



# The Great Lady Decorators

*The Women Who Defined Interior Design, 1870–1955*

ADAM LEWIS

Foreword by BUNNY WILLIAMS

Original Room Portraits by JEREMIAH GOODMAN

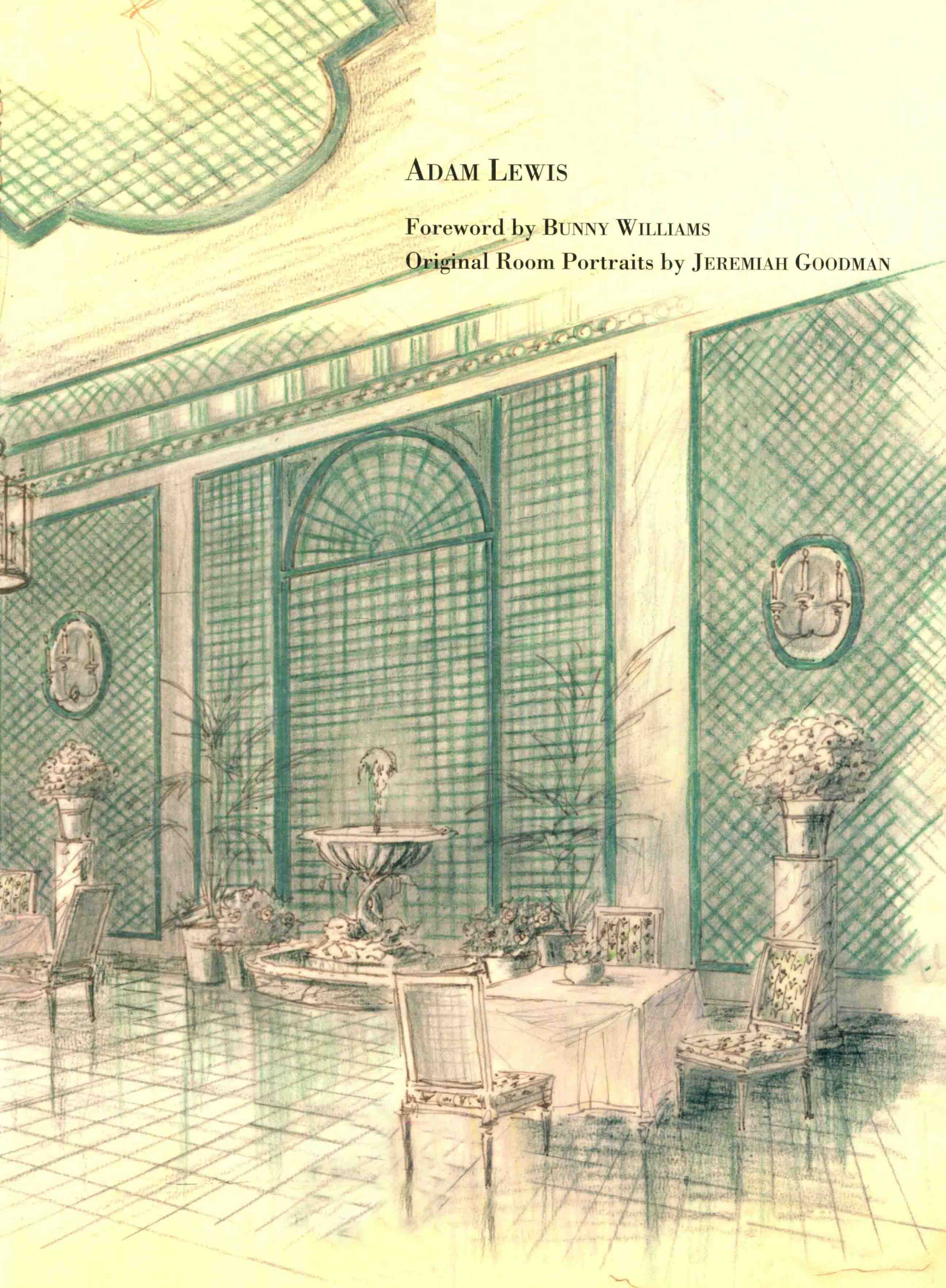
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NEW YORK



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#### A NOTE ON THE IMAGES

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#### END PAPERS

French silk *Tiger Velvet* by  
Brunschwig & Fils. Courtesy of  
Brunschwig & Fils, New York.

