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COLLECTOR'S EDITION: INTERIOR DESIGNERS' OWN HOMES



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BRIAN MCCARTHY

CONTINENTAL FLAIR FOR A NEW YORK APARTMENT



Here are the key things one needs to know about the young Manhattan designer Brian McCarthy: He is an alumnus of Parish-Hadley, the Princeton of interior design. He loves luxury. And he is widely considered one of a new generation of innovative traditionalists on the New York scene.

His calling card is his own rambling apartment in the rather colorful neighborhood surrounding Carnegie Hall. McCarthy is ensconced in one of those slightly sinister turn-of-the-century apartment houses where the ceilings are too high and the paint is perpetually peeling, where the neighbors include a fair share of characters—elderly men with booming baritones, elderly women with ballerina necks—who still know how to work the stage, even if that stage is now only an elevator.

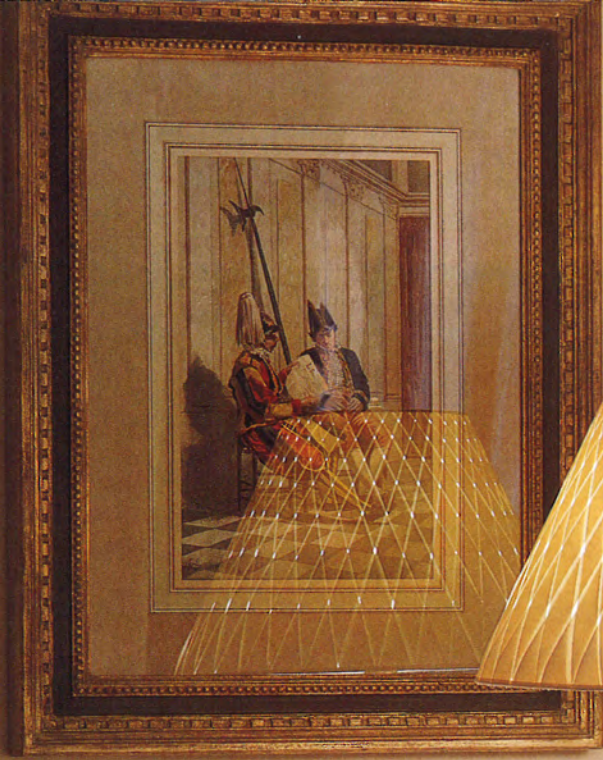
The atmosphere is thick with romance. “This apartment has a soul,” says McCarthy. “To equate it to a person, it is someone who has had a fascinating life and has traveled a great deal and has lots of stories to tell.”

Apartments of this vintage, however, are not usually machines for living. There is invariably an old-fashioned layout that has to be rethought, clumsy attempts at updating that need to be undone and always, everywhere, the possibility of some future avalanche of



“It evolved around the back-grounds,” says Brian McCarthy (above left) of his New York apartment. ABOVE: Lacquered walls enliven the entrance hall. Regency mirror, Kentshire Galleries. A sconce from Marvin Alexander is below a mirror from Old Versailles.

“Through the use of color I tried to create a rhythm from room to room,” McCarthy explains. OPPOSITE: A 19th-century Italian watercolor hangs in a living room corner. The portrait is 19th-century French. Silk taffeta drapery fabric is from Christopher Norman.



The dining room/library is punctuated by McCarthy's favorite view. "You don't have to live in the best building on the block—sometimes it's better to face it." *Bureau plat* is Louis XVI. Clarence House drapery fabric and trim. Stark carpet.



BELOW: Two 1994 mixed-media works by Chilean artist Isabel Klotz are displayed in the dining room/library. Reflected in the Italian-style mirror is *Warrior*, a 1930 oil by Rubincamp. The moiré chair fabric is from Brunschwig & Fils.



BELOW: McCarthy redesigned the butler's pantry off the dining room/library with marbled Italian paper and surfaces "glazed to a woody finish." Beyond, a work by Klotz is mounted above an Austrian Biedermeier commode.



plaster that makes even the most optimistic decorator wary about calling in a first-class painter. But at Parish-Hadley, a young designer meets and conquers more than his share of grand prewar wrecks. Here was an opportunity, says McCarthy, "to practice what I preach."

