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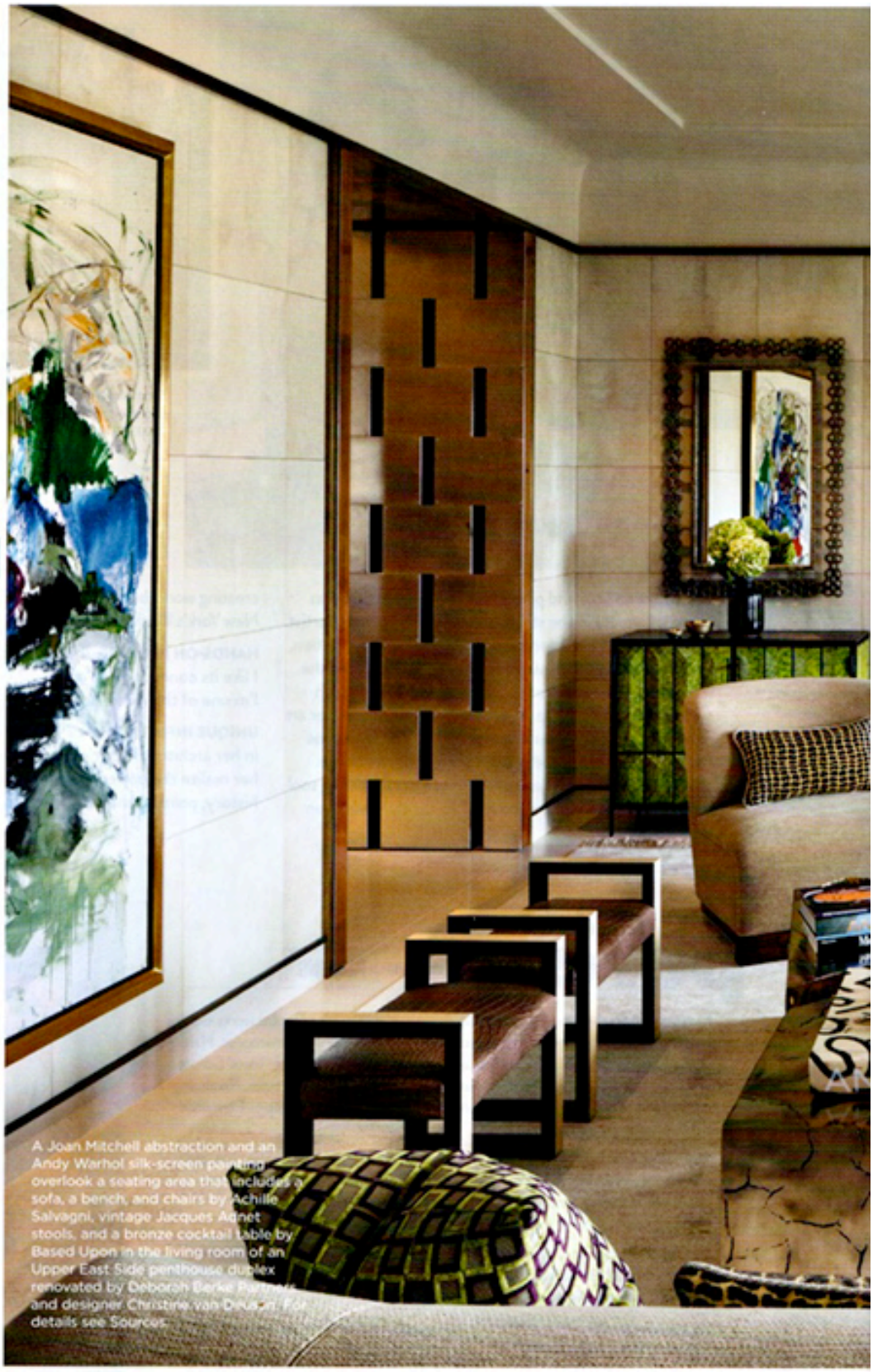
Making an Impression

