

# Matthew White

RESTORING A GILDED AGE NEW YORK INTERIOR TO NEW GLORY

Text by Steven M. L. Aronson  
Photography by Durston Saylor



**Y**ou could say they were aspiring to greater heights. "We were looking exclusively for a place with a double-story living room," says California- and New York-based designer Matthew White. The apartment that he and his partner, Thomas Schumacher, president of Disney's Buena Vista Theatrical Group, were living in overlooked Central Park (see *Architectural Digest*, September 2000), yet they were willing to drop the curtain on that panorama in exchange for a good 20-foot-high ceiling.

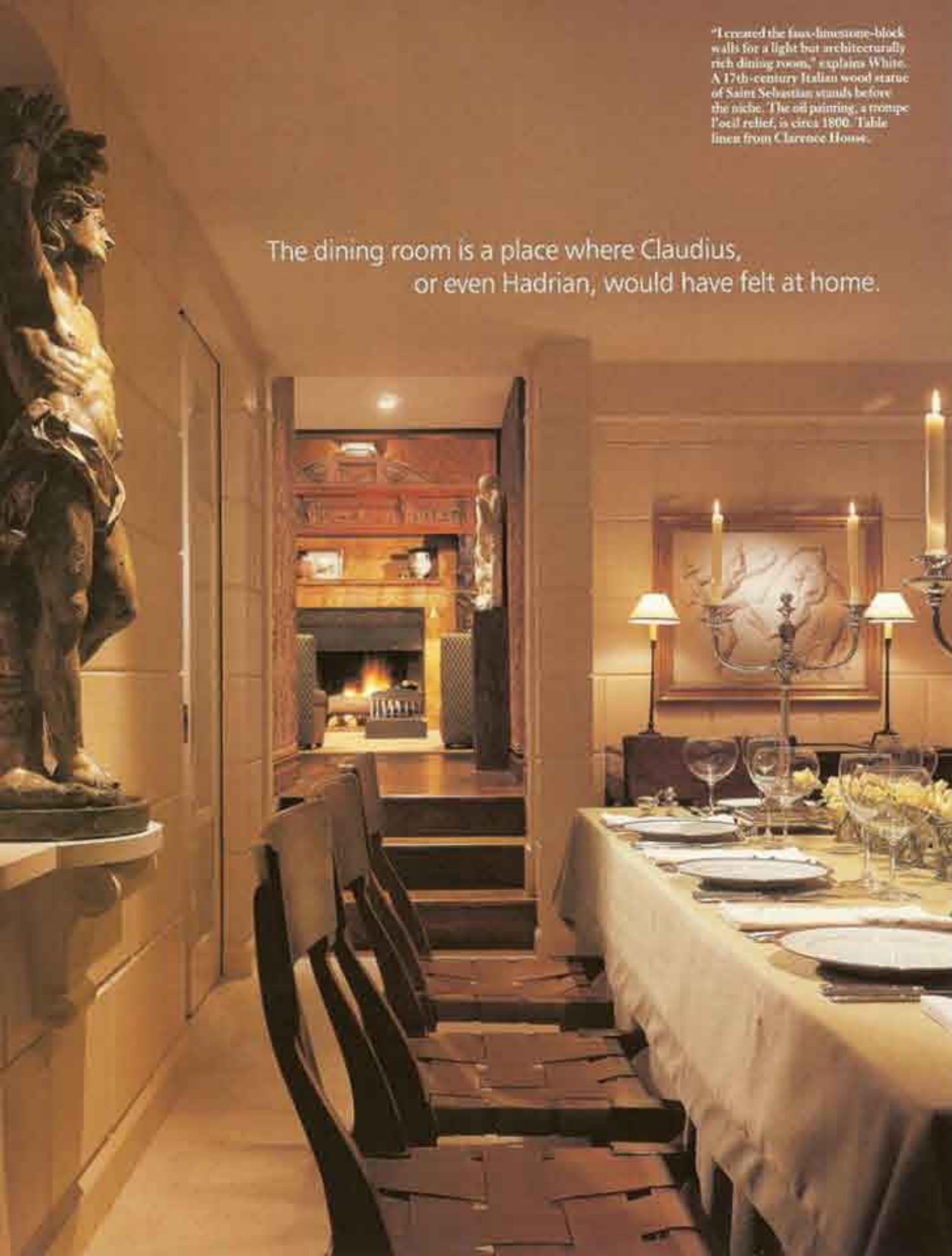
One day they learned of a duplex for sale in a McKim, Mead & White mansion in midtown Manhattan (put

