3.H36A4 2010
747—dc22

2010014308

ISBN 978-0-307-46053-0

Printed in China

Design by Rita Sowins / Sowins Design

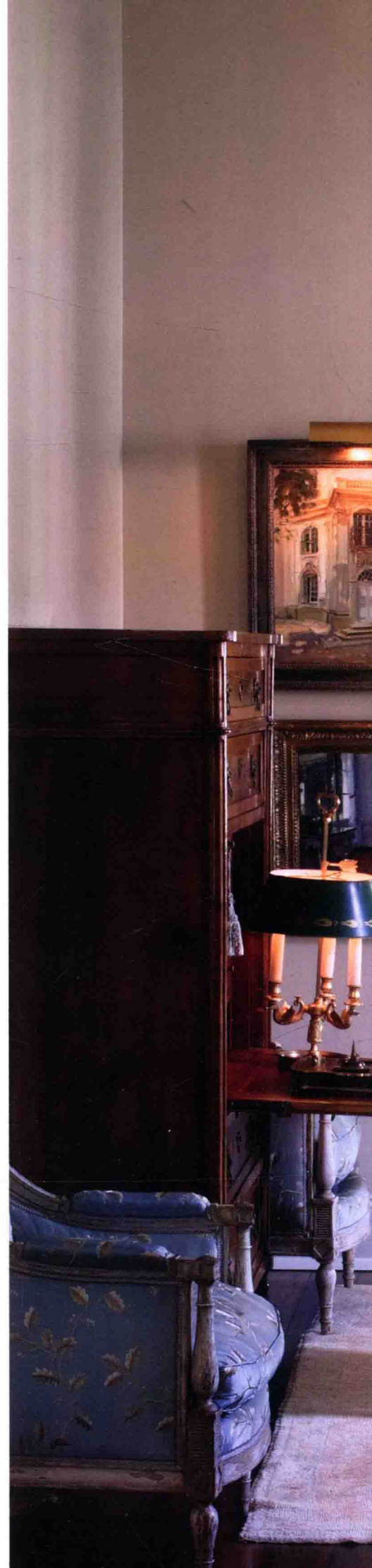
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3

First Edition

FRONTISPIECE: A sweeping staircase punctuates the magnificent rotunda that serves as the entrance to this grand neoclassical New Orleans house. (Its story begins on page 145.)

RIGHT: The tall, rectilinear secretary in the living room counters the sinuous curves of the piano opposite it. The Walter Gay paintings we acquired on the left were the start of a collection.

OVERLEAF: Cadmium-yellow silk damask creates a rich, warm backdrop on windows and walls in this New Orleans living room.







CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	8	COLOR	140
CONTRAST	14	NEW ORLEANS GRANDEUR	143
CHIAROSCURO	17	THE PARTICULARS OF PAINT	164
BUILDING ON TRADITION	27	FEARLESS COLOR	167
UPTOWN/DOWNTOWN	35	SHADES OF LIGHT	179
CITY RETREAT	47	THE FABRIC SCHEME	190
A LAYERED LOOK	61	BALANCE	194
FIRST STEP: THE FURNITURE PLAN	70	A FRESH APPROACH	197
PROPORTION	74	PALM BEACH ROMANTIC	207
TUDOR REVIVAL	77	NEOCLASSICAL RESTRAINT	217
LANDMARK RESTORATION	95	TAILORED ELEGANCE	231
CLASSICALLY COMPOSED	103	A GREEK REVIVAL	239
SLEEK GEOMETRIES	117	SELECTING SEATING	250
A COUNTRY COTTAGE	125	THE RIGHT LIGHT	251
ALL ABOUT CURTAINS	136	ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	253
		INDEX	254

INTRODUCTION

There is a language of interior design, a vocabulary that can be studied, absorbed, understood, and spoken. It is a language in which one can become fluent and well-spoken, or one can stumble through it haltingly, with only a pidgin approximation of its true meaning. I believe that decorating is not simply a set of arbitrary ideas, an eclectic assortment of favorite objects, or a mere mimicking of current trends. Good design has a clear lexicon; it is grounded in logic, an aesthetic precept, and the work and well-trained eyes of artists, architects, builders, and designers.

