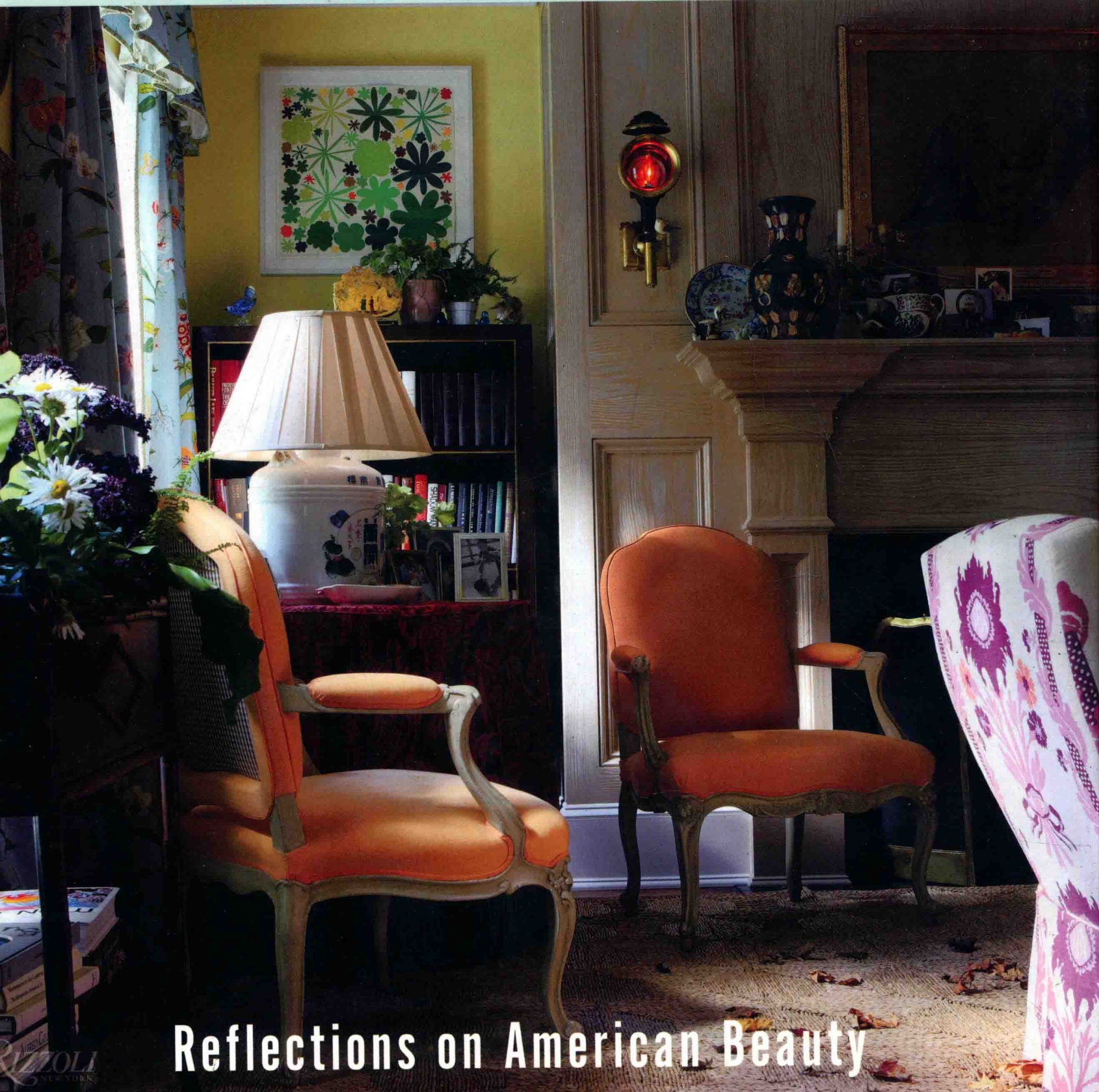


Jeffrey Bilhuber

● THE WAY HOME



Reflections on American Beauty

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THE WAY HOME

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Photography by William Abranowicz

RIZZOLI
NEW YORK

New York Paris London Milan

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

'American Beauty' found 'The Way Home' with the arrival of William (Bill) Abranowicz, the brilliant, acclaimed photographer who listened to my ideas and inspirations at our first meeting, and exceeded my expectations with the images he delivered. Pictures that will last a lifetime or two—perhaps more. It was after he submitted the first four chapters that I realized the narrative of the images told a slightly different tale than the one we had set out to capture. The pictures spoke of a way home that is a part of all of us, regardless of our backgrounds or origins, and reflects the dignity of all people, embracing our common humanity, and confirming not so much their circumstances but the truth about the people who live there. I am honored to have worked with him and his astute assistant, Christian Harder, as they both intuitively embraced the atmosphere and noble humanism of this book.