Matthew White has rejuvenated the apartment he and his partner, Tony Award-winning producer Thomas Schumacher (above, from right to left), share in a McKim, Mead & White Manhattan mansion. **LEFT:** The paneled living room. Old World Weavers sofa velvet. Slipper chair fabric, Pierre Frey. Clarence House stool fabric. Lee Jofa wallcovering.



"I created the faux-limestone-block walls for a light but architecturally rich dining room," explains White. A 17th-century Italian wood statue of Saint Sebastian stands before the niche. The oil painting, a trompe l'oeil relief, is circa 1800. Table linen from Clarence House.

The dining room is a place where Claudius, or even Hadrian, would have felt at home.



up in 1891, it had persisted as a private house for a quarter of a century before being turned into a club and finally into a co-op). "I happen to have a passion for Italy, and the building is in the Italian Renaissance style—in fact, it isn't so much a town house as a palazzo," White says. "Plus the first floor is the old piano nobile."

They took their first look at the magnificent living room with its soaring ceiling and its original leaded-and stained-glass windows, and Central Park paled in comparison. "I realized right away that to own a place like this would be to carry a certain responsibility," White recalls, "but I saw it as an opportunity to restore a fabulous piece of New York residential history." In the living room, he had his work cut out for him: Exigent attention had to be paid to the paneling and the deeply coffered ceiling with its frieze of fruited garlands. In the case of the other rooms, which had long since been denuded of all detail, the designer wisely decided to not even try to achieve the kind of ornament that had been created by an earlier White (it was no less than Stanford White himself who had been the supervising architect on the project). He did, however, vow to bring the interior architecture throughout up to a certain level so that the rooms would all at least "feel as one."

Two exceptionally tall Matthew White floor lamps—*faux-marbre* wood columns capped by kraters ornamented with classical figures and electrified to illuminate the ceiling—flank the most dramatic feature of a not uneventful living room: a splendid Renaissance-style fireplace, with a surround of yellow Numidian marble, framed by stone caryatids. "The removal of the ornately carved chimneypiece decades before had left the fireplace looking totally out of proportion," says White, who proceeded to confidently design a new overmantel plinth, with scrolling supports in carved oak. "And then I had to finish *that* off with something sculptural," he adds. A marble bust consisting of a second-century head of the Roman emperor Claudius set onto a Renaissance torso was found in the nick of time, and behind it, for theatrical effect, White hung a gilded halo of an antique sunburst mirror.



Engravings, paintings and a carved wood mask—all dating from the 18th century—are arranged on the wool-covered walls of the library. White designed the pendant light fixture, walnut coffee table and sofa. Toile from Old World Weavers.

The fabric on the walls—an Italian damask—is, the designer insists, "just the sort of thing Stanford White would have chosen for this room." Matthew White's color choice for the damask was brown, which would marry the wainscoting to the coffered ceiling, and for the facing 19th-century-style linen velvet sofas a refreshing green.

The mezzanine is every inch the intimate space that White and Schumacher envisioned when they set out to find a living room to accommodate

their high hopes. It's dominated by a grand piano, an essential for Schumacher's working sessions with the composers on some of his upcoming Broadway productions, such as *The Little Mermaid*, *Mary Poppins* and *Tarzan*. The banquette is covered in the same soothing brown damask as the wall, which is animated by an old-master painting of Alexander the Great in the midst of battle. From here, too, can be seen—clear across the space at ceiling level—Claudius in his height and glory. The whole room is a triumph, embodying as it does the spirit of the connoisseur—someone who knows and loves antiquities, who knows and loves antiques, who knows and loves Italy, and who knows how much he would have loved Gilded Age New York.

*continued on page 299*



"The master bedroom, with its sapphire and ivory colors, was inspired by India," says White. The 19th-century carved giltwood miniature temple at the window "repeats the feeling of the domed bed." Schumacher paisley bedcovering silk; blue fabric from Pindler & Pindler.