In every project I undertake, I consider four basic elements of design: contrast, proportion, color, and balance. To me, these essential elements represent hundreds of years of reasoned design choices that are critical to the way I approach a space. To continue the language metaphor, contrast can be thought of as a verb: It creates the

tension and “action” that keep the eye engaged and moving around the room. Proportion serves as the grammar of design: it establishes the spatial relationships between the various elements of a room and defines the structure or backbone of a space. Color provides the descriptive adjectives, making a room feel formal or playful, beachy or citified, restful or vibrant. And finally, balance underlies the entire composition; it gives each item relevance and meaning, bringing continuity and harmony to the whole. It is the conclusion to a story well told.

While there is no question that the best designers have innate talent and creativity, the language of interior design can be taught, and anyone can benefit from learning it. Training your eye is a lifelong process. Studying and learning from the masters, and following the empirical truths that form the foundation of architecture and design, are essential. It’s a truism that only when you have





learned the rules, and the reasons for them, can you successfully break them.

In my case, my training started quite young, as my father, Mark Hampton, a well-educated, accomplished, and highly esteemed decorator, insisted on spending our family vacations touring houses and palaces, museums and churches, both abroad and in the United States. While other families were skiing, sunning, playing tennis, or visiting amusement parks, my sister and I could be found being dragged by our parents to see architectural high points, museums, and galleries around the world. By the time I was twelve, I had seen the Pantheon, the Parthenon, and Buckingham Palace.

We always had to dress formally on these trips, because my father wouldn't hesitate to ring the doorbell of a historic house not open to the public, and he felt that if we were all well dressed, the

chances of our being invited in to see the house and grounds were much better. Of course, this almost always proved to be the case.

From my father, I learned about symmetry and balance, about masterpieces of architecture and art, the difference between a caryatid and an atlas. He had an encyclopedic, almost photographic memory, and could (and would) expound on nearly any edifice we came across. He once got into a heated argument with a tour guide at the Hermitage, who he felt had made serious factual errors in her commentary. As he engaged in a battle of wills with her, my mother and I tried to fade quietly into the woodwork. It may have been a bit stultifying at times for a young, spirited child (I remember throwing up at Giverny, and having a meltdown in the parking lot of Mont St. Michel), but I will always be grateful for the incredible bank of knowledge I stored from those trips, and for the

good fortune of being exposed to such a broad swath of the finest houses and museums around the world, before my professional training had even begun.