#### HALF TITLE PAGE

Entrance hall. Swan House,  
Residence of Mr. and Mrs. Edward  
H. Inman, Atlanta, Georgia.  
*Atlanta History Center.*

#### TITLE PAGE

Members' dining room. The  
Colony Club, New York City.  
*Drawing by Albert Hadley.*

#### OPPOSITE

Detail of the French chimney  
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Bedroom of Madeleine Castaing,  
Paris. *Photograph by Antoine Bootz.*

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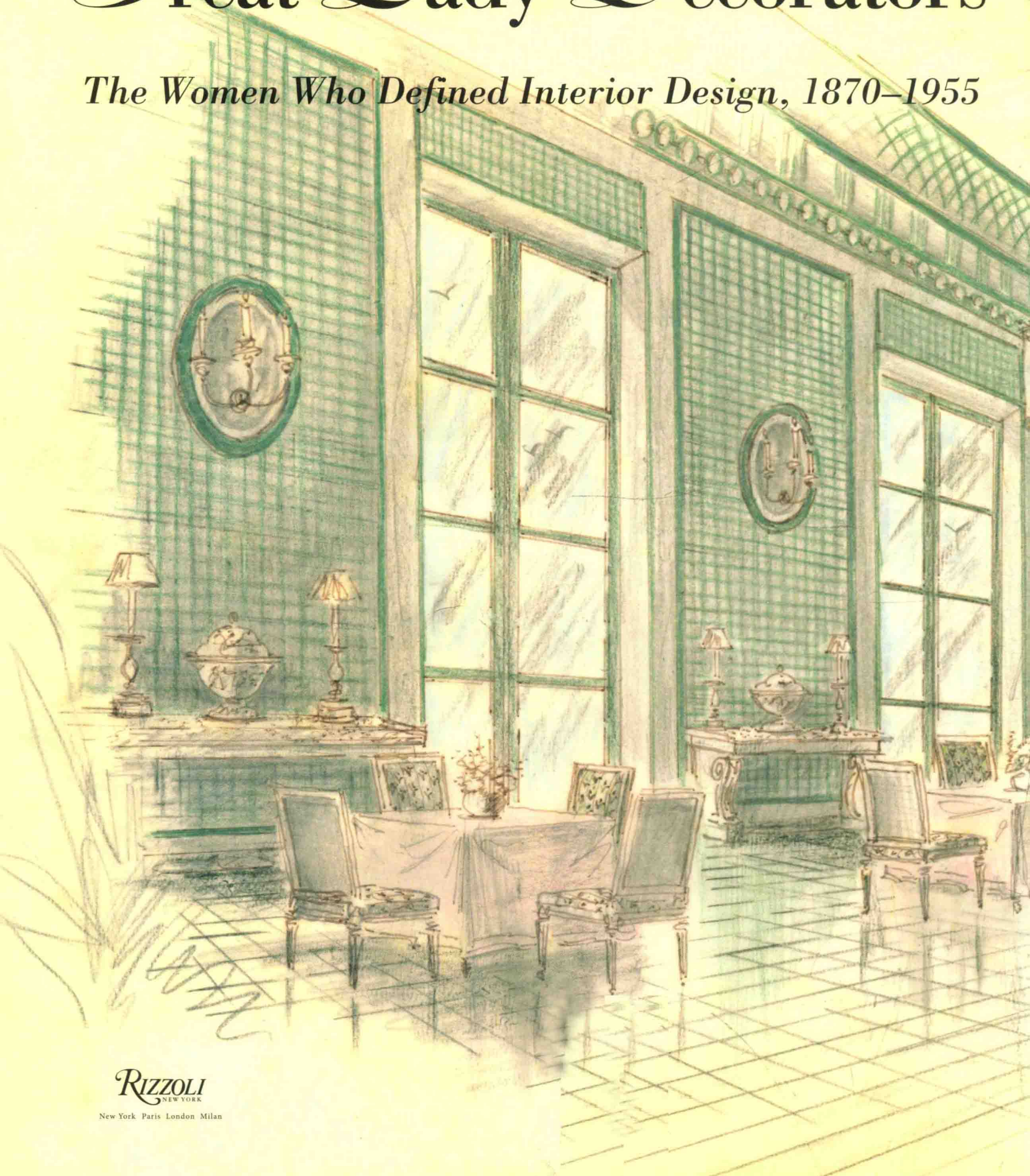
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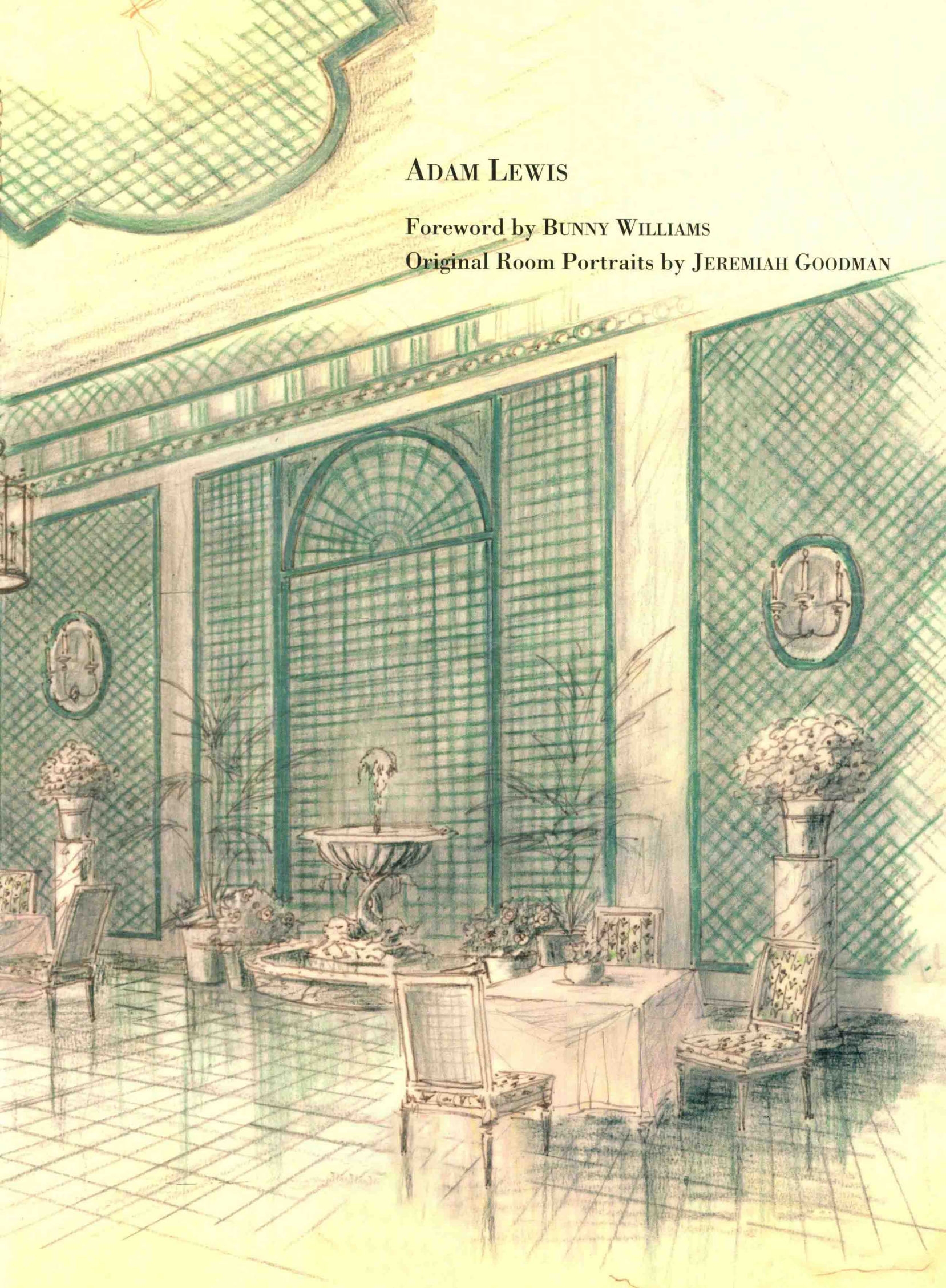
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Thomas Chu

