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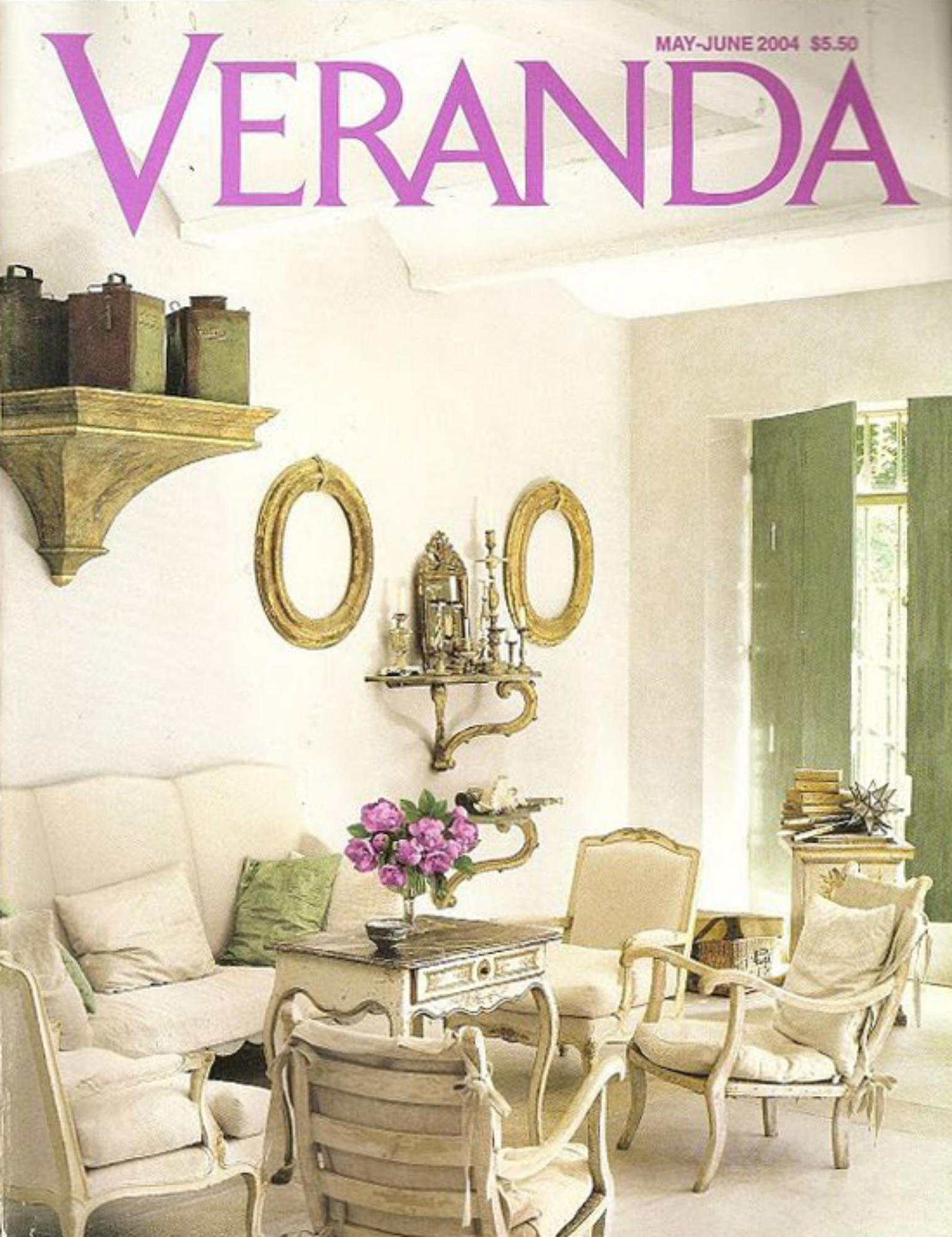

OBERTO GILI

A residence designed by Albert Hadley features subtle tones and refined shapes.

ONE VOICE: MARIAN McEVOY

PLAYING FAVORITES

OBSERVATIONS ON DESIGNERS

PART I

The most exciting—and by far the luckiest—part of my thirty-four-year career reporting on fashion and decorating has been close encounters with superstars. I don't mean Sean "P. Diddy" Combs, Joan Rivers, Courteney Cox, Thom Filicia or any of the ones on TV, in *The Star* or at the pool at the Delano Hotel. I'm talking about the legendary, more private talents who are serious masters of their crafts: the gifted ones who create prophetic couture collections and the most seductive, copied rooms in the world. Couturier Yves Saint Laurent is a prime example; but so is the late, less well-known, interior designer Michael Taylor. Household names or not, my favorite superstar designers are as rare, and sometimes as fragile, as snowflakes in August.

