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MAN OF DISTINCTION

AN ARCHETYPAL New York TASTEMAKER, DESIGNER THOMAS O'BRIEN GATHERS
ART AND OBJECTS WITH THE ZEAL AND DISCERNMENT OF THE GREAT
19TH-CENTURY COLLECTORS, BUT WITH A CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN EYE

O'Brien's collection stamps him as a Renaissance man. A mantel, opposite page, showcases a 1920s Tina Modotti photo and a '50s ebony sculpture by Alexandre Noll. ■ The main space, this page, is divided into a living room and a bedroom. The latter features a round Farrell side table by O'Brien for Hickory Chair, a cube table from Aero, NYC, and a vintage James Mont chest of drawers.





O'Brien, in his living room, this page, wears tortoiseshell glasses, custom-made at A. R. Trapp Inc., NYC. His Eclipse table lamp in Polished Nickel for Visual Comfort & Co. sits at the end of a Nakashima Conoid dining table. ■ A bulletin board, opposite page, holds inspirational clippings. A 1960s bronze by Javier Marín, from Joel J. Mathieson Antiques and Fine Art, NYC, sits atop a teak bookcase by Pierre Jeanneret. A striking Gio Ponti matte-black, two-spout vase was found at Pampaloni, Miami Beach.

ABOVE THE WINDOW IN THOMAS O'BRIEN'S KITCHEN

is a framed print bearing the maxim "Tomorrow's success is founded upon today's preparation." The piece—which has traveled with O'Brien from apartment to apartment since he arrived in New York City from his upstate hometown in 1979—conveys a work ethic that came over on the Mayflower, and the phrasing is old-fashioned in a *Poor Richard's Almanack* way. To those who know O'Brien and his work, it's no surprise he takes this Americanism so deeply to heart.

O'Brien has been called a "designer's designer" largely because of the rigorousness of his methods and the comprehensive scope of his thinking. His lines for Target and, most recently, tableware maker Reed & Barton—not to mention other licensees such as

Hickory Chair (for which O'Brien designs furniture), Lee Jofa (fabrics), Visual Comfort & Co. (lighting), and Safavieh (rugs)—are thoroughly plotted designs for living that consider every aspect of the home.

O'Brien is conversant with the whole vocabulary of decoration. But, he concedes, "I have an American point of view in what I do. There are French influences and English things in my apartment, but most are American. It's mostly about American designers."

One look around O'Brien's one-bedroom apartment in midtown Manhattan makes that plain. There is furniture by James Mont, Charles and Ray Eames, John Dickinson, and George Nakashima; photography by Edward Weston, Man Ray, and Irving Penn; vases and bowls by Russel Wright; sound sculptures by Harry Bertoia; and art by Paul Cadmus and Max Weber. These are mixed with retro clocks, worldly







In the living room, opposite page, O'Brien's designs—a Deco Plaid rug for Safavieh and a Hallings secretary for Hickory Chair—complement vintage furniture and 20th-century art, including a pair of tall sound sculptures by Harry Bertoia, ca. 1970. The white onyx egg-shaped table lamp is available at Aero, NYC. ■ The dining table, this page, is laid with pieces by O'Brien for Reed & Barton's Tiago collection: Slate Blue dinner plates and serving bowls, a large oval platter in Matte Charcoal, a charger in Chestnut, and assorted flatware. Vintage Scandinavian oval tray with white gold by Carol Leskanic.



O'Brien's art, this page, left, includes a Francis Bacon study in a white gold-leaf frame from Bark Frameworks, NYC, and a Greek dolphin-shaped clasp, ca. the fifth or sixth century B.C., from Joel J. Mathieson. The gesso and white-gold candleholder, by Carol Leskanic, is available through Aero. ■ On the terrace, O'Brien's pups lie on a vintage sofa in Sunbrella awning fabric in Captain Navy/Natural Classic. A white vintage Architectural Pottery vase from Aero, NYC. ■ The den, opposite page, features an Arne Jacobsen Egg chair and a custom Ponti wardrobe topped with an antique Inuit stone figure from Joel J. Mathieson. See Shopping, last pages.

pieces I buy there aren't overly precious."

Indeed, O'Brien is also known for his free-wheeling mix of the classy and the quotidian. In the living room (which he converted into his bedroom), a custom 10-by-18-foot bulletin board and the Pierre Jeanneret cabinet that stands before it display everything from an ancient Aztec sculpture of a grasshopper to pottery by Russel Wright and Gio Ponti to a five-dollar etching of an eagle and pages ripped from magazines.

O'Brien developed this visually democratic sensibility when he studied art at New York's Cooper Union. "What was important to me at school," he says, "was both the foundation courses and, especially, the critical discussions. Talking about what I made, or what other people made, was where I really learned. I walked into those critiques and (Cont. on page 167)

curiosities, and, not surprisingly, many of O'Brien's own creations. There is also photography by German-born Loretta Lux and Wilhelm von Gloeden, French and Irish furniture, Italian pottery, Dominican and Celtic sculpture, and art by Francis Bacon. But the American spirit dominates in the decor.

"His sensibility is rooted in American tradition, but with a mid-century twist to it," says O'Brien's friend and fellow designer Thom Filicia. "There's a humbleness to his aesthetic. It's very stylish, but it still feels grounded."

O'Brien is well-known for his inveterate collecting, a pastime that informs the look at Aero, his retail store in SoHo. The same holds true for his apartment. Every inch of its 1,200 square feet is chockablock with his personal objects of desire. It is partly a very lusciously outfitted artist's studio and partly a contemporary version of the Victorian cabinet of curiosities, but curated by a modern eye.