Jeremiah Goodman

Albert Hadley

John Hill

Four gentlemen, each untiring in his efforts for this book, who became a *chevalier servant* to these ladies and their stories.

*Merci.*







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# Acknowledgments

It would have been a far more difficult task to write this book without Albert Hadley. He knew each of the Great Lady Decorators personally, visited their shops, and was a guest in their homes. Professionally, Albert worked with two of them and became the partner of Mrs. Henry Parish II. He was tireless in going through his files and scrapbooks to establish an accurate account of the early years of the interior decorating profession.

Jeremiah Goodman, like Albert Hadley, was privy to the inner sanctum of the early years of interior decorating. When I first described this project to Jeremiah, he enthusiastically offered to enrich the book with twelve original paintings. His literally fantastic interpretations of the work of these women add a unique dimension that is beyond value.

John Hill, photographer, graphic designer, master of type, layout, and design, worked diligently to ensure the best possible reproduction of every photograph, drawing, and painting in this book. Limited to old photographs and transparencies, some dating to the nineteenth century, he has revealed through digital technology and his remarkable eye details in the images that have never before been seen. John's finished work allows us a new vision into the archives of interior decorating and design.

Bunny Williams was the perfect person to write the foreword to this book. Having been trained within the ranks of the women featured in the book, Bunny now stands as America's Great Lady Decorator.

Kathleen Jayes, my editor, Abigail Sturges, who designed this book, and my literary agent, Helen Pratt, deserve unending kudos for their patience with me and my constant insistence that the most minute details had to be considered in every aspect of the story. Charles Miers, my publisher at Rizzoli, also allowed me the freedom to seek the vision that I wanted for this book. It has been a long nine years in the making.

Now that the narrative is complete, I offer sincere gratitude to my readers Deeda Blair, Harry

Hinson, Lionel Larnier, Willoughby Newton, and Claudia Thomas for their long hours of giving attention to details, style, and social content.

Some people added in-depth knowledge from their own endeavors in the world of interior design. Mitchell Owens, with his encyclopedic knowledge of the design world, freely shared his research on Ruby Ross Wood and his learned opinions on interior decorating.

With the same openness, Martin Wood offered me extensive assistance from his research on Nancy Lancaster, as did Pauline Metcalf from her work on Syrie Maugham, and Stephen Salny shared his vast knowledge on Frances Elkins.

Each of the following people was indispensable in his or her help. I extend my thanks to JoAnn Agle, Susanna Barrows, Apple Bartlett, Bill Blair, Angelina Bliss, Louis Bofferding, David Boyd, Katherine Boyd, John Brancati, Carol Cavalizzo, Susan Crater, D. Ron Daniel, Alexandra d'Arnoux, Beth Daugherty, François de Bené, Murray Douglas, Christopher Flach, Duane Hampton, Fred Iberri, David McMahon, Leigh Montville, Dorothy Muche, Florence Palomo, Anne Pepper, Mary Jane Pool, Nancy Porter, Carol Prisant, Nicholas Prychodko, Luis Rey, Betsy Rix, Tom Savage, Marian Hall Seldes, Michael Stier, John Thomas, Carleton Varney, Candace P. Wheeler, Lili Whitmer, Hutton Wilkinson, and Nellie Xios. If anyone who assisted me has been omitted, I offer my apologies.