McCarthy has a style all his own, considerably more European than Sister Parish's and considerably riper than Albert Hadley's. "I'm a nothing-o-phile," he says. "I've collected furniture and objects from practically every country in

northern Europe, western Europe and southern Europe. This apartment is a scrapbook. Everything here is my family."

But if his collection of contemporary Latin American paintings and his early-nineteenth-century Danish and Russian pieces look as if they have waited all their lives to come together in this apartment, it is largely because of certain sound principles of comfort and style that McCarthy has picked up over the years.

"Great backgrounds are the begin-

In the sitting room are an Empire daybed and a Regency mirror. "The leopard-print carpet is timeless," says McCarthy. Clarence House wallcovering and daybed, armchair and drapery fabrics. Marvin Alexander ceiling fixture. Stark carpet.

ning," he says. "You either put in or take out. But you get that done properly, first." In this apartment, he paneled the living room and glazed the walls in three shades of café au lait, so the first room everybody sees upon entering has "strength and structure." In the sitting room, he created a "womblike feeling," with toile on the walls ("A toile room relies less on *things*") and a leopard-print carpet on the floor ("Madeleine Castaing pretty much had it all figured out—leopard carpet looks good anywhere"). And he transformed a butler's pantry into a gentleman's bar with Italian marbled book paper on the walls as well as some woody effects with paint.

The entrance hall is all backgrounds. "A foyer sets the tone," says McCarthy. "It either builds you up or lets you down." The floor, a standard-issue Manhattan parquet, was stained and painted with an elaborate pattern adapted from Italian and Russian palaces. The walls, the only ones not in any known path of future water damage, were lacquered and wet-sanded eight times to a high gloss Narcissus would have appreciated.

"Layering" is yet another important principle of decoration here. McCarthy explains, "Albert used to talk about creating a 'skyline' in a room so that everything isn't on one level." As he talks, his index finger traces a panorama around the living room, from the high Biedermeier secretary to the Louis XVI-style fireplace and overmantel mirror to the low seating group by the window, then back up to a large contemporary Chilean painting. This is not a room just trying to get by on symmetry, it's a very complex puzzle.

For McCarthy, intimate seating arrangements are essential. "Small groups of people should be able to find a corner," he says. And indeed, the living room and library/dining room seem to be all corners: a seating group tucked behind a desk, another at the window, an Empire-style table that can be used for dining or tea or browsing through books. There's a place to sit for every mood. (One of the designer's favorite seating positions is a deep slouch,



"NOT EVERYTHING HAS TO BE PRECIOUS." OR EVEN, FOR THAT MATTER, VERY OLD.

preferably with a pile of books in the corner of his walnut Empire daybed.)

In matters of lighting, McCarthy doesn't like a lot of it; instead he uses soft, moody lighting that flatters his guests. "More than lamplight, I like to use candlelight and picture lights."

And in true Parish-Hadley spirit, McCarthy says, "Not everything has to be precious." Or even, for that matter, very old. Admire his magnificent mahogany *bureau plat*, and he explains that it's Louis XVI; admire his equally magnificent Empire-style table, and he says it's brand-new. "It's such a simple design. Why *not* just have it made?"

Though McCarthy makes it all sound easy, he's the first to admit, "Decorating for yourself is agony. It's easy to figure out what will make someone else happy. It's easy to make someone else's dreams come true. But to get into your own head as a decorator is hard because you're exposed to so many things. I've learned that usually you have your best ideas before you've begun work. I always went back to my first night of tossing and turning to figure out what I really wanted."

It helped to go slowly. For example, McCarthy covered all of his sofas and chairs in white muslin at first, then upholstered them one at a time as his rooms took shape. "Every home has its own pulse," he says. "If you live in it awhile, it tells you what it wants to be."

Sometimes going slowly isn't even enough. McCarthy makes a practice of always mocking up elaborate draperies in flannel, to see beyond a reasonable doubt that the jabot is long enough and the swag is deep enough. But then the draperies for his own library arrived, the design he had approved and approved and approved again. "For the first time in my life, I understood how my clients feel when I install a room."

He fretted. He pouted. Frankly, he panicked. In about a week the terror subsided, and the draperies stayed. And now, as he sits at his writing desk beneath those sumptuous folds, falling just as they were intended to, he cannot believe he ever for a moment doubted the wisdom of his decorator. □