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La Vie en Rose

In her first book, designer Rose Tarlow shares her sought-after recipes for making life beautiful.

Los Angeles seems like the wrong city for Rose Tarlow. Famous for her fierce attachment to vanishing traditions (afternoon tea by the fire, uniformed domestic help), Tarlow is someone you'd expect to find cozied up in a venerable Holland Park town house or reclining in the dappled shade of a loggia in Fiesole—not living five minutes from the 405 freeway.

But here stands Tarlow in the doorway of her ivy-wreathed Bel-Air home, her tiny manicured hands on her tiny hips like the last defender of the Old World. "I don't usually let anybody come here," she says in a frank, New York tone that clashes with the Merchant Ivory lifestyle she has created for herself. "Close friends and family, that's it."

And, of course, the occasional magazine. Despite Tarlow's protestations, the house, which she designed—sans architecture degree—from the ground up in 1989, has appeared in enough design publications to make it one of the most coveted in contemporary society. The occasion for today's exception to

place where Kristin Scott Thomas' and Ralph Fiennes' characters in *The English Patient* might have ended up had they actually lived happily ever after. "For me, nothing has ever been as hard as writing this book," Tarlow continues. Not building her famous house? Or running her legendary West Hollywood antiques shop? Or designing the homes of such titans as David Geffen and Eli Broad? "Absolutely not," she says.

"I love working with David, because he is a great friend of mine," Tarlow says of Geffen, whose \$50 million, Georgian-style behemoth appears (unidentified as Geffen's) in *The Private House*. "And he has an incredibly fast intelligence. He immediately gets everything you tell him, which makes him a lot of fun to work with."

Fun is a big thing with Tarlow. Loath to admit that she is available for professional design work at all, she refuses to take on projects unless they sound like fun to her—which is practically never. "I hate designing houses," is her standard protest. But Tarlow, who says she originally got design degrees from



From left: Rose Tarlow; Tarlow's living room, with its climbing vines and 18th-century French oak doors, brings a cozy traditionalism to Bel-Air.

the oft-bent rule is the publication of Tarlow's first book, *The Private House*, which she describes as "a design book that's not a design book." Inspired by the informal, cozy style of culinary writers like M.F.K. Fisher and Elizabeth David, the book—due out this month from Clarkson Potter—is equal parts memoir and how-to. It includes everything from anecdotes about the cherished 20-bedroom house on the New Jersey shore where Tarlow's family summertime when she was growing up to instructions about how to use garden soil to give one's walls just the right "lived-in" patina.

Tarlow's decision to work without a ghostwriter—unlike many other designers-turned-authors—made the project an exhausting, eight-year labor. "I love writing, but I'm not a writer," Tarlow says, settling herself on an ancient, perfectly worn velvet sofa in her perfectly lived-in living room. With its burnished walnut floors, towering bookshelves and vines creeping in through the French doors and up the walls, the room looks like the sort of

Parsons and the New York School of Interior Design only because she "could not stand" for her house not to look the way she wanted it to look, insists that her distaste for the work is genuine. "I don't want to do it, and the only reason I do do it is that I am obsessed with buying antiques," says Tarlow, who once purchased almost the entire collection of fabled Art Deco furniture by Emile-Jacques Ruhlmann from the estate of the designer's widow for Eli and Edythe Broad's New York apartment. "That's the truth. I need to buy furniture, and I only ever take on a design project if it's one that's going to allow me to buy furniture that I'm interested in buying."

It also helps if the client-to-be is one of Tarlow's famous cronies. "I hate dealing with clients, so when I do work, I prefer to work with friends," she says. Fortunately, since moving to Los Angeles in 1972 to marry her now-ex-husband, criminal attorney Barry Tarlow, she has quietly amassed a pretty astonishing collection of friends. In addition to the Broads and Geffen—to whom

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Tarlow was close for years before agreeing to work for them—she vacations regularly with Michael and Jane Eisner, talks almost daily on the phone to Bill Blass and Terry and Jane Semel, and, until recently, had been romantically involved with architect Richard Meier for more than a decade. Tarlow made many of these friends, including Geffen and Blass, through the shop she opened in 1976, Tarlow Antiques. “Rose just had the most exquisite taste,” says Blass. “The first time I saw her store, it was a complete revelation.”

Tarlow Antiques was an immediate success. “I remember when I first opened my shop, a Japanese man who could hardly speak English came in and said he had just bought a \$20 million house in Beverly Hills and that he was going to come back and buy everything in the shop,” says Tarlow. “I thought, Yeah, right. But he did. He came back and bought everything.” As the market for genuine, top-drawer antiques in L.A. dwindled, the store eventually evolved into Melrose House, a showroom for Tarlow’s own lines of period furniture, textiles and wallpaper, and it was not long before her fans were hounding Tarlow to design their homes.

