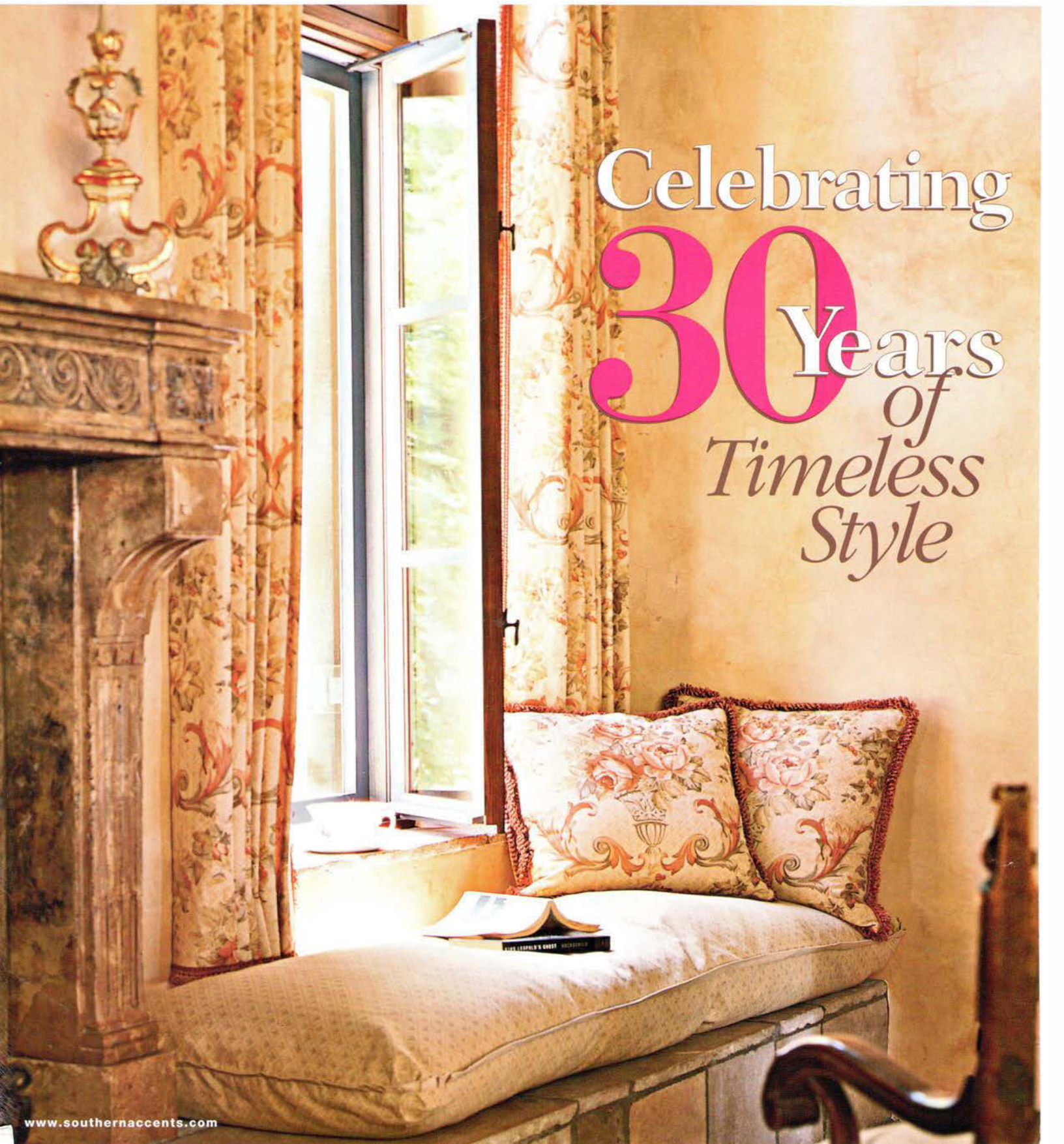


Southern Accents

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Celebrating
30 Years
of
*Timeless
Style*

A Love of the Classics

Antiques dealer and decorator **Patrick Dunne** has always had a fond reverence for objects of the past, but what makes his interiors so beguiling is their ability to embrace both old and new elements that show how good, classical bones—in architecture, furniture, and even arrangements—are always in style



MY FIRST ADOLESCENT ATTEMPTS AT INTERIOR decoration had some highly opinionated tutelage. Old Mrs. Tarleton, a family friend whose high style I much admired, left her lofty house for what was then a new and terrifying concept—the suburban town house. The ceilings were low and the rooms small, and I suppose her children thought this would make things manageable. I grieved as cruel details of this transition reached me by mail at school. Facing the eclipse of what once was perfect, I dreaded our summer reunion. When the day came to breach the door of that poorly stuccoed box, she swept me into her salon as if Marcel Proust had writ the script.

