LIVING TRADITIONS

INTERIORS BY MATTHEW PATRICK SMYTH

THE MONACELLI PRESS

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PRINCIPAL PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHN GRUEN
WRITTEN WITH JUDITH NASATIR

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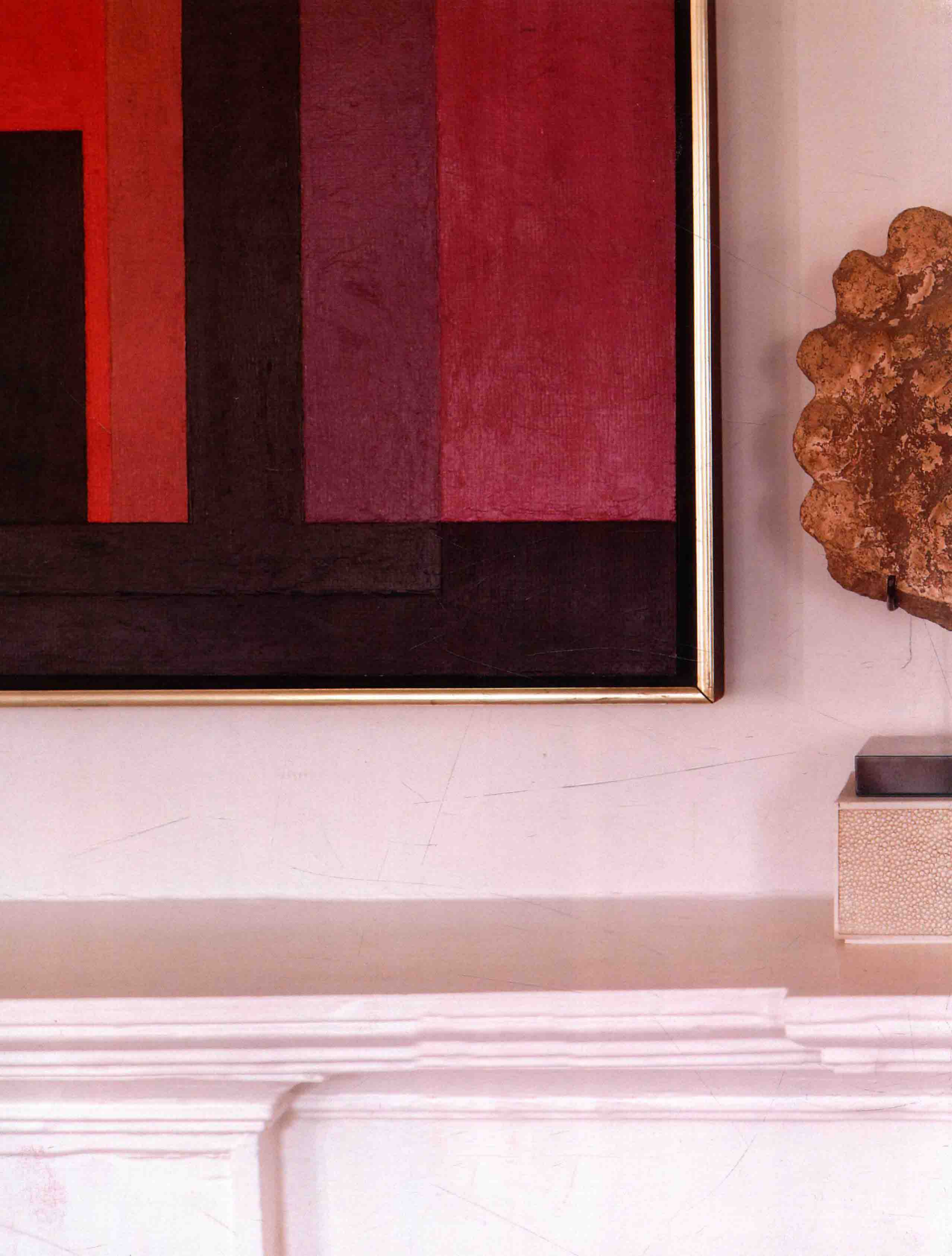