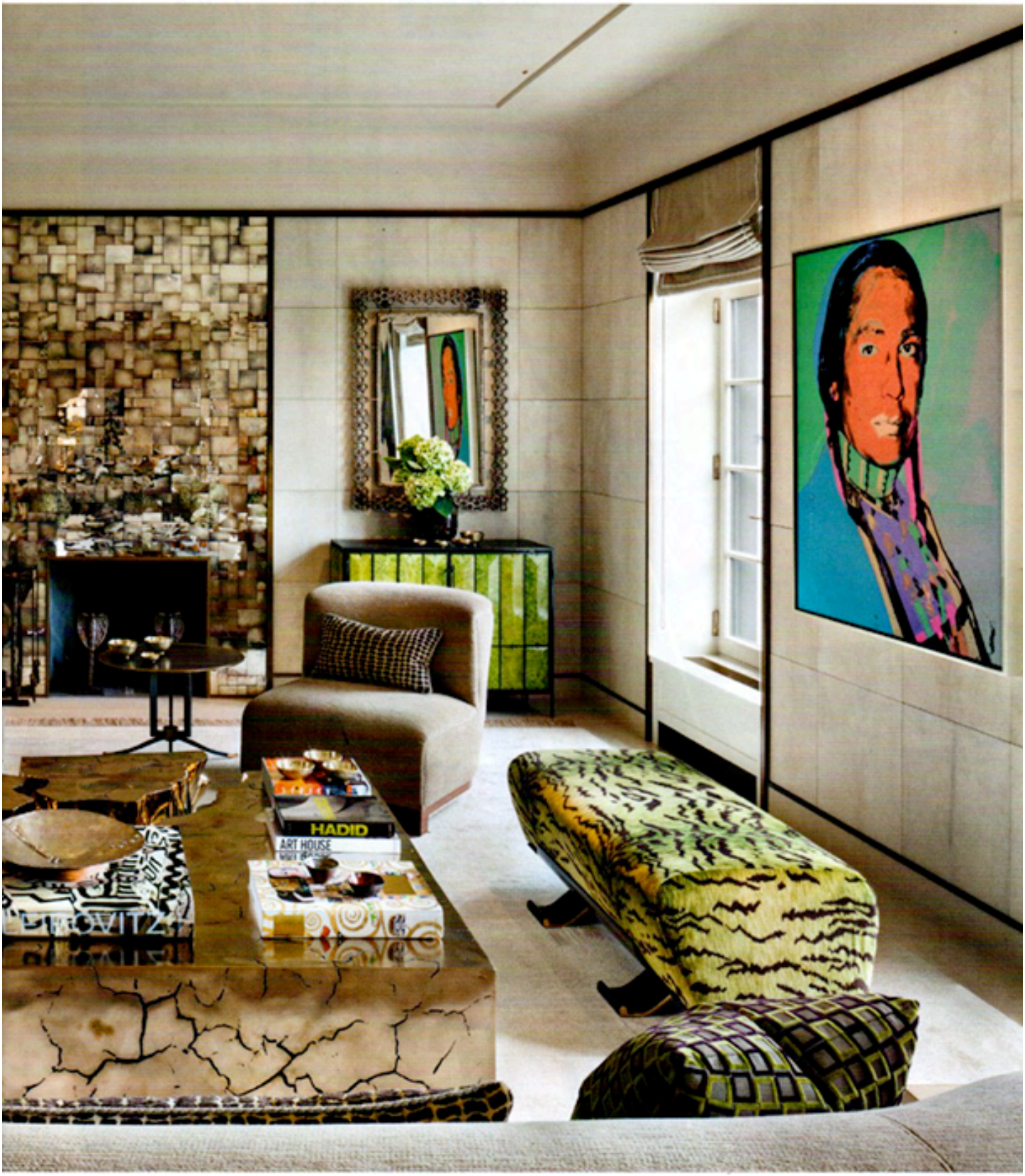
Deborah Berke Partners and designer Christine van Deusen team up to create a Manhattan penthouse where the museum-quality art and bespoke decor are as spectacular as the park views

By Stephen Wallis

Photography by Chris Cooper



A Joan Mitchell abstraction and an Andy Warhol silk-screen painting overlook a seating area that includes a sofa, a bench, and chairs by Achille Salvagni, vintage Jacques Adnet stools, and a bronze cocktail table by Based Upon in the living room of an Upper East Side penthouse duplex renovated by Deborah Berke Partners and designer Christine van Deusen. For details see Sources.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ART HOUSE

Creamy limestone paves the entrance hall, where a Tony Cragg sculpture stands next to the steel-clad living room doors inspired by the ones at Villa Necchi Campiglio. ***Opposite:*** Works by Henri Matisse, Louis Valtat, Henri Manguin, and other Postimpressionist and Fauve artists are mounted on blue-lacquered walls in the den, where a 1940s Jules Leleu side table and a '30s Jean-Maurice Rothschild armchair continue the French theme.

