

A PASSION FOR INTERIORS



CAROLYN ROEHM

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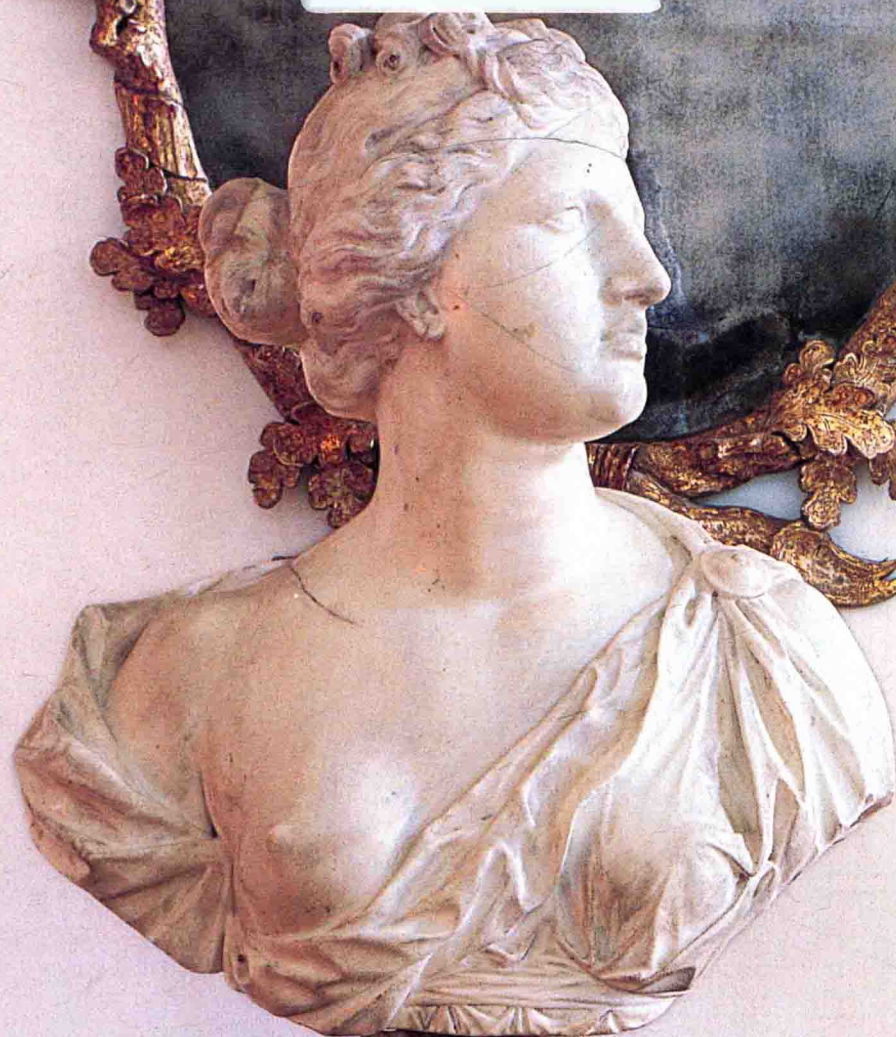
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CAROLYNE ROEHM

Written with Marc Kristal



*To all the architects, artisans,
and designers who throughout
civilization have created and
championed the classical tradition*



INTRODUCTION

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IT WAS IN A STUDIO ART CLASS, AT WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY in St. Louis, that I heard something I have never forgotten. One of my fellow students asked a question about draftsmanship and modernity. Our teacher replied, “You have to understand: Picasso could draw as well as Michelangelo.”

When I think about my passion for all things classical, that observation comes back to me. I have never wanted to be one of those old dogs that hates everything new and complains about “the kids’ music.” There’s a lot of contemporary work that I find beautiful—Tadao Ando’s Modern Art Museum in Fort Worth is a standout—and I know that plenty of traditional stuff looks stodgy. But like the oeuvre of Picasso, whose familiarity with art history was encyclopedic, the best of modernity resonates with a depth of knowledge that goes back to antiquity. Having an edge is great, but without the traditions of architecture, design, and craft, our knowledge base, our culture—indeed, our lives—would be diminished.