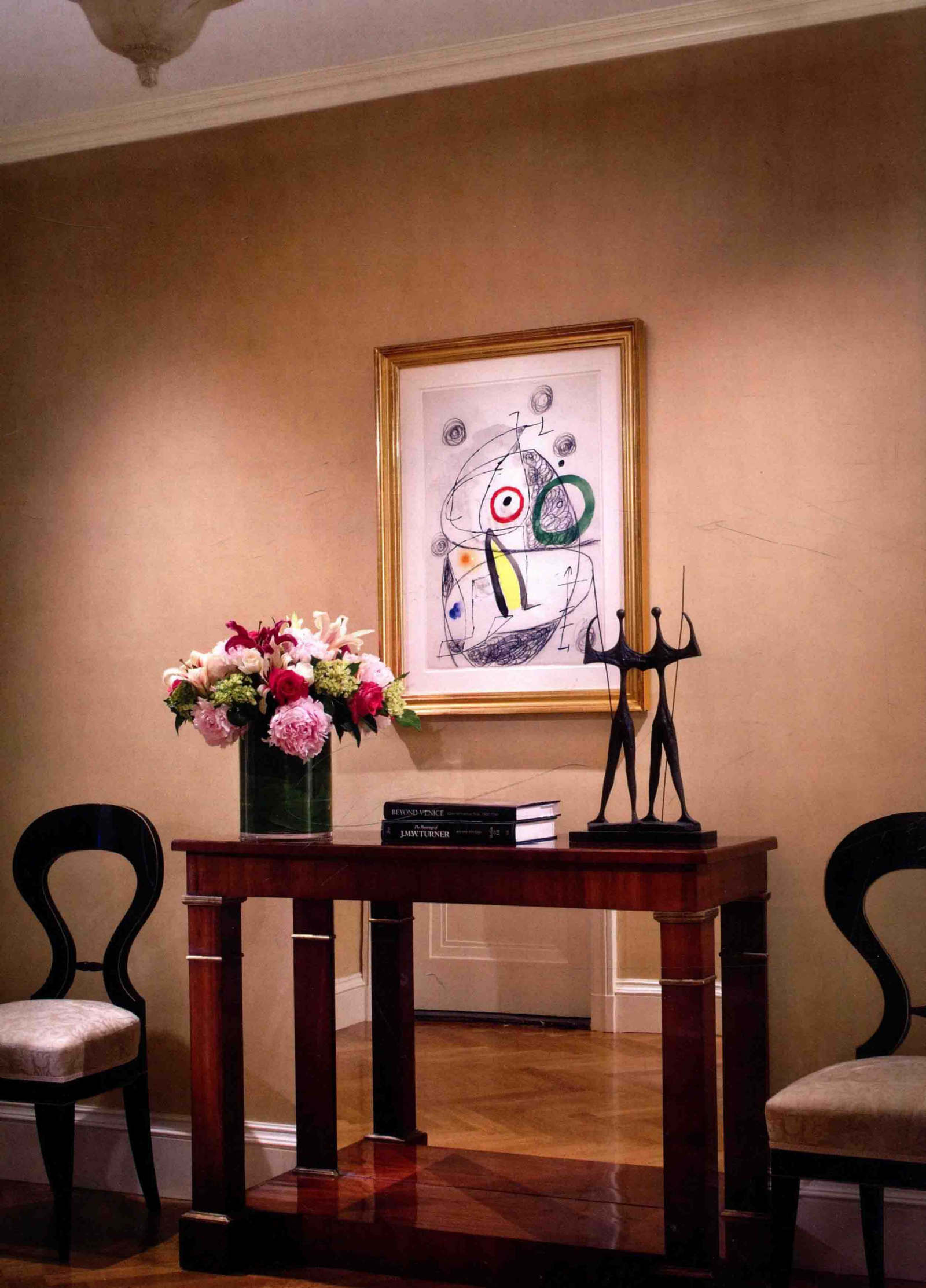
Through travel and, eventually, through studying art history and working as a designer myself, I later learned the principles of architecture, art, and design. Studying the best examples of many different styles and eras trains the eye to see what is balanced and proportionate, what is harmonious in scale and color, and what is not, until eventually it becomes second nature. I also learned the logic and reasons behind the rules: Crown molding is not simply applied decoration; it bridges the seam between wall and ceiling. Chair rails, similarly, are not just a builder's amenity. They should be hung at the proper height, to catch a chair being pulled out and prevent it from scuffing the wall. Fringe or tape trim along the leading

edge of a curtain or the hem of a chair skirt is there to help prevent wear and tear to the most heavily used part of the fabric.

In this book, my goal is to illuminate the elements I consider most important to successful interior design: contrast, proportion, color, and balance, along with many other essentials, from texture and symmetry to the creation of a furniture plan. In exploring the process of design, I hope to provide a deeper understanding of what makes a room or a house not just pretty or livable, but extraordinary, and to equip anyone with the tools to speak the language of design with fluency.

PREVIOUS PAGE: Silk taffeta curtains frame Fifth Avenue views in this master bedroom lined with authentic Louis XV oak boiserie, installed nearly a century ago. (See the story on page 95.)

OPPOSITE: In my own quietly neutral bedroom, hints of color come from the watercolors by my father or me.



CONTRAST