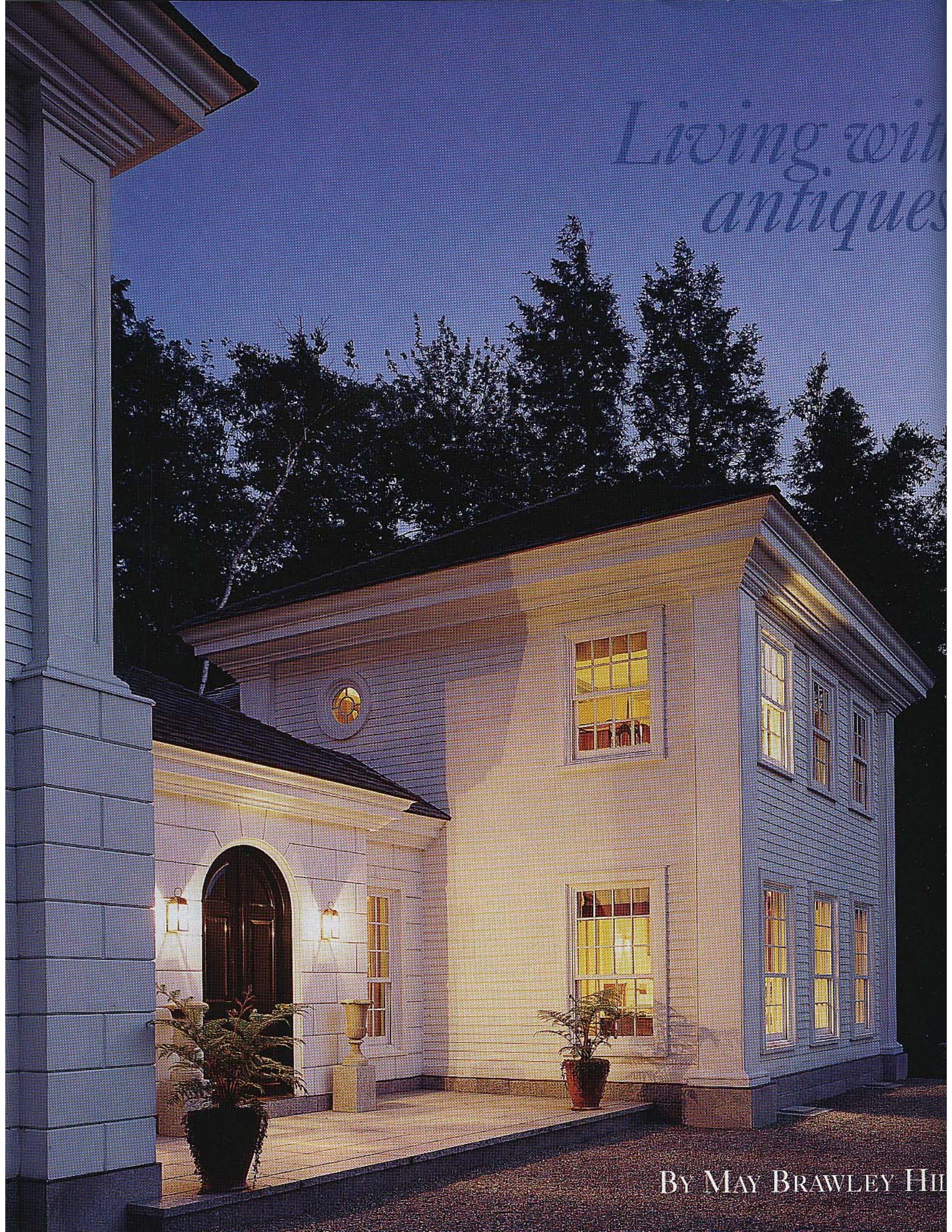
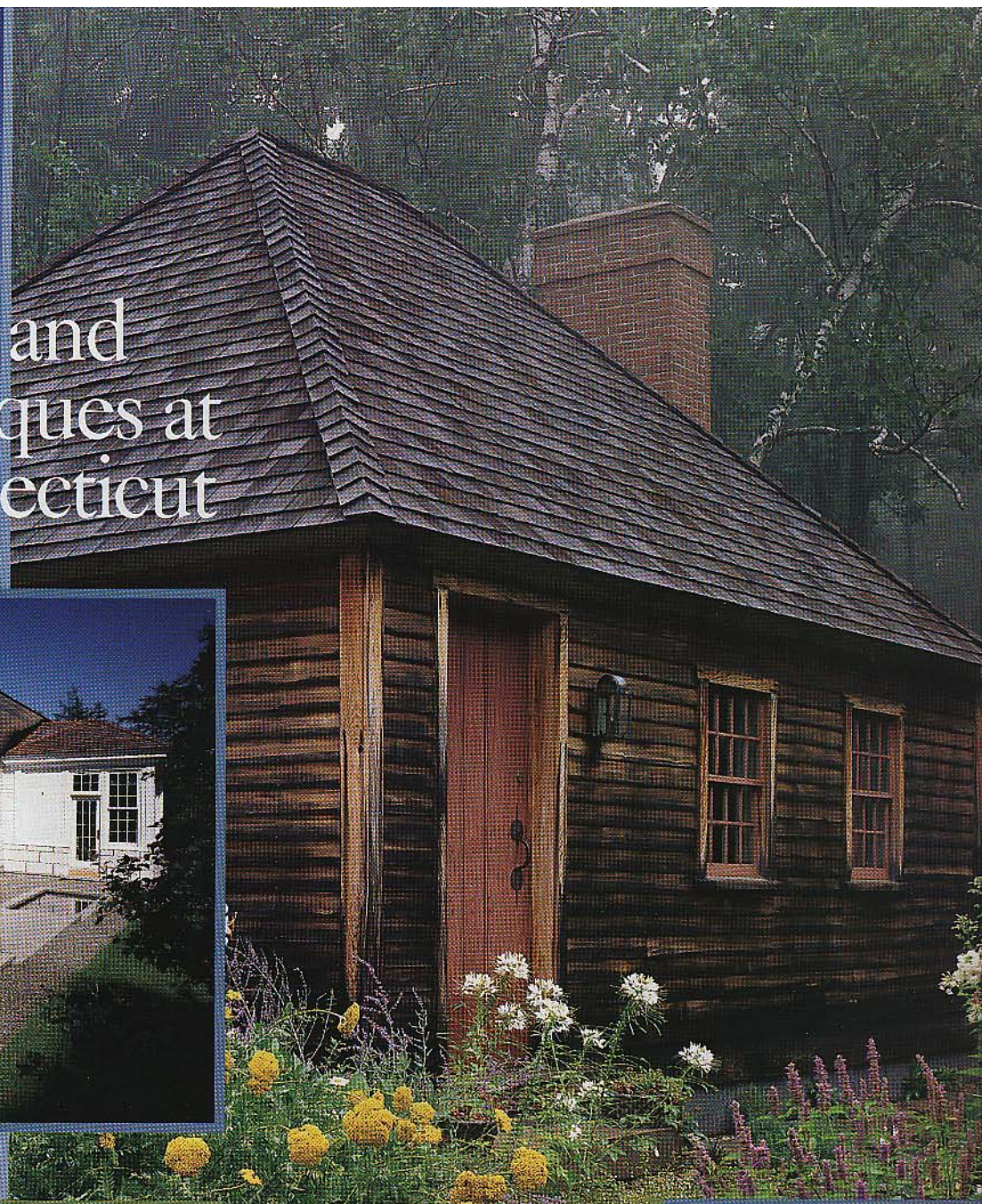


*Living with
antiques*



BY MAY BRAWLEY HILL

New England and European antiques at home in Connecticut



Facing page:

Pl. I. Lakefront facade of a house designed by Robert Couturier, Kent, Connecticut, built 2002. Photographs are by Paul Rocheleau.

This page:

Pl. II. Garden facade of Couturier's house.

Pl. III. Saltbox in Kent, built in 1743 and restored by Jeffrey Morgan in 1979. The outbuilding at the right is also shown in Pl. IV.

Pl. IV. Outbuilding to Morgan's house, built in 1998.



An inspiring example of American-French rapprochement began eight years ago in the hills of Connecticut's Litchfield County. On Memorial Day weekend in 1997, Jeffrey Morgan, a Connecticut Yankee by birth and breeding, and Robert Couturier, a French architect and interior designer who had been established in New York City for many years, met in the house of a mutual friend in Washington, Connecticut.

Morgan had become an expert in the restoration of the area's early houses and had assembled a small but choice collection of early New England furniture and objects. In the late 1960s while still at school, he had apprenticed himself to a local antiques dealer, and after college he bought a decrepit 1739 saltbox in Kent, Connecticut, and spent the next decade meticulously restoring it while working as a chