

Perfect Taste And a Client List To Prove It

By JULIE V. IOVINE

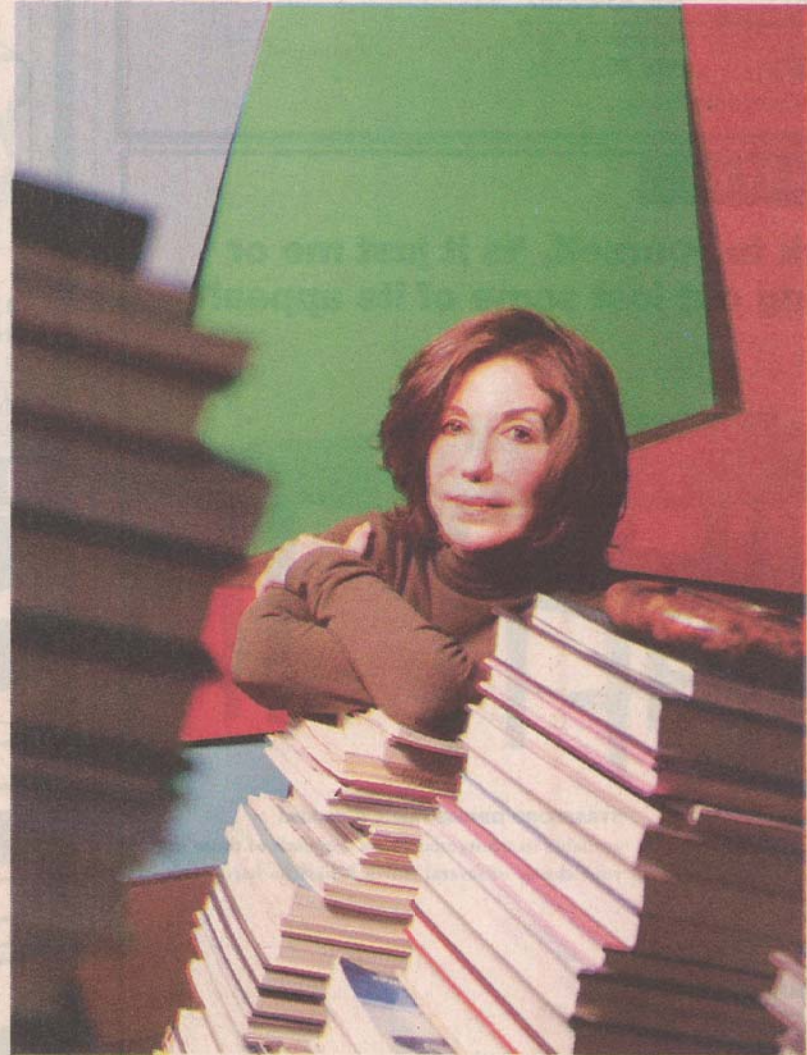
LAST Friday, in a living room lined with art monographs and Frank Stella collages, Rose Tarlow, the elusive doyenne of decorating, posed for a rare photograph. Princess Jah of India read gossip columns on a nearby sofa, and Richard Meier, the architect, ate mashed hard-boiled eggs in the kitchen of his Upper East Side duplex.

Mr. Meier, who is Ms. Tarlow's former boyfriend, emerged to discuss the merits of a 17th-century slab of pale beige limestone sent for her inspection. She had selected it as flooring for a client's house in Greenwich, Conn., and she wanted to make sure it had been properly waxed.

"It's ugly," Mr. Meier said and headed up the stairs. Ms. Tarlow stuck her tongue out at his receding figure. "No, it's perfect," she said.

Both charmingly prosaic and ridiculously rarefied, the scene could have come straight from Ms. Tarlow's new book, "The Private House" (Clarkson Potter), which she had jetted in from Los Angeles (on Eli Broad's private plane) to publicize. The 266-page soft-focus memoir, party guide and design essay offers glimpses into the lives and (unidentified) homes of David Geffen, Eli and Edye Broad, Barbara Walters and Bill Blass, to name a few of Ms. Tarlow's boldface clients and friends. But the main subject is her professed passion: creating rooms of haunting luxury packed with enough rarities and idiosyncratic touches to

Continued on Page 4



Craig Blankenhorn for The New York Times

STYLE BIBLE In "The Private House," Rose Tarlow shares (some of) her life as the A-list's mandarin of taste.



Perfect Taste: Client List Proves It

Continued From Page 1, This Section

upstage a Zeffirelli opera set.

For someone who, by her own account, has decorated no more than five homes in the past 15 years, Ms. Tarlow's reputation as "one of the most talented interior designers today," as a showroom manager at the Decoration & Design building called her, has mounted to dizzying heights.

That was never more evident than at a book party last Tuesday. It was given at the Four Seasons Grill Room by society's bicoastal royalty, including Jane and Michael Eisner and Terry and Jane Semel, and was attended by a crowd that would have made Truman Capote swoon. Among those loading up the cocktail napkins

attile home.) "I just wanted to write a book, and design is what I know. I have no interest at all in telling people what to do."

That said, she wastes no time in spelling out exactly how she likes things to be. She applauds how, in a friend's home in Provence, a shirred curtain hides kitchen appliances less than 100 years old, but she clearly deprecates multicolored flower bouquets at parties.

About half the photographs in the book are of Mr. Geffen's homes in California and New York, which had never been published before. Many of the images come from Ms. Tarlow's own home in Bel Air, a labor of love (with unattributed help from celebrity architect Larry Totah) — and they have been published at least a half a dozen times.

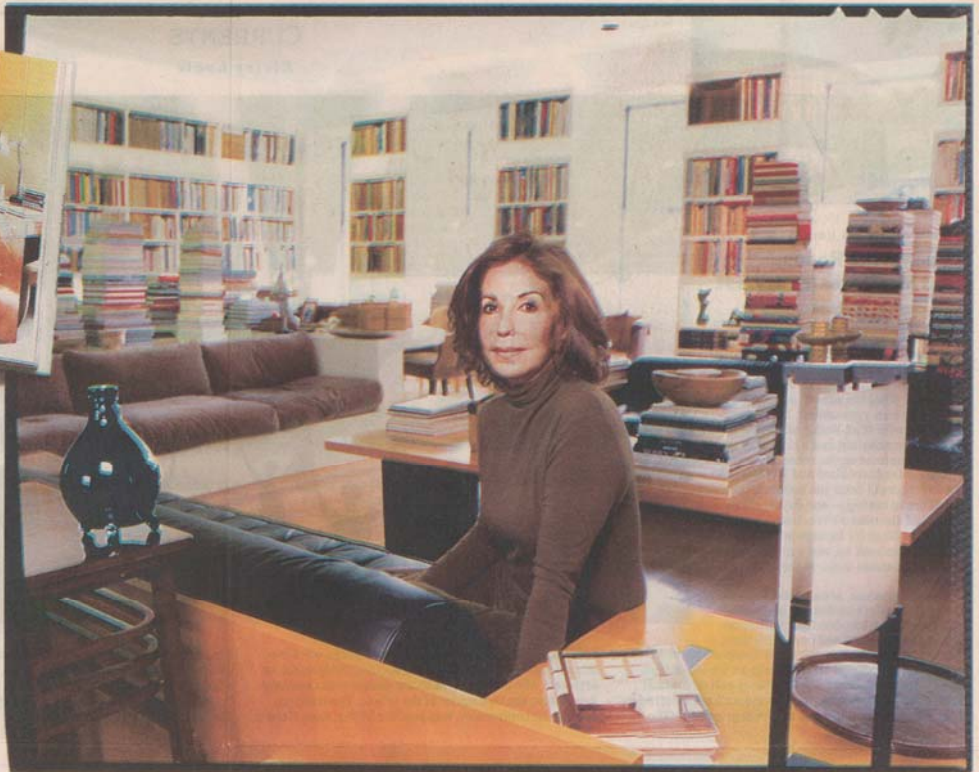
With its 11th-century oak beams from a church in England and 18th-century boiserie from France, and with vines climbing up the inside of the 20-foot living-room walls, the house is a kind of Grand Hotel for one. "Sometimes I look out on the green lawn and I feel like I could faint," said Ms. Tarlow, who is rather perfectly manicured herself.

While her ascension to diva status is well documented in the pages of such upper-crust style manuals as *Architectural Digest* and *Town & Country*, she has been pointedly vague about her early years. Ms. Tarlow was born in Shanghai, a descendant of two monied families, the Sassoons and the Khedouris, who have real estate holdings throughout New York.

In "The Private House," the veil wafts slightly as she recalls a childhood spent shuttling between a Fifth Avenue mansion across from the Frick and a beachfront summer house with 20 bedrooms (in Deal, N.J.). "My favorite parts of the book were about her life," said Bill Blass, a friend for more than 25 years. "I like to know all those things."

Married before she turned 18, Ms. Tarlow studied design at Parsons and the New York School of Interior Design. In 1971, she moved to Los Angeles with her second husband, Barry Tarlow, a criminal lawyer.