Not all of Tarlow’s friends, however, are eager to combine business with pleasure. “That would be the kiss of death,” says Jane Eisner, laughing. She has called during the interview to see if Tarlow is still planning to join her and Michael on their jet to Aspen the next morning. “I admire her enormously, though, because she has one of the most incredible eyes for beauty that I’ve ever seen,” Eisner continues. She recalls, on a bicycle trip through Mississippi, Tarlow’s refusing to set foot in a casino where the group had stopped to gamble. “She said, ‘It’s just so ugly, and the

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lighting is so hideous. I just can’t be in an environment like that.’ She has a very clear sense of herself and what her boundaries are. Unlike a lot of people in this town, Rose is not at all removed from who she is.”

As for Meier, Tarlow claims that the two are still close and that they have continued working together on the Broads’ Malibu house, which Meier designed. “I don’t have an ego when it comes to my work,” she says. “I don’t really take it that seriously, you know? I design homes; I don’t think I’m Joan of Arc or anything.”

Tarlow, however, has no problem contradicting herself. Ten minutes later, she is expatiating on the psychic toll that design work exacts and the difficulty of meeting her own exalted standards. As Edye Broad says, “For Rose it’s not nearly as important that the client be satisfied with her work; *she* has to be satisfied with it.” It is partly, Tarlow admits, the strain of such perfectionism that causes her to avoid taking on new projects. “It’s so personal for me,” she says. “To make it really good, you have to put your heart into it, and that’s really difficult.”

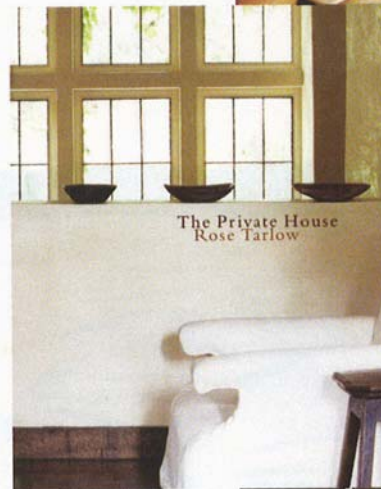
Ideally, Tarlow believes people should design their own homes. “It’s not like surgery,” she says. “I mean, there are some rules to it, and I tried to address the essential ones in the book, but they are not so strict. The bottom line, I think, is that people need to learn to trust themselves, because when it comes down to it, nobody is going to know what they want and need better than they are.”

Nevertheless, there remain those chosen few who prefer the privilege of having Tarlow in the driver’s seat. Calling from his office at DreamWorks, Geffen raves about Tarlow’s unique taste and vision and concludes by saying, as though it’s the biggest compliment of all, “She’s also just a fun person to have in your life.” Broad says, “One thing that’s wonderful about Rose is that she doesn’t approach anything in a business-y way. With other designers, you’re always getting millions of invoices and things, but there’s none of that with Rose.”

Of course, unlike most designers, Tarlow charges a single, hefty flat fee for her work instead of earning a commission, on each piece of furniture she buys. But with Tarlow’s clients, nickels and dimes clearly aren’t an issue. In fact, most of them are just grateful she’s agreed to work with them. “I wish Rose would do every project I had for me, but she doesn’t work that way,” says Broad, who has signed on—along with Blass and the Eisners—to give a book party for Tarlow in New York later this month. “She really has to feel something in order to take it on.”

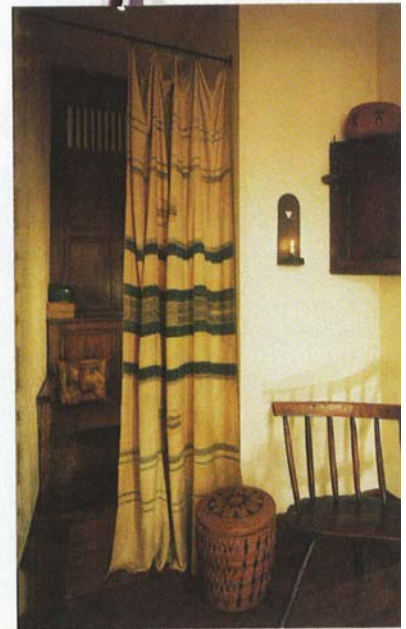
If Tarlow has her way, she will be taking on even fewer design projects in the future. She recently purchased a property in Provence that she refers to as a “love affair” she began when she knew that her relationship with Meier was coming to an end. And she is already planning two more books—one on France and one on antique furniture.

“Right now there’s nothing else I’m interested in doing,” she says. “I have a vision of myself in the countryside, just writing and drinking tea out of some beautiful thing and riding horses and having lots of books and watercolors around. But you never know.” Tarlow pauses and grins like a sphinx. “I said I would never do David Geffen’s house, and look what happened there.”



Above: Tarlow’s collection of old English pewter chargers and wooden plates are artfully arrayed near a set of 1920s French porcelain dishes.

Left: The cover of Tarlow’s first book. Below: A panel of American Indian cotton fabric hangs in a guest powder room in Tarlow’s house.



—KIMBERLY CUTTER