In addition to the individuals and institutions who supplied the photographs for this book, noted by each image, I am grateful to the staff of the following institutions for the information and research that they provided: the Elsie de Wolfe Foundation, Jewish Museum Milwaukee, Monterey Public Library, Huntington Library (San Marino, California), Monterey Historical Society, Monterey County Free Libraries, and the Social Register Association.

Finally my gratitude to Thom Chu, my companion, who has given unending encouragement and support and labored tirelessly for the success of *The Great Lady Decorators*.

## OPPOSITE

Drawing room. Home of Elisabeth Marbury and Elsie de Wolfe, East Fifty-fifth Street, New York City. Painting by Walter Gay.







# Foreword

BUNNY WILLIAMS

## OPPOSITE

Living room, Residence of  
Bunny Williams, Park  
Avenue, New York City.  
*Photograph by Pieter  
Estersohn.*

Spending a weekend reading Adam Lewis' book *The Great Lady Decorators* was like spending a weekend with my superheroes. These ladies are the rock stars of interior design.

Adam introduces us to each lady from her early background, through the height of her career, to the end of her life. Some were born into privilege and others came from more humble beginnings. Some went into design to support their families, others to support the passion they had for living well. Few had formal training but what they all had was an amazing imagination, great style and a need to be creative. They also had the knowledge of how a house should function as well as how it should look. They understood the practical side of running a house and how it needed to work. They knew how to entertain and did so beautifully, always bringing together interesting people, serving good food, and providing immensely comfortable as well as stylish backgrounds for living.

For years, interiors were done by architects working with upholstery and drapery workrooms. It took Elsie de Wolfe to break this staid approach and give interiors a real freedom—the flair, imagination and creativity that began the whole field of interior decoration. Adam beautifully describes many of the famous rooms created by each of these ladies and the individual inspiration each has left

on the interior design world. From the flamboyance of the Greenbrier Hotel done by Dorothy Draper to the tasteful, scholarly elegant rooms of Eleanor Brown; from the glamorous, theatrical hand of Rose Cumming to the comfortable classic rooms of Sister Parish; from the amazing modernist rooms of Frances Elkins to the Parisian style created by Madeleine Castaing, we are taken on an amazing journey through the work of the great trendsetters of the world of interior decoration. When I finished this book, I realized how lucky I am to be working today where having a career is not an anomaly. For many of these ladies, a career meant being “in trade,” which often set them apart socially. But, they led so much more interesting and creative lives than those who criticized them and played such an inspiring role on the field of interior design, leaving a legacy that will always be admired and emulated. I am indebted to them for leading the way.

*New York City, 2009*





# Introduction

B

efore the waning years of the nineteenth century, the interior of a house was overseen by the designing architect. He would decide on every interior detail, the color of the rooms, and the arrangement of furniture. Under the architect's supervision the furniture was custom-made by upholstering and woodworking firms. Curtains, also designed by the architect, were made by men who called themselves drapers. These decisions were made in company with the owner of the house. The owner's wife had little, if any, voice in these decisions. This began to change when Candace Wheeler, who had worked with the designer Louis Comfort Tiffany, opened her own design firm and defined herself as an interior decorator.

While Candace Wheeler was the first to establish herself as a decorator and published a book on decorating, she was in fact more noted as a fabric designer. She was also a champion of women's rights in the workplace. Following the example of a group of Englishwomen who had established a commercial needlework guild in London, Wheeler pioneered the idea of an exchange where women could market their handmade crafts and sewing. She was passionate about providing opportunities for women to earn money.

With the dawn of the twentieth century, women were becoming more visible in the workplace,

RIGHT

Entrance hall, The Mark Twain House, Hartford, Connecticut. *The Mark Twain House & Museum.*