Some of the most memorable New York City apartments make an instant statement,

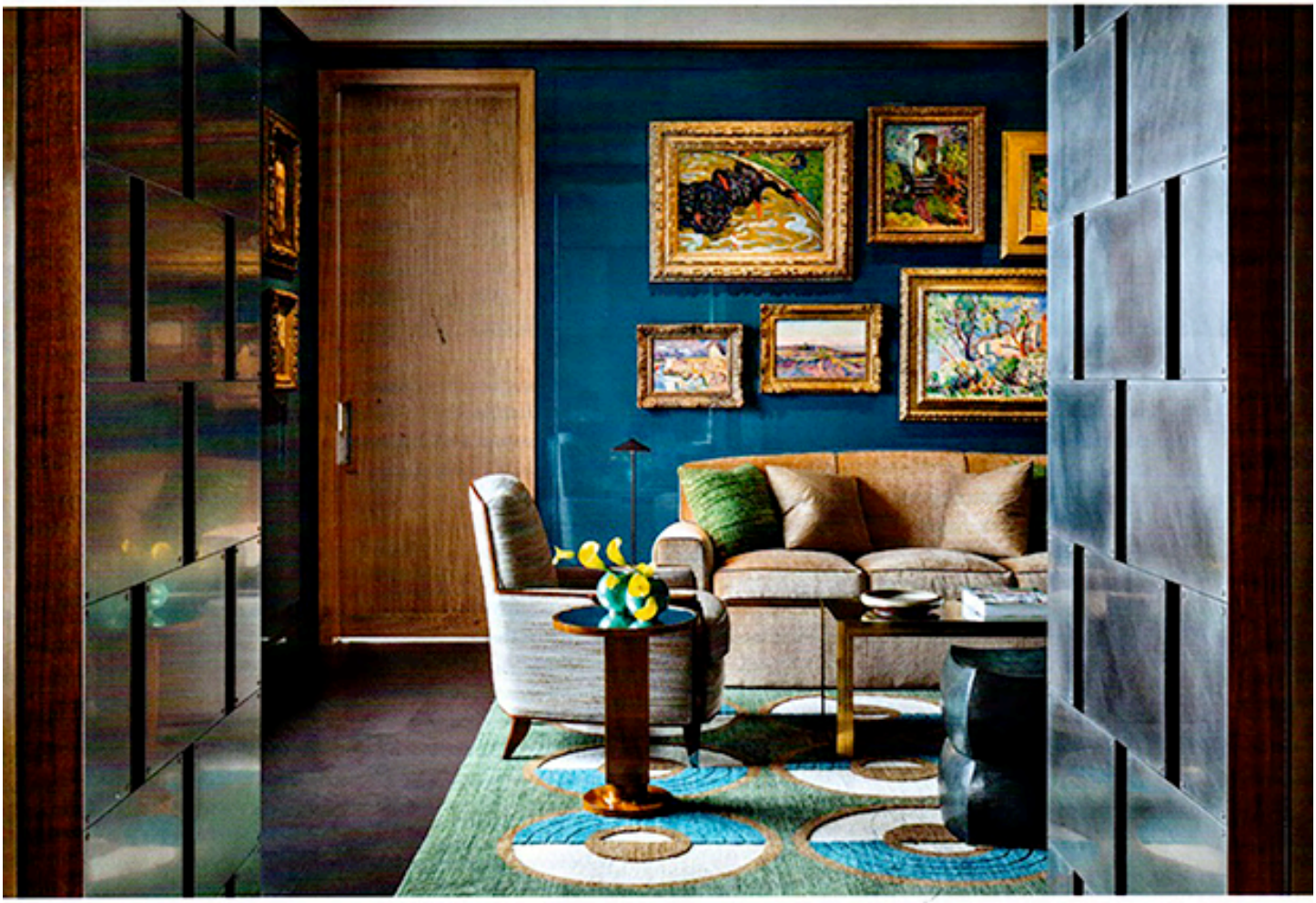
unleashing a pop of visual wow as soon as you're in the door. Others are more discreet, revealing their allure subtly and slowly as you move through them. Then there are those, considerably rarer, that do both.

Perched atop a 1928 Rosario Candela building on one of the Upper East Side's most elegant blocks is a duplex penthouse that's had just four owners in its nine-decade history. The latest, a French-American woman who comes from a distinguished art-collecting family, was looking to create a refuge where she could live with her trove of important paintings and sculptures and entertain comfortably—in a setting, it must be said, of supreme artisanal refinement.

An elevated, art-centric tone is set immediately in the apartment's impressive double-height entrance hall, a gallery-like corridor softly illuminated by a skylight overhead. Here to greet visitors are a boldly splashed black-and-white Willem de Kooning work on paper, a tornado of twisting bronze by sculptor Tony Cragg, and one of Anish Kapoor's wall-mounted concave mirrors, its copper and lacquer form playing off the gentle curves of the serpentine limestone staircase rising above it.

As captivating as these works are, guests inevitably find themselves drawn through a pair of steel-clad doors—featuring a cutout pattern inspired by the famous doors at the Villa Necchi Campiglio in Milan—and into the spectacular living room. "The arrival is really a 'ta-da!'" says architect Deborah Berke, whose architecture firm, Deborah Berke Partners, oversaw the renovations alongside her longtime colleague at the practice Catherine Bird.