Doug Turshen is considered a wizard in the field of art direction, and he brought, with his earnest assistant Steve Turner, their considerable talents to the development of these chapters. As the images helped me verbalize what only I had been able to visualize, the tenor of the book continued to evolve. For that I am grateful to Judith Nasatir, who helped cobble together my words in a way that made me hear more accurately what I had been speaking of so passionately these past few years. An orchestra is only as good as its conductor and I'm grateful to my editor, Isabel Venero, for her ability to combine the strings, the winds, and the percussion of this score.

Selecting projects that fit the American point of view in this book was an arduous task as I am honestly committed to all the efforts my office has helped me accomplish these past few years. Editing to fit the narrative was a difficult task made much easier by everyone in my design studio, and the generosity of my clients, who allowed me to share their stories. It speaks volumes that I selected twelve houses to tell twelve stories and made twelve phone calls to request their consideration for inclusion. Every request was greeted with pleasure and generosity, and each welcomed us back into their lives with admiration and into their homes with hospitality.

If it is true that we are defined by those we choose to surround us, then I am in good company. For that I am truly grateful.

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THE WAY HOME

Reflections on American Beauty



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AFTERWORD

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INTRODUCTION

Every day we find ways to share the ongoing stories of our lives with families and friends. Words, whether written or spoken, help us tell our tales. So does music, and especially song. Illustrations, be they photographs, watercolors, drawings, or paintings, are another way to communicate what we want to say, record, and remember. The furniture, art, architecture, and decoration, the trappings that we gather and arrange in the rooms we inhabit, also speak, whether mutely or assertively. Our homes are central to the narratives of self that we construct and pass on to our children, our families, our friends, and loved ones, and to the generations that follow all of us. Those in this book both reflect and are part of my own evolution. They represent for me a rather Arcadian ideal, and a specifically American one at that. This ideal is witness to the times that surround us, and how we choose to record it.

The projects I've cherished most these past few years, and the projects I'm presenting here, are those that I feel speak volumes about the people who live in them: they reveal home truths rather than, like so many American interiors, constructing domestic fictions about desired lifestyles. These interiors evoke personality, emotion, and mood. They conjure atmosphere, but don't pontificate about style. They express sensibility and character, without belaboring status or class. They are as different from one another as we human beings, yet they have in common a certain type of backdrop that embraces wildly disparate elements: Georgian sideboards, japanned corner cupboards, ebonized armchairs, wicker sofas,

Indian ikats, or painted cottage dressers. With a uniquely American beauty that only our national heritage offers, these rooms happily reconcile high and low, rare and common, handsome and homely from across the spectrum of cultures and periods. These kinds of interiors, democratic as they are, reveal the power of decoration to do more than preconceive a future or prestidigitate a past.

Rooms can, and often do, reveal intimate stories of lives lived in a specific time and place, because decoration of a certain kind embodies the unique capacity to tell the truth. Houses may do the same, just on a more epic scale. When they do, they demonstrate decoration at its most artful and enlightened. That occurs very rarely, and only when there is trust. When a decorator is offered the opportunity to put his ear to one's heart, he can create rooms that breathe the same essence as those who will live in them.

Growth is an evolutionary process. History is too. As we mature, we gain insight into our interior lives as well as our physical ones. Most of us require time to find our way to the houses we're meant to inhabit, places that seem to fit us only over time, and become better with each passing milestone or year. As a decorator I prefer when people come to me with a few or more touchstones that matter to them, that are part of their personal histories, simply because decoration is a dialogue between person and place.

I am uneasy with a clean slate. When my clients come to me with furniture, or art, or mementos that they love, I breathe a sigh of relief. Objects that are

close to a person or family obviously present me with insights into individual taste and preferences. They reveal far more than mere taste. When objects have meaning—and those that we keep usually do—they are repositories of emotion, memories made manifest. If we love these objects, if they embody our connections to family, to aspects of our personal history, to special events or places, they become evidence of good lives moving forward, the hallmarks of arrival, and the path we've taken to reach home. Some things we love without explanation or question, simply because they've always been with us, regardless of whether their intrinsic value has anything to do with their extrinsic appearance. Others have an allure that develops as we covet and finally purchase them, when they, in turn, become our pride and joy.