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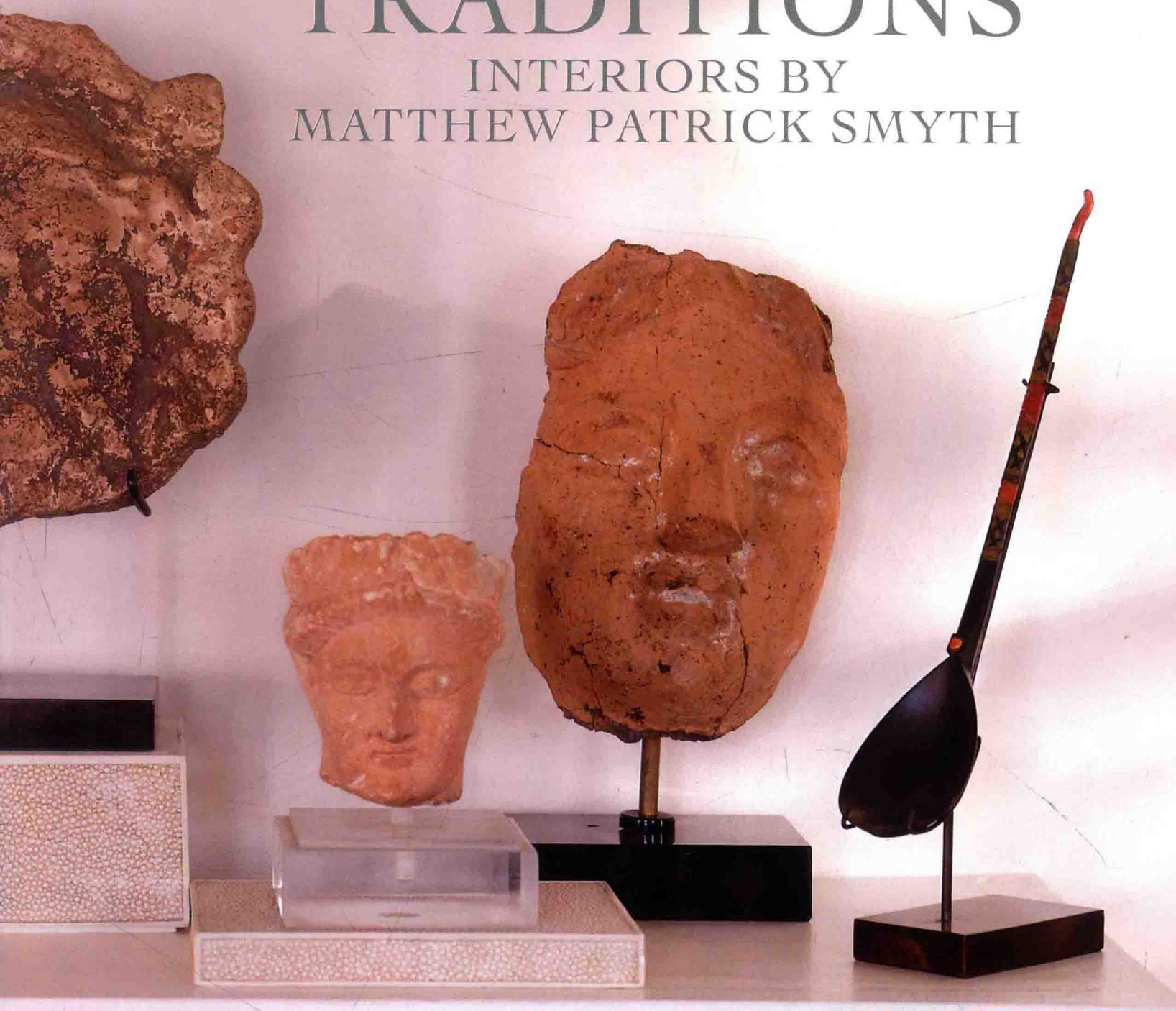

PRINCIPAL PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHN GRUEN
WRITTEN WITH JUDITH NASATIR

I would like to dedicate this book to my clients, who have given me their loyal support over the years. I've been very lucky to have had only "nice" clients, which makes a world of difference! If I were to do a family tree of clients it would stem back to my friends Tony Korner and Eugenie Voorhees. Thank you for believing in me so early on.