Of O'Brien's aesthetic, designer Miles Redd says: "He has a very strong personal vision—sort of masculine, streamlined 1930s elegant luxe. There's a passion that reads through everything he does."

And it's O'Brien's collecting instinct that lures interior designer Steven Gambrel to Aero again and again. "He builds these wonderful layers of incredible objects and materials, and has an uncanny way of building collections of small objects that are the perfect thing to finish off a room," Gambrel says. "And I like the accessibility of them. The





SIGNATURE STYLE

THOMAS O'BRIEN DISCUSSES THE INSPIRATIONS BEHIND HIS PRODUCT DESIGNS AND HIS THOUGHTS ON THE ELEMENTS OF A GREAT DECOR



▲ OLD AND NEW

"I PARTICULARLY LIKE THIS SMOKY BLUE GLASS DECANTER I DESIGNED FOR REED & BARTON. THE COLLECTION MIXES VINTAGE QUALITIES WITH MODERN FORMS. THE PIECES MIX SEAMLESSLY WITH OBJECTS LIKE THE '50S EVA ZEISEL PITCHER AND THE '20S ORREFORS ICE BUCKET, SEEN HERE." REEDANDBARTON.COM.



EYE-CATCHERS

"I MET PHOTOGRAPHER LAURA RESEN AT COOPER UNION, AND WE'VE BEEN FRIENDS SINCE. THIS PHOTO WAS FOR A CALENDAR WE DID. FOR AERO'S 15TH ANNIVERSARY THIS FALL, WE'RE DOING A SHOW OF HER WORK. THE PHOTO IS LEANING ON THE ODEON MIRROR I DESIGNED FOR HICKORY CHAIR. IT'S SIMPLE AND BOLD, AND WORKS ANYWHERE. 'BOCCE BALLS,' \$1,800, AERO. 212-966-1500. ODEON MIRROR, \$1,425, HICKORYCHAIR.COM.



ANTIQUITY AURA

"I LOVE ANCIENT OBJECTS. THE 300 B.C. CELTIC BUST I GOT AT JOEL J. MATHIESON HAS A CONTINUITY WITH MODERN PORTRAITS. MOUNTED JADES, BELOW, FROM THROCKMORTON FINE ART, ARE LIKE JEWELRY." JOEL J. MATHIESON ANTIQUES AND FINE ART. 212-343-7477. THROCKMORTON-NYC.COM.



ON UPHOLSTERY

"I START DESIGNING A ROOM WITH THE SOFA FABRIC, BECAUSE THE SOFA IS USUALLY THE LARGEST OBJECT IN THE ROOM. THIS MOROCCO CHENILLE FOR GROUNDWORKS/LEE JOFA HAS A GREAT SCALE FOR LARGER UPHOLSTERED PIECES BECAUSE IT HAS VISUAL INTEREST, BUT AT THE SAME TIME IT'S CALM." TO THE TRADE. LEEJOFA.COM.





REVISED RUGS

"FOR SAFAVIEH, I DID MOROCCAN RUGS IN NEW COLORS RATHER THAN TRADITIONAL IVORY AND BROWN. THE MOTIFS FOR SOME RUGS CAME FROM ARTS AND CRAFTS POTTERY." MARCO RUG IN OCEAN, SAFAVIEH.COM.



MATTE BLACK

"I LOVE PAMPALONI IN MIAMI BEACH. THEY MAINLY SELL ITALIAN SILVER, BUT THEY ALSO HAVE MATTE BLACK POTTERY BY GIO PONTI. IT MAKES GREAT SILHOUETTES WITHIN A ROOM." PAMPALONI.COM. PONTI PIECES ALSO AVAILABLE AT BARNEYS NEW YORK.



COLOR MIX

"YOU SEE PALE BLUE AND CHOCOLATE TONES IN ALL MY COLLECTIONS—LIKE THESE REVERSIBLE TOWELS I DID FOR TARGET. I THINK OF THEM AS NATURAL COLORS, SOOTHING AND SERENE." BATH TOWEL, \$10, TARGET.COM.



WOODEN PUSHINS

"AT AERO STUDIOS, A LOT OF ATTENTION GOES INTO PRESENTATION. WHEN WE PUT STUFF ON A BULLETIN BOARD TO WORK ON CONCEPTS OR SHOW A CLIENT SOMETHING, THESE LOOK BETTER THAN PLASTIC PUSHINS." \$3 FOR A BOX OF TEN, KINOKUNIYA, NYC. 212-765-7766.



ON LIGHTING A ROOM

"I RARELY TURN ON CEILING LIGHTS. I PREFER POINTS OF DIM LAMPLIGHT AROUND A ROOM. THE BASIC FORMS AND TRANSPARENT CRYSTAL BASES MAKE THE GEOMETRIC TERRI LAMPS I DESIGNED FOR VISUAL COMFORT & CO. VERY EASY TO USE IN MANY DIFFERENT ENVIRONMENTS." VISUALCOMFORT.COM.



HOSTESS GIFT IDEA

"I GIVE THESE MATISSE PAPER CUTOUT BOOKS FROM RIZZOLI AS PRESENTS. THEY'RE CHIC AND SO ELEGANTLY PRINTED THAT YOU CAN KEEP THEM AS A FOLIO, OR FRAME THEM." "LES NUS BLEUS," \$450, RIZZOLI BOOKSTORE. 800-522-6657. RIZZOLIUSA.COM.