The far wall was filled with a beloved, immense Knole sofa covered in a rusty green mohair (I've searched for the fabric ever since, without success). The tapestry behind it soared to the ceiling—who knew, or cared, how many yards lay crumpled on the floor? Now that I think of it, the pier mirrors must have been cut to fit the diminished spaces, and ashy gilt consoles overlapped the door frames.

She sensed the shock and awe she had inspired. My stammered honest compliments made her forgive my youthful doubts, and she relaxed into habitual grandeur. “Do you know what makes a room?” she asked, her voice clearly indicating that all my answers would be wrong. “Of course you don't, since you're as ignorant as a fish. So I'll tell you before you say something dim like ‘color’—any half-wit can think of color.” In fact, I had admired the caramel-colored walls and meekly hoped to have the same one day. “Well, it's simple—scale and balance,” she continued, pausing for effect. “That's it. Scale with great confidence, and balance with good sense. It's straight from the ancients—that's classic.”

Today the word *classicism* has a faintly mildewed aura. When it describes décor, imaginary whiffs of grandmother's perfume cause most self-respecting moderns to feign suffocation. And yet classicism seemed very modern in the past. Rome found Greece an edgy model, and the Renaissance swooned for all things classical, as did tastemakers in the 18th and 19th centuries. The influence

of classical style has held fast for centuries. Edith Wharton quipped in her 1897 book, *The Decoration of Houses*, that the artistic tradition of the last 2,000 years provided such an abundant vocabulary of style that even a good architect would be hard-pressed to come up with so much as a design for molding that was truly new. Despite her Olympian tone, Wharton may have been onto something.

The more abbreviated word *classic* is perhaps less layered with academic dust and more comfortably contemporary: a classic beauty, a rock-and-roll classic, a classic tawny Port. While it doesn't quite have the charge that *creative*, *eclectic*, or *postmodern* conveys, there is a certain reassurance in something classic. Once, after a visit to a schoolmate's house, I regaled my grandmother with details about the home: “completely modern ... everything built-in and coordinated by a decorator ... all the furniture completely new.” She interrupted me with a horror tempered by Southern charity: “Poor things! Never mention it again.”

Looking back today, trying to conjure up Mrs. Tarleton's rooms, I wonder if I would still think them marvelous or just plain mad. Yet the lesson taught that day has stuck, along with a subtext so basic that no other early mentors thought it worth mentioning: A large portion of furnishings in a well-done room are old or good or personal.

The old, the chipped, the grandiose, the purely decorative or merely useful things that filled those rooms made sense in some overarching scheme. They had a quality that Wharton harped about—suitability. Any slide toward pretense was averted because the decoration was comfortable in the truest sense. That didn't necessarily mean that one could sprawl in every seat, but it meant something a bit more subtle. In those days, people were comfortable with, not just in, their furnishings. Décor may have evoked past styles, but these things belonged essentially to their world. In my father's house, no chair, however overwrought, was too fine for bulldogs, a bishop, or a yardman.

Harmony, order, awe, and even the possibility of



Classical Bones

1. In the gallery of a Georgian-style house in Nashville, the light streaming in through the windows illuminates the simple neoclassical furnishings set off by a collection of beautifully framed drawings and prints. *July-August 1994*

2. The supreme balance and order of this Maryland room

still enchants us today. The modern, sculptural bowl at the right keeps the exquisite symmetry from feeling rigid.

January-February 1989

3. Anything in the style of Thomas Chippendale gives a room a traditional feel, but the designers of this grand Dallas dining room shook things up by covering the chairs in ivory lacquer. Papered walls ramp up the glamour. *May-June 2001*



timeless design



4. Colors fade and photography styles change, but antiques and architectural elements—whether they're chandeliers, mirrors, or even a simple table and chairs—endure. In this Savannah house, the dining room shows an adept marriage of style and design. Great antiques—the mantel came from an older historic home in Savannah—and a table graciously set with fine linens, crystal, and china reflect the style of well-decorated, well-appointed rooms. *Summer 1979*

privacy and decorum can help organize a room so beautifully that people are naturally put at ease. The great decorators in the classic tradition, such as Billy Baldwin, understood those principles. They knew how to use scale and balance (and even color) in rooms so that there were always surfaces for teacups or martini glasses, places for writing letters or setting a vase of flowers, and plenty of light.

Rooms need to be filled with things that connect us with the past: our own and that of our rich civilization. A room is classic when it can just as easily spark lighthearted conversation as hold a single heart in thrall. ♦

Patrick Dunne is the proprietor of Lucullus in New Orleans (504/528-9620) and Breaux Bridge, Louisiana (337/332-2625) and is the author of The Epicurean Collector (Bulfinch Press, 2002).



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