To the magazine editors, writers, and photographers who have helped promote my work over the years. Without their help, there would be no book.

In memory of Alvin Karstensen, George O'Brien, Billy Goldsmith, Bob Menhennett, and my Mother. They all set the course.

Finally, and above all, to Jean Vallier for 28 years of listening to me worry but never hearing a word!

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INTRODUCTION

So much of my life has come neatly full circle, but my life in design came completely out of the blue. Growing up in a close-knit Irish Catholic community did not expose me to the world of design and decoration directly or indirectly. My elementary education was in the hands of nuns who taught me long division and cursive, but who never mentioned interior design or architecture—not in relation to our church's nave, apse, or altar, and certainly not as a career option. I'm fairly sure they still don't.

No one breathed a word about interior design in high school, either. And in college I bounced from major to major, from theater eventually to business, and only to please my family. When I graduated, the one sure thing I knew was that I had much more to learn. I was twenty-two years old. I was trying to make a go of commercial photography. I was a bit lost. One day, I found myself watching Katharine Hepburn on the *Dick Cavett Show*. He asked why she didn't have children. She said something along these lines: "People say you can have it all, but you can't. You're never going to get anywhere unless you narrow down what you want. If you don't, you'll get to a certain point in life and nothing will pull together."

I remember thinking: "That's it. Narrow it down." I wasn't sure whether "it" meant theater, photography, or business, but "it" started coming into focus at a dinner party one night in Stone Ridge, a small town in upstate New York where I was then living. My dinner partner told me in passing that he was a weaver, and that his current project involved


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handcrafting carpets and throws for a house in Lake Forest, Illinois. He went on at length about the site, a pure, eighteenth-century-style manor house that seamlessly incorporated all the modern-day conveniences yet also had plaster moldings handcrafted by artisans using centuries-old techniques. He marveled about how the designer communicated with the artisans and craftspeople: by sketching an idea or the solution to a technical problem on the walls, drawing carpets in detail, making color samples based on the custom fabrics chosen for the rooms. This designer had filled the house with the finest Georgian furniture available—sourced and purchased in London—and summoned artisans from Italy to glaze certain rooms. I had no idea then what "glaze" meant, nor, really, much else that he mentioned. But I was moved by how he spoke, so I wrote down the designer's name: David Easton.

In those pre-Google days, finding out about a designer's work meant hunting down old copies of decorating magazines. The more I read about Easton, and about decorating, the more I thought I might have found what I had been looking for. I started tagging along with a few designer friends on their client visits and helping them with their antiques business. I then bought my first book on decorating, *The New York Times Book of Interior Design and Decoration*, by Norma Skurka. I remember eyeing it in the mall in Middletown, New York, where I had a part-time job at Biltmore Tuxedos escorting model brides down a makeshift runway while wearing the brightly colored tuxedo of the week—it was the 1970s. The cover of that book, which I still have, was so beautiful—a John Saladino apartment that I could live in happily even today on the front, and classic Mario Buatta on the back.

I soon discovered that the Fashion Institute of Technology was then considered the field's most respected school. As Parsons, formerly the "best" school, shifted toward industrial design in the late 1970s, its renowned faculty—the teachers of Mario Buatta, Angelo Donghia, Thomas Britt, and so many others—had migrated to FIT. If I could get in, I would be able to learn from such legendary teachers as Stanley Barrows, Renee Smith, Glen Boyle, and Ray Kendall.

