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In the living room of a Manhattan apartment decorated by Brian McCarthy, a landscape painting is displayed against antiqued mirror; the 19th-century black-lacquer low table is inlaid with mother-of-pearl, the pillows are made of a Clarence House velvet, and the rock-crystal table lamp is from Guy Regal Ltd. Facing page: An 18th-century Italian console, Marston bench by Nancy Corzine, and Empire glass lantern in the entrance hall; the floor is inlaid walnut and ash, and the walls are covered in Gracie wallpaper. See Resources.





# THE TRANSFORMERS

IN CONCERT WITH DESIGNER BRIAN MCCARTHY, A YOUNG COUPLE BRINGS UNCOMMON POLISH TO THEIR CLASSIC PREWAR APARTMENT

*Text by Mitchell Owens · Photography by William Waldron · Produced by Anita Sarsidi*

Nothing's perfect. Not even when that something is a sunny apartment in a prime building in an extremely desirable neighborhood. In the case of a young family's prewar residence on Manhattan's Upper East Side, the perceived perfection was merely skin-deep.

Taking up a full floor of a 1928 building by Beaux Arts architect Kenneth M. Murchison, the apartment had seen better days. Its kitchen was outmoded, its wiring outdated, and its floor plan lacked amenities, such as family-friendly common spaces, that are considered basic today. Even the neoclassical-style details that seemed so special decades ago now felt been there, done that. All of which led the apartment's latest residents—energetic finance executives with a shared appreciation for traditional rooms suffused with a contemporary spirit—to give it a grand-gesture renovation that would live up to the sum of the property's attributes. The honors went to Fairfax & Sammons, an architecture firm that is a leading practitioner of updated neoclassicism, and Brian McCarthy, a decorator who admires the hippest modern art as much as he does a signed *fauteuil à la reine*.

"I wanted everything stronger, younger, fresher; I don't like florals or too much Louis whatever," says the wife and mother of two young sons. What she got was an elegant arrangement of interlocking spaces for entertaining







In the living room, an 18th-century mirror, a Louis XVI-style gilt armchair, English Regency-inspired pilasters painted to resemble Macassar ebony, and a Beauvais cowhide rug. Facing page: Armchairs upholstered in linen velvet by Quadrille, a custom-designed ottoman by Jonas Upholstery, and a Claude Lalanne bronze bench used as a cocktail table in the library; decorative artist Jean Carrau painted the paneling to resemble pine and treated the knots with gold leaf. See Resources.

(entrance hall, living room, library, dining room) backed by a full contingent of private areas that range from the purely practical (a laundry room close to the children's rooms, racks for the bird-hunting couple's shotguns hidden behind secret panels) to the downright decadent (dressing rooms for him and her). Pilasters unexpectedly hand-painted to look like polished ebony line the white-walled living room—the wife says they shape the interior like ribs—and a gold-leafed barrel-vault ceiling adds uplift to the entrance hall, not to mention a sunny glow. The spatial experience is lively rather than formal, more New World Now than Old World Manqué.

Part of that up-to-date spirit is due to the aesthetic volleys between McCarthy and the

clients. For example, when he came up with the idea of paving the entrance hall with tone-on-tone wood in a herringbone pattern, the wife said it “seemed too boring.” She favored black-and-white marble—a suggestion that led McCarthy to install an equally graphic walnut-and-ash alternative.

Likewise, the lady of the house recalls waking one night and realizing that the antique carpet she initially wanted for the living room would be too old-fashioned. As soon as she could get McCarthy on the phone she proposed sisal as a less-stuffy alternative. The decorator countered with a floor covering that would be the same color as sisal and have a similarly soothing effect but which was nowhere near as ubiquitous—hand-stitched







Clockwise: A George II-table, a Jakob Bogdani painting, Regency-style molding, and a sisal rug by Stark Carpet in the dining room. The breakfast room's banquette is upholstered in Lulu DK's Fruit Punch, the 1940s American side chairs are from Gerald Bland, and the coral chandelier is from Mecox Gardens. The kitchen cabinetry is custom made, and the countertops are Carrara marble. See Resources.







# “I wanted

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LOUIS WHATEVER,” SAYS THE WIFE  
AND MOTHER OF TWO

blocks of blond cowhide. “He knew what I was after and made a much more unusual choice,” the wife says of McCarthy, now a close friend. “That’s when I knew we had truly clicked.”

When the couple saw the library’s paneling polka-dotted with rounds of gold leaf, though, a touch of panic set in. “Don’t worry, we’ve just started,” explained McCarthy, who had been inspired by the Queen’s Antechamber at Ham House, a 17th-century English country estate, where gilded knots gleam beneath a painted faux-olive-wood finish. The decorator’s decision to shake up the library’s velvety comforts with a swamp-theme bronze bench by Claude Lalanne, however, was an instant succès fou. Not only does the wife declare the piece “one of my favorite things,” but the couple’s two-year-old son can’t stop tracing the toothy grin of the bench’s life-size bronze crocodile. The room’s Knole sofa was another triumph. The client had always wanted one, so McCarthy

delivered—but then jazzed it with the addition of gilded animal-paw feet.

The shiny scarlet dining room and black-and-white master bedroom are spectacular departures from the norm too. “My husband looked at me like I had three heads,” the wife says of the bedroom’s suggested colors, which her spouse thought would be harsh. Instead the space is airy, buoyed by a fernlike printed linen and shots of chartreuse. (Yes, he now loves it.) The dining room, on the other hand, is full-bore 1920s glamour, with mirrored corner niches that “soften the rectangle,” McCarthy says. So far, so good—then again, maybe not.

The dining furniture is too traditional, say both wife and designer, who are pondering white Deco-era chairs and pieces with cleaner lines. They’re also eyeing the room’s 19th-century neoclassical cut-glass chandelier, which they now feel is slightly staid. Perfection—who says it can’t be improved? ■



In the master bedroom, an Art Deco side chair from Bernd Goeckler Antiques, a circa-1960 French chandelier, and a work by artist Rachel Hovnanian on the desk; the curtain fabric is custom-printed linen from Quadrille, and the carpet is by Patter-son, Flynn & Martin. Facing page: The master bedroom’s ebonized-wood bed and upholstery fabric are by Ralph Lauren Home. See Resources.