

welcome

as american as the chintz on the chaise

As soon as I saw the new curtains in my bedroom, I thought, why not? I have always wanted to live like a princess in a fairy tale. The curtains did not remotely resemble the idea I had started out with, which had something to do with wanting to wake up with decidedly earthly visions of chintz, so that I would be surrounded by the rosy, rich colors of late summer gardens. If what I got had turned out to be a terrible mistake, I would be warning you about the perils of giving your decorator vague, hopeful descriptions that have more to do with how you want to feel than what you want to see. (Other professionals provide couches for mental refurbishment.) However, my curtains were not a mistake, far from it. They were the kind of lucky surprise that happens in the alchemy of decorating.

The curtains have been on my mind because I've been thinking about American decorating, and how to describe it, which is much trickier than first appears. Once you get past patchwork quilts in log cabins—and let's get past those quickly, please—it is difficult to pinpoint what is purely American. It isn't a question of size, of large or small houses; it isn't a question of color, or stars or stripes; it isn't about shape, and it isn't about types, though that's where you might expect to find the answer. Nearly everything in American decorating comes from somewhere else. The Palladian houses going up all over wealthy suburbs? Derived from the Italian. The Arts and Crafts furniture we love? Derived from the English. The skyscrapers that are a hallmark of our city skylines? The most distinctive of these were the work of refugees escaping

a war-torn Europe. That cradle of a chaise longue under the bow window of your bedroom? French. That china pattern you registered? Chinese. That Saarinen table that once graced the IBM headquarters? Finnish. The same is even true for our gardens, whose azaleas, peonies, lilies, and camellias are rooted in the Far East. And on it goes.

Of course we have our own designers who have responded to our landscape; think of the Prairie style of our greatest American architect, Frank Lloyd Wright. But even that work was influenced by the Arts and Crafts movement. And Charles Eames worked for a while with Saarinen. This brings us

to the heart of the matter. We don't so much have an American decorating type as we do an American point of view—which is what this magazine has been championing since its birth more than a hundred years ago. That point of view is large and embracing, and you might even say it is restless; it reaches around the globe for inspiration. This is more true now than ever, when your windows can be decorated with kente fabrics from Africa, or your table set with oxblood-glazed plates from Vietnam, and you have gone no farther than Pottery Barn. What is distinctly American is in the mix, and in the changeability.

Perhaps the most important thing about an American point of view is our national lust for decorating, redecorating, and then doing the whole thing over again. Decorating here—like so much else—does turn out to be about dreams. We aren't, for the most part, filling our homes with stuff from our great-grandmother's rooms. Our rooms don't have an ancestral feel, or the glamorous look of decaying aristocracy. We love what is new. Even when we are collecting antiques, we are collecting in trends—and in herds—because things from the '30s suddenly look new and things from the '70s look fresh.

So what does this have to do with my curtains? I took a detour off the beloved chintz road and became smitten with a green-blue taffeta from Boussac Fadini; Jean Charles Moriniere from Trade France added ingenious pleated ruffles down the middle, and gathered the heavy, voluminous silk into gentle folds. Never mind Scarlett dressing herself from the windows of Tara; this is the curtain that *began* life as a ball gown. I thought the whole thing

would look French—that is certainly its antecedent—but it doesn't; it doesn't look like anything I've ever seen. Which makes it quite American. And now that I've seen such curtains, to get even more American about it, everything else must go. I have become fabric obsessed, as I see that it is the most dramatic way to transform your room, to say nothing of your life. The best thing about American style? It is always time to start over.



A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'D. Browning'.

Dominique Browning, EDITOR