There’s a reason the vocabulary of classical architecture, thousands of years after it was developed, still has the power to move us—one that’s perhaps best explained by that great explainer, Plato. The philosopher posited that there is a realm of understanding—an alternate, perfect world—in which can be found forms for objects and concepts that are ideal. While our real-world interpretations of these

must inevitably fall short, Plato believed that our souls inhabited this perfect realm before entering our bodies and retained a memory of it. Thus it might be said that the impulse toward classical perfection in architecture is a desire to create what we instinctively know to be everlasting—using forms we collectively recognize as eternal.

I'm no philosopher. But like the ancient Greeks and Romans, I am soothed and uplifted by the harmonious relationships between columns, capitals, entablatures, and pediments, by the wisdom of the classical orders, the sublime perfection of proportion and scale. Better still, it's a perfection that's livable—reassuring rather than intimidating. When I walk into Michelangelo's Medici chapel in Florence (or, for that matter, the New York Public Library), I don't feel dwarfed or alone. I feel at home—which is why my own homes are neoclassical in design. What's great about living with a timeless style is that you can inhabit it in a modern way. It never gets old, as the incomparable twentieth-century architect Mies van der Rohe surely recognized when he designed his residential modernist version of a classical temple, the Farnsworth house, in Illinois.

Yet as much as I love classical architecture, I love traditional craftsmanship even more. That adoration comes from my love of clothes: As a fashion designer, sketching ideas on paper was never as interesting to me as how a garment actually got made.

In fact, the preservation of traditional methods of making things

explains, in part, the book you're holding—it's become a crusade for me. Thankfully, the textile market has no dearth of beauty: The old ways endure, even if the means of production have been updated. And organic, undecorated bespoke objects and furnishings remain popular, which is encouraging. But in our laser-cut, digitized, minimalist world, demand for the skills that enrich the rooms we inhabit—*passementerie*, carving, *intarsia*, gilding, metalwork, braid—may well diminish until they're beyond the reach of most people. Maybe it's selfishness on my part—I love these things, and don't want to see them disappear. But none of us should, because when you walk into a room in which everything is beautifully made, it makes you feel good.

And quality is nothing to be ashamed of! In today's society, the dumbing-down of so much in our culture has had its impact on the quest for the highest quality of many products. That coupled with globalization and a large workforce who can generally copy almost anything at a much lower price is eliminating the need for highly skilled artists. When these people are gone, so will be the knowledge that creates a product that is exceptional, leaving us with a plethora of lower-priced copies or adaptations. Oftentimes, when I appear on television, I'm cautioned against showing anything too grand or fancy—"It's got to appeal to our viewers," they always say. Well, I think that's underestimating the audience's ability to appreciate

things that are well and lovingly crafted. Look at Julia Child. In her day, she was the perfect person for a nation interested in bringing a degree of refinement into life: A regular American woman who'd mastered the art of French cooking, and now was going to show us all how to have that same special pleasure. All right—if I'm not a philosopher, I'm not Julia Child, either. But if it's okay to uplift one's culinary palate, why not one's design palette, too?

As with food, our tastes evolve and broaden as we get older. The more we're exposed to, if we keep an open mind, the more we're able to appreciate—and someone who's a strict modernist at twenty-five may find, ten years later, that layering one's style with tradition and history enriches rather than diminishes it. The problem is that many of the old ways of making may have passed into history by the time we've raised our consciousness sufficiently to appreciate them.

So I hope you will draw inspiration from the three classically derived homes in this book: my own two, and a third which I designed for a special friend. When I was starting out, and living in my first cookie-cutter New York apartment with its flaking cottage-cheese ceiling, I lived on dreams—that's what motivated me. And while we all dream of different things, the quality to be found in classical architecture and décor invariably elevates the spirit, and reminds one to take a moment to appreciate an ancient beauty.

That doesn't mean we can't have an edge. But as Margaret Mead put it so eloquently: "Don't forget your grandmothers."