When I moved to Paris in 1974—to correspond for *Women's Wear Daily* and *W*—I wrote gazillions of features about clothes, parties, food, wine and decor. During sixteen privi-

FRITZ VON DER SCHULENBURG

Designed by Renzo Mongiardino, Rudolph Nureyev's Paris apartment is as flamboyant as the famed dancer.

leged years, I produced piles of stories about what people wore, but what I really loved was reporting on how people lived. I visited chateaux, farmhouses, villas, cottages, *hôtels particuliers*, townhomes, lofts, hunting compounds, pieds-à-terre, chalets, beach shacks, converted barns, mills and monasteries from Sicily to Stockholm. At first, I lapped up everything everywhere: I thought every room of every house had a redeeming quality. After a year or so, I learned that all decors are not created equal. And that every interior design project falls into one of four categories: the good, the bad, the tragic and the great. I won't waste your time with the bad/tragic bits—it is counterproductive and just too depressing—because the crucial differences between good and great are much more fascinating.

GOOD

rooms are easy on the eyes and well organized to suit their function: dining, sleeping, cooking, etc. • A good room is often homogenous and always reassuring; it looks somehow familiar and well-behaved. • Whether stark and streamlined, or cluttered and frilly, good rooms are tasteful.

GREAT

rooms are assertive: They stir the senses, tweak the intellect and veer off the beaten path. They can take your breath away. • As artfully constructed as a fine novel, symphony, painting or film, great rooms provoke an emotional response. You know they are historically important. • Even if they are as serene as fog, great rooms are never, ever simple. Nor are the handful of characters who create them.

How do you define a great designer? What does he/she do that other solid professionals don't? Why do only a few designers get the nod to create truly grand residences or refurbish major landmarks? Why are some interiors so prophetic that they are copied from continent to continent, decade after decade?

Number one, luck has very little to do with it. Instinct, unusual references, a clear plan, knowledge and training, worldwide travel, a manic attention to detail and a diabolical will are some of the elements that separate the good from the great. "Cute" and "comfy" are two words that monumental interior designers don't use a lot. It's not that charm and graciousness aren't part of their design vocabularies; major design stars are simply more captivated by "extreme" aesthet-

ics than their less-possessed peers. A dramatic/memorable sense of scale, proportion, contrast, light, juxtaposition and finish is a great decorator's Holy Grail. Above all, a great designer has the power to seduce, inspire—and, when necessary, intimidate—contractors, artisans, business partners, the press and, of course, the clients who write the checks. No matter how disarmingly self-deprecating or soft-spoken he/she might be, there is no such thing as a major decorator who's a pushover. "Give the clients what they want" is not a mantra of the great: Give the clients what they *should* have is more like it.

Six design superstars who have had an enormous impact on me and practically everyone else in the design world are Jacques Grange, Michael Taylor, Renzo Mongiardino, Albert Hadley, Rose Tarlow and John Stefanidis. Two were holy terrors; another is a sly pussycat; one is truly, deeply glamorous; one is an elegant glacier and one you could cover with kisses, but none of the above matters. Whether I dine with them occasionally or never got to meet them before they died, these six legends are my inspirations, my points of reference, my heroes and my great pleasure to write about. In this first installment, I cover Mongiardino, Italy's most revered decor maestro, and Hadley, the undisputed "Dean of American Decoration."

Renzo Mongiardino is the world's number one over-the-top decorator. He's responsible for demonstrating that "less is more" is no fun at all. Although he wasn't there, I fell in love with him during cocktails in Rudolf Nureyev's astounding Parisian apartment overlooking the Seine River. Mongiardino is famous for leaving no inch of any interior space untouched, and every centimeter of Nureyev's living room—with walls padded in what looked like deeply embossed, handpainted antique leather—was an adventure in

intensely staged design. The whole scene was presided over by a humongous globe, which has since been bought by decorators Stephen Sills and James Huniford.

Moving right along, another Mongiardino interior that practically knocked me flat is Mrs. William Randolph Hearst Jr.'s Manhattan apartment. The entry hall alone—black and white diagonal squares on the floor, perfect green walls, almost holy lighting—embodies more magic than some decorators' entire careers.

