

# SUBVERTING TRADITION

*For a down-to-earth power couple and their adventurous collection of photography and art, architects Pietro Cicognani and Ann Kalla with designer Thomas O'Brien create a warm New York duplex.*

**By Martin Filler**

**Photography by Laura Resen**

**Produced by Dara Caponigro**

*The architects moved doorways in the large entry gallery to provide more wall space for works of art. New banister was modeled after one in Sir John Soane's London house museum. On an 18th-century northern Italian credenza, self-portrait photographs by Cindy Sherman. Swedish 18th-century chandelier from Brahmans-Netsky, New York. Opposite: The library, all views, clockwise from top left: Against gold-leafed wall, photo by Ute Barth and armchair in Bergamo striped fabric. American redware displayed on shelves. French 19th-century toile painted tray hangs between windows; c. 1880 Baroque-style chairs from Rose Cumming.*





Moving to Manhattan from the suburbs after their children were grown, a busy, successful couple—she’s a major publishing executive, he’s a leading physician—wanted a duplex apartment so they could retain the feel of a house. But evaluating a rundown two-story co-op on the Upper East Side required more than a bit of imagination. Used for more than 25 years as a consular residence, the apartment was filled with so many beds that it seemed, the wife recalls, as though a cult had died there. Yet she could envision a complete transformation, and assembled an expert and like-minded team to execute it.

Architects Pietro Cicognani and Ann Kalla, who had designed the couple’s country house, understood the wisdom of playing up the distinguished heritage of this 1920s building. They suggested sympathetic gestures like replacing the drab travertine floor of the entry gallery with white-veined black marble to match that of the original doorjambs. With equal responsiveness, interior designer Thomas O’Brien of Aero Studios replaced the fifties-style wrought-iron handrail of the curving staircase with a graceful wrought-iron-and-

mahogany interpretation of a 19th-century English design. That glamorous entry space opens onto a dining room with wood paneling that was disassembled and painstakingly restored piece by piece.

The furnishings that O’Brien and the clients chose together are considerably softer, smaller, and more wide-ranging in period than the massive Jean-Michel Frank-inspired pieces the designer usually favors. Although there are many rooms in this apartment, none is particularly large, and that intimacy is enhanced by the judicious placement of perfectly scaled objects. In the long, somewhat narrow living room, O’Brien carries off one of the most difficult decorating tricks by organizing two separate seating areas that work as well individually as they do together for larger gatherings.

Here O’Brien’s palette widens notably from the cream-to-taupe range he is best known for. The jewellike tones of the numerous magnificent Oriental carpets are smoothly coordinated with the celadons, barely blues, and pale yellows of the upholstery and curtain fabrics. Finding just the right



antique floor coverings was no easy matter, however, and more than twenty were auditioned before final decisions were made. As the wife's decorating-savvy friend Bette Midler had forewarned her, "Wait till you get to the rugs. It's the *worst!*"

Though many elements in the apartment would have been at home here when the building was new, this is no period piece, which is signaled by the first photographs that confront you upon entering: a pair of black-and-white Robert Mapplethorpe studies of a male and a female nude (albeit relatively decorous for that shockmeister) and an enormous color self-portrait close-up by Cindy Sherman looking like some

demonic carnival reveler. In room after room, the very proper decoration is deliciously subverted by the kind of unsettling photography coveted by trendies half the owners' age and living eighty blocks downtown. The rest of their collection is equally provocative, with works by such confrontational painters as Lucian Freud and Leon Golub, and several surreal pictures by the outsider artist Robert Helm.

"My philosophy is that our house should be easy to live in, homelike, and reflect our particular eccentricities," says the wife. "But I've never before lived in anything that could pass for elegant, so this place is our idea of heaven."

*The sunny living room (above and opposite) is pulled together by a warm-toned Hereke carpet c. 1900 from the Rafael Collection, New York. Above: Cindy Sherman photo of a devilish doll jolts an 18th-century parcel-gilt console bought at Christie's and a carved alabaster lamp from Coconut Company. In front of 19th-century Chippendale-style mahogany-and-glass screen, the tufted sofa is upholstered in Lee Jofa's striped fabric. Opposite: In the mirrored fireplace niche, an arresting oil by Leon Golub hangs over French marble mantel and Irish Chippendale chair, both 18th-century. Pair of sofas in Holly Hunt's striped velvet. On wall at right, 1999 Lucian Freud portrait etching from Acquavella Galleries.*



*The oak-paneled dining room (both pages) evokes the history of this venerable building, which was built, sponsored, and organized as a co-op in 1926 under the guidance of etiquette arbiter Emily Post. This page: Chinese Chippendale chair with cane seat from Paterac beneath vintage bronze sconce from Chameleon Antiques. Thomas O'Brien's Aero Studios made the shade and those for the Louis XVI crystal chandelier (opposite) from David Duncan Antiques out of 19th-century photographs of old master paintings. Oval dining table on lively reeded legs is another custom Aero design. Wheel-backed dining chairs are covered in silk velvet from Jack Lenor Larsen. Antique Sultanabad carpet from The Rafael Collection.*





Period wallpapers contrast with contemporary photos. Clockwise from left: In the den, against William Morris's Compton wallpaper from Sanderson, disaster pictures by Sebastian Salgado. Saraab carpet from Safavieh. Private sitting room, with Cindy Sherman Movie Still, includes settee covered in Clarence House velvet. Master bath with Biedermeier pedestal cupboard.

FOR MORE DETAILS, SEE READER INFORMATION



The architects largely gutted the second floor and reconfigured private spaces. Master bedroom's British Khaki four-poster was embellished with chinoiserie painting. Japanese 17th-century altar candleholders converted to lamps, from Joel Mathieson. On chaise by Jonas Upholstery, Scalamandré floral-print silk. Carpet from Safavieh.