Berke and Bird collaborated closely with interior designer Christine van Deusen, rounding out the all-woman team. "There's a lot of female energy in this apartment," says Van Deusen, noting the central placement of an exuberant Joan Mitchell painting in the living room, opposite works



From left: A rimless skylight illuminates works by (from left) Yves Tanguy, Danh Vo, and Olga de Amaral in the butternut-paneled upstairs hallway. In the adjacent living room, an Achille Salvagni chandelier is installed above a Jean Royère-style sofa and an Ado Chale coffee table. ***Opposite:*** Commanding one wall of the upstairs living room is a work by Man Ray mounted over a bronze table by Do König-Vassilakis that is next to seating by Ayala Serfaty; installed outside the walk-in bar are a small Willem de Kooning work and a sculpture by Agustín Cárdenas.

by Andy Warhol, Pierre Soulages, and Barbara Hepworth. For the room's decor, she deployed an array of bespoke creations, from exquisite cabinets clad in glazed lava stone by Christophe Côme and a massive cracked-bronze cocktail table by the studio Based Upon to a mosaic-pattern églomisé-mirror fireplace surround by glass artist Kiko Lopez. As throughout the home, an almost obsessive emphasis on exceptional materials is reflected in the design choices—not least the panels of real parchment lining the living room's walls, providing a neutral but far from ordinary backdrop for the art. "There really isn't any area of the home that wasn't given that special something," says Van Deusen.

The entire project—a gut renovation that entailed reconfiguring multiple spaces inside the 4,900-square-foot residence—took four years from planning to completion. "We really had a wonderful opportunity to approach this in a very measured way," says Van Deusen, who has been a friend of the client since they met while both living in Paris years ago. "It was never about rushing to fill a space."

Art was always at the center of their thinking. The owner had inherited from her family a significant group of French Postimpressionist and Fauve works, and the decision was made to create a jewellike den where they could be displayed together. Sotheby's executive and former Guggenheim Museum director Lisa Dennison consulted on the salon-style installation atop paneling lacquered in a lustrous Prussian blue. "Once we had the paintings cleaned, it was shocking to see the life come back into them—the colors were so vibrant," says Van Deusen. "And on that special blue, they just looked amazing."

In addition to the art from her family, the client was building her own collection, spanning from prime examples of Abstract Expressionism to major contemporary works. It's a range that is represented quite dramatically in the dining room, where two of her earliest acquisitions—a slashing, moody 1950s Franz Kline canvas and a Damien Hirst mirrored cabinet lined with rows of sparkling cubic zirconias—hang opposite one another, while one of De Kooning's effervescent late abstractions commands a third

wall. It's not hard to imagine atmospheric dinner parties with flickering candlelight reflected in the Hirst and dancing across the glossy walls whose can't-quite-put-your-finger-on-it grayish hue Berke describes as Weimaraner.

The architect explains that when they were conceiving the apartment, they imagined a progression of guests moving through the space, starting in the living room and den, shifting to the dining room, and, after the party, the owner could retreat to the smaller, more intimate living room upstairs. There, bay windows offer yet more priceless views, and the homeowner could settle into a variety of comfortable seating, including a massive—and exceptionally cozy—sofa in the style of Jean Royère. When the client is seeking a nightcap, there's a dashing walk-in bar with bronze cabinets, onyx countertops, and wall panels painted with delicate faux-horn patterns.

"Every space in this apartment has been thought intensely about," says Berke, whose firm has a well-earned reputation for updating traditional interiors with a graceful modernism. (She also serves as the dean of the Yale School of Architecture.) While all of the rooms—including the radically revamped eat-in kitchen, the two lower-floor bedrooms, and the expansive master suite upstairs—feel rooted in tradition, they are a long way from "Louis XIV or Mrs. Astor on Park Avenue," as Berke jokingly puts it.

The sense of artistry and craftsmanship comes across throughout. To name a few: the multiple commissioned pieces by Côme, the dining room's parquet oak floors that were harvested from a single 300-year-old tree at the end of its life, and the cashmere covering one of the bedroom's walls that was "woven by a guy in the mountains in India on a loom cobbled together using bicycle parts," says Van Deusen.

The level of detail and distinctiveness, she notes, isn't always obvious until you get up close. Visitors may well find themselves tempted, as Berke suggests, to "roll around" on those luxurious cashmere walls. Just take care not to bump into that iconic Jeff Zimmerman hanging nearby. □

Above: A pair of 1940s Italian armchairs stand in the master bedroom's bay window, overlooked by a Georgia O'Keeffe painting; the bed is dressed in custom-made Cristina Azario bedding. ***Right:*** In the marble-clad master bath, Deborah Czeresko created the glass pendant above the Urban Archaeology tub with Barber Wilsons & Co. fittings and the Lorin Marsh mirror-top side tables. ***Opposite:*** Czeresko also made the ceiling lights in the kitchen, which is outfitted with a La Cornue range and a custom-designed hood; the countertops are Pyrolave glazed stone, the backsplash tiles are by Paris Ceramics.