What a star! One hundred percent Italian, with a biblical beard and a Roman profile, Milan-born Mongiardino was a walking opera. An academic, a sensualist and a hippy deluxe, he became an aristocrat by osmosis. His clients, including Gianni Agnelli, Lee Radziwill, Gianni Versace and the Carlyle Hotel, paid—and treated him—royally. Mongiardino was selected to refurbish the La Fenice Theater in Venice after it was destroyed by fire. His set designs for Franco Zeffirelli's film, *Romeo and Juliet*, were as beautiful as the cast. And, thanks to video, there's a rabid fan club that still worships his sets for *Tosca* starring Maria Callas at Covent Garden in the 1960s.

Mongiardino was an architect as well as an interior and set designer, and he liked to set people straight from the get-go: "I am NOT a decorator," he proclaimed. Whatever: One thing he certainly wasn't was a minimalist loner. His design team included a dozen faux painters, a team of carpenters and a brace of gilders. The resulting fakery was often more ravishing than the real thing. Renzo's wealthy clients grew to love his fabulous faux. One proud homeowner regularly directed guests' attention to his handquilted, -painted and -embossed salon walls. "Look!" he'd point, "Does this look like antique handembossed leather? Yes! Yes? Wrong! It's cardboard—cardboard!"

Paper or hide, a typical Mongiardino room was/is also jam-packed with antiquities, neoclassical *objets*, Napo-

leon III furniture, assorted cushions, layered rugs and trims on everything. In a single room, he was capable of using two dozen different materials and motifs, thirty or so textures, a selection of painted "faux" wallpaper, triple moldings, hundreds of tiles, old-master paintings, rock crystal chandeliers, sconces and half a rainbow of colors. He clearly did not want anyone to focus on individual pieces but, rather, on the overall effect. A Mongiardino room is not just a room, it's a major event, and you'd better be dressed for the occasion. I can't imagine entering one of them in a tank top and flip-flops: I don't think any of his clients ever did, or ever will.

On the opposite end of the design spectrum is Albert Hadley. When he worked as the late Sister Parish's beloved partner and sidekick, Hadley's gentle modernism balanced her more florid, cozy, quilty/chintzy style. Throughout years of tackling heady projects—refurbishing the Kennedy White House and creating rooms for various vice presidents, ambassadors, Whitneys, Paleys and Astors—Hadley's style has become increasingly honed, even sculptural.

After Parish's death, Hadley's interiors started to look like he looks: tailored, trim, clean, handsome, well edited and just a tad whimsical. He's not allergic to cheeky, snazzy, dramatic effects, but he tempers them with good sense and good taste. Glitz, ostentation and pomp are not on his radar. A typical Hadley client might spend "gaboons" of money for a Hadley interior, but it will never smack of "big bucks bling bling." And don't ever call Albert for froufrou: Show me a Hadley room decked out in pom-poms, ruffles, swags, baby pastels or "poufy" curtains, and I'll eat my tasseled tiebacks.

He *does* love flamboyant color, as long as it's flanked with neutrals. Among the whoppers: Hot lemon yel-

low, tart apple green, Coca-Cola red and electric fuchsia. He also uses muddier tones and earthy neutrals, but there is no such thing as a Hadley room painted the color of a bruise or a sauce. His signature color combo—black, red and slightly off-white—shows up in bedrooms, living rooms, foyers, kitchens, hallways, bathrooms and in his smart new fabric collection. When contrasting matte and shiny surfaces, he's more skilled than most: ceilings lacquered to a patent leather shine successfully with flat, dense-looking matte walls happily grounded on satiny, stained wood floors. There's always a touch of brilliant chrome here, a bit of matte upholstery there, and a smidgen of a sparkly lacquered table over in the corner to add visual and tactile adventure.

Through decades of showing very wealthy people how to live well, Hadley has not fallen into the trap of trying to live as grandly as his clients. When he entertains at his small Manhattan apartment or at his tiny house in Southport, Connecticut, it's perfectly orchestrated and fuss free.

He loathes fancy cocktails—anything with a cornball name or more than one ingredient is taboo—and he avoids precious, complicated food—no fusion or nouvelle cuisine, please. He'll have the lamb chops. Spend an evening at Albert's, and you'll sit on a down-filled sofa for two; pull up one of the handy little mismatched side tables; be flattered by good lighting emanating from several sources; pick up one of the many books in easy reach; stretch in front of the fireplace heaped full of crackling wood; nibble on an olive or a nut, and wish you could remember even half of Albert's wry/wise observations. If you're very, very good and ask the right questions, he might even tease you to death. □

Part II will be published in the July-August 2004 issue.

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