Increasingly, I find myself drawn to images of a certain kind of domestic bliss from other distant times. Even though I have no interest in slavishly recreating the appointments of eighteenth-, nineteenth-, or even early twentieth-century residences, their comforts seem very appropriate to the spirit with which we live today. They provide flashpoints, moments of illumination and invention—the sort of inspiration that I then filter into the contemporary environment I'm creating for the here and now. That, to me, is what great modern decorating should be. That's what the houses in this book represent. However directly or indirectly influenced by history they may be—and some are more so than others—they feel modern because they

respond to the times we live in. They're building their foundations from history and memory, conjuring up a mood or a spirit that comforts with the familiar and previously experienced. They nurture these connections to our past, encouraging it to sustain us in a kind of emotional wave. Far more than assemblages of singular objects, these rooms are filled with the stories and reflections of their inhabitants. Their atmosphere and moodiness inform us about what gives their owners comfort and pleasure. They embody what I think of as a uniquely American perspective, and a distinctively American way of living. In many ways they reflect a certain contentment, and, I hope, to some growing degree, a few proven and rather old-fashioned values.

Context is essential to all great decoration. In many cases, it dictates our choices. Americans understand that it is their obligation and right to sample many decorative and cultural traditions—our own, and others. We prize ease and comfort in our domestic lives. We're very confident. We look to our future optimistically, and to our past with an understanding and empathy that only a new country can achieve. We are less hidebound, less rigorous than other cultures that embrace order and formality. American rooms are American precisely because they endow us with the liberty to be comfortable and enlightened: they are rooms where good things are put to their proper use and where not-so-good things remain to remind us that there's great joy and individuality to be found in the

informal and less-than-perfect. We enthusiastically embrace and encourage appropriating bits and pieces from other cultures and across history, because we Americans are curious. We explore all worlds. Then we make choices that are uniquely our own, putting our stamp, our fingerprints, on these objects as we combine them.

Our rooms and houses contain the story of our evolving lives. They provide us with a narrative of our maturation, of how we've grown, and of how most of us continue to revisit, in one way or another, certain memories and the objects that have defined them.

Anyone can live beautifully and comfortably if they want to, if it matters to them. I don't believe that it's possible for any of us to do it all. Each of us needs help. We all benefit from the guidance of those people we trust and love.

As I decorator I do two things particularly well: I listen, and I make creative decisions. One is essential to the other. I have always found the most compelling and attractive rooms clearly reflect the individual—or the family—at home. These rooms, these houses, and homes, tell public stories of private lives. They are the tales I have chosen to tell here. I am interested far less in the individual objects or their materials than in the atmosphere of a place and its distinctive spirit, its specific approach to how we nest and the comforts that we find within our four, or occasionally more, walls. The interiors in this book are personal worlds, inward facing, and autobiographical about the people and the daily lives of those who inhabit them. They are

reflections of personal histories and family life, not grand gestures of presentation. They contain a sort of existence I would like to discover behind any closed door: replete with great pleasures and comforts, all of which play a role in informing us about who we are as we travel somewhat introspectively, listening, sensing, hearing our hearts beat, and finding our essential selves.

When everything at home contributes to the story of the house and of those who live there, that place—be it house, home, or heart—cannot be anywhere else than where it is. In places like these, it's possible to understand the spirit and the rhythms of the lives lived within, day after day, because their presence is visible and palpable. In houses like these, there's always someone home.







TAKING THE LONG WAY HOME

The admirable pursuit of a curiously timeless aesthetic

Jenny and Trey Laird are a quintessential New York story. They were college sweethearts at the University of Texas, and in many ways, they still are. Originally from Nacogdoches, the oldest town in Texas, Trey has built his advertising and branding company, Laird+Partners, into an international powerhouse. Jenny grew up in a family that embraced the pleasure of creative expression and gloried in celebrating the domestic narrative. She talks fondly about her mother's and her grandmother's houses and how they exist in her mind in a very specific place and time. Jenny has told me tales of visits to her grandmother's house and a certain fox fur piece, complete with glass eyes, she inevitably discovered curled up in a different location every time she arrived. Her always-tinkering grandmother had found dozens of spots where this fox looked "absolutely perfect!"—tucked into a bookcase, wrapped around a lamp, peeking through the balusters of a staircase. I find it equally remarkable that a very young Jenny noticed these deft moves and delighted in the sensibility behind them.

PRECEDING PAGES: *Carved into the marble mantel is a heraldic ornament, typical of this period in New York. LEFT: A lacquered hibachi doubles as a cachepot. OPPOSITE: The center medallion of an antique suzani reiterates the shape of the sofa.*