In those days FIT held the equivalent of an open entrance exam: a portfolio review by the faculty on a specific day. I pulled together ten of my photographs, made a few sketches of my bedroom, and bought a bus ticket to New York. Students who had drawings far more detailed than mine filled the auditorium, yet many of them were turned away.

While the professors were reviewing my portfolio, they huffed and puffed and waved their hands. I thought my dream was over before it began—and that maybe I would take that flight attendant job I had just applied for after all. Then they called my name, asked me a few questions, and repaired to a corner to discuss my portfolio some more. Finally Mr. Barrows walked back over to me. "Your portfolio is weak,"

he said, "and nothing in it really pertains to interior design, but we see something in your photographs. You seem to have a sense of perspective, so we are going to take a chance on you."

When I got back upstate, I gave notice to my boss at Biltmore Tuxedos, a wonderful woman named Agatha Rinaldi. Agatha was an Anna Magnani type—tough, gorgeous, larger-than-life. When I told her I was leaving to study interior design, she offered that she had a cousin who was a designer—then she asked if I had heard of him, Mario Buatta! I walked her to the bookstore, and as we looked at the cover of Skurka's book together, she told me stories about growing up with him on Staten Island. Today, of course, "Mario" is like "Cher," an instantly recognizable name associated with an instantly recognizable style. He and the other designers and firms in that book—David Hicks, Joe D'Urso, Ward Bennett, Thomas Britt, David Easton, Angelo Donghia, MAC II, Kevin McNamara, Parish Hadley, Denning & Fourcade, Joseph Braswell—remain a major source of inspiration. All I knew when I first pored over that book was that interior design was going to work for me. That August I moved to Manhattan, to the student floor of the West Sixty-third Street YMCA. I focused on my studies. And I never forgot about David Easton. I had no idea I would come to know many of them personally, or that, like them, I would someday be installing a room at the Kips Bay Decorator Show House.

My senior year, the president of the Interior Design Club asked me for a list of possible guest speakers. I of course suggested Easton, he accepted, and came to FIT with slides of the very same house I had heard so much about at dinner a few years before. At the end of the lecture, the club's president introduced me to him. I asked him to review my work. Polite and kind, he made me feel as though I was on the right track. At that point in my life, the only thing I was certain about was that I had to work for him.

After David left, I noticed that he had left behind a roll of blueprints—depictions of rooms that Jim Steinmeyer, his partner, had rendered exquisitely. I asked the department head if he wanted to keep them; he said I could have them if I liked. Those sketches soon covered every inch of wall surface in my room at the YMCA. I can still see those prints, their lines and nuances, as if they were in front of me.

When graduation arrived Stanley Barrows asked if I had a preference about where I might like to work. I told him with David Easton. His reply was: "A good choice. You will learn a lot, but you won't last long." That scared me. I remember thinking: what if I go to work for him and get fired soon after? What would I do, since he was the very reason I got into design? I decided to get my feet wet in a few other offices first.

The reality of working as a designer came as a shock. I discovered that I would only be devoted to actual design 10 percent of the time. The rest, the hard and important part, was detail—running around, problem solving, organizing on a massive scale with military precision. My first job made me think I had

opted for the wrong profession. My boss had an extremely tough clientele. For the sake of my résumé, I stayed a year and a half, miserable, but determined to learn.

I then moved to a young firm of seven people. It was the early 1980s, when many rental apartment buildings in Manhattan began to convert to condos or co-ops and needed model apartments and updated lobbies to entice buyers. This firm specialized in those projects, and I learned how to shepherd a job from initial design and space planning to installation—in three weeks. To decide about materials and styles, we developed scenarios and personality profiles for our "clients"—a young woman in the garment district, for instance, or a young attorney on Wall Street—a process reminiscent of what I loved about theater.