With a talent for spotting impeccable but quirky antiques, she quickly turned her cottage shop on Melrose Place into a pit stop for the discerning. "In California, if you have any talent at all they pick you up and give



Craig Blankenhorn for The New York Times; inset top left, Naam Kaahdan/The New York Times



Photographs by Patrick McMullan

BOLDFACE FRIENDS From left, Michael Eisner, Barbara Walters, Henry Kissinger.

for a long night of rubbing shoulders were Henry Kissinger, Tina Brown, Charlie Rose, Martha Stewart, and Carlton Hobbs, a London antiquarian who flew in for the occasion. He called her book a bible for people "of the most advanced taste."

"It wasn't a glittery crowd," said John Barrett, the hair salonist. "It was pure power."

From restless housewife to antiques dealer to founder of Melrose House, a multimillion-dollar business in furniture reproductions (she calls them "essences of a period"), Ms. Tarlow insists that her ambition as a child was "to be like Emily Dickinson, a writer and a recluse."

"This is not a style book; I didn't even want it to have photographs," added Ms. Tarlow, who is famously contrarian. (Seven years ago, she turned down an offer to meet with Bill and Melinda Gates about decorating their 40,000-square-foot Se-



Clarkson Potter (above and left)

SENSIBILITY UNVEILED Rose Tarlow, above, poses in Richard Meier's Manhattan duplex; inset top left, a spread from her new book, "The Private House," showing her study for David Geffen; left, Ms. Tarlow's own studio; below, her country kitchen in Bel Air.

entire foreword. According to an editor at the magazine, Clarkson Potter sent the manuscript with a long list of photographs it was prohibited from using, specifically images of the Geffen homes.

In the composed world of Ms. Tarlow, the serene surface is rarely ruffled. "I try to hide from things that are not good for my eye," she said. "I only see what pleases me." Last January, she ended a 10-year relationship with Mr. Meier, but they remain good friends. Of the book (in which he makes cameo appearances), Mr. Meier said only that he had suggested things to be edited out. Of her rooms, he said they are "cluttered but nice." "It's not arbitrary clutter, but thoughtful clutter," he said.

Even those who have cause to dislike Ms. Tarlow, don't. About a year ago, an associate of Mr. Geffen's bought a \$23 million house in Greenwich, Conn., and asked Ms. Tarlow to bring her magic to the place, a neo-Palladian orangerie with some 40 stone arches on the exterior and stuccoed groin vaults within. A labor-intensive work involving dozens of local artisans, the house had been four years in the making. Ms. Tarlow disliked the arches and vaults, and had them ripped out.

"How did I feel?" said the architect, who asked not to be named. "Four years wasted? I felt that. But she told me 'At this point in my life, I can take what I want, and it has to be perfect,' and I can respect that."

A dash of Dickinson, a bit of Capote.

you everything," Ms. Tarlow said. "I couldn't have made a name for myself so quickly anywhere else."

People remember her early striving and shrewd pursuit of design legends Michael Taylor and Kalef Alaton, and the help of a behind-the-scenes publicist, Ralph Webb, an old friend, recalled seeing her in the early days of Melrose House zipping about in a Mercedes convertible with fresh-minted antiques piled in the back. "Though she was personally rich, she was always out to save a buck or two on her business," he said.

The patina of exclusivity was burnished to a shine when it was widely reported that Mr. Geffen had to beg her to decorate his \$47.5 million estate (formerly Jack Warner's). She

agreed, promising to spend all his money doing it. Then she turned down the Gates commission, and her stock soared. "If I had accepted, I would probably not be so famous," Ms. Tarlow said. A 1994 New Yorker profile called her a "person of famously good taste." A relationship with Mr. Meier, just as he was undertaking the billion-dollar Getty Cen-

ter, added gravitas. Annual Butterfield and Robinson bike tours abroad with the Eisners, Mr. Geffen, Fran Lebowitz and, last year in the Dordogne, Diane Sawyer ("She was nearly biking in her heels," Ms. Tarlow said.) cemented her relationship with the power elite. Jane Eisner said, "She always has a different observation from everyone else. In Ireland she saw 87 colors of green."

While Melrose House expanded, Ms. Tarlow cast about for more creative outlets, teaching at U.C.L.A., designing fabrics for Scalomandre and scented candles for Bergdorf's.

Ms. Tarlow has emerged from A-list exclusivity to push the book with numerous public events. In October, Town & Country ran a 10-page excerpt, including Paul Goldberger's