I then went to work for Billy Goldsmith, an owner of Luten Clarey Stern, a firm that produced contemporary furniture classics. One day, a friend whose best friend ran Easton's office called and said he needed to hire someone fast—and could I interview that very afternoon? It was now or never. I rushed home, put on a fresh shirt and tie, dusted off my portfolio, and ran to Easton's office. I started two weeks later.

In those days the firm was just seven in all, and David worked closely with us. He taught me how to draw, and to see what he saw. I studied hard—and not just design skills. David insisted that manners mattered, and his love of travel and his sense of generosity made a mark on me. He sent me to Paul Stuart with his credit card to buy my first tuxedo so I could take a client's daughter to a ball—the same girl whose carpets were woven by my dinner companion all those years ago. I didn't think that I would have much use for a tux, grateful though I was. Once I had it, however, more black-tie invitations arrived. Better yet, I remain close with the girl I took to the ball—and got to know her sister, too. I went to their weddings and helped decorate their first apartments.

I worked on houses, apartments, boats, and planes that were once-in-a-lifetime opportunities for an assistant. I traveled with David to Madeira to design needlepoint carpets, to Venice to create vestments for a private chapel, to London to shop for antiques, and to Paris just for the sake of it. The intense training was comparable to graduate school—sleepless nights, anxiety attacks, and all—but I loved it. During my time at David's office, I thought repeatedly about what Stanley Barrows had said. After about three years, however, I stopped worrying about being fired. I held on for six years: a firm record.

For years after I left David's office, I could hear his voice in my head, guiding me. My own has taken over now, but I never forgot the lessons. The experience of working for the best is irreplaceable, as much for what it teaches about the details of design as for the exposure it provides to the finest examples of the decorative arts, to the world, and to life. That knowledge informs every aspect of what I do now.

Even after all the places I visited, my abiding love for Paris permeates my work. Whenever I'm about to start a big project, Paris always beckons. I return to New York inspired about design. That's been true since my very first trip there. I stayed in an apartment on the Right Bank with a magnificent view of the Eiffel Tower. A friend there knew the curator from Versailles, so he arranged a lunch and a private tour of the rooms then under renovation—a real eye-opener for someone living in a sixth-floor walk-up. I was determined to return, and soon.

The French lifestyle, based on fully enjoying free time, resonated with me. Who in Paris would spend a Saturday or Sunday in the office, as we Americans so often do? I made a goal of eventually keeping an apartment there, which I achieved, ten years ago. I am never bored in Paris. Each block is different. No two buildings are alike. There's always something new, and everything is individual. There's so much style, and an appreciation for every period: Art Déco, the various Louis eras, and Directoire, to name a few. I love going to the flea market on Saturday mornings, as much for the pleasure of looking as to buy. When I'm really tempted, I find myself thinking: "Will it be worth it to ship this back?" I talk myself into saying "Yes!" far too often, of course!

Much of interior design is about saying yes while saying no—or, more accurately, narrowing down the options. Where to begin when everything is possible? Many of my younger clients feel for London what I feel for Paris and New York. When they try to convey to me how they want their homes to look, they often reach back across the Atlantic for an image of what it is that they desire from their experiences there in the past—the atmosphere of a particular hotel, or a club, some special place where they've had dinner. They remember the lighting, the intimacy, the fun.

Architecture often sets a project's mood or direction, and I don't fight it unless the architecture is truly bad. Context is key: interiors should suit their time, their place, their surroundings, and their purpose. I'm not a great proponent of "Versailles in the sky," as they say. What's more jarring than walking into a modern urban apartment building, riding the elevator up thirty-eight floors, and exiting into a palatial gilt-and-velvet-covered parlor?

Rooms are not theater sets, and design is not about making fiction come to life. Rooms should express the needs and personalities of the people who live in them, now. That's my main goal. The relationship between designer and client is like any intimate relationship: it either clicks, or it doesn't. The client makes a project successful. I need mine to be involved, to have an emotional attachment to where they live, because no one can be happy in a forced or arbitrary interior—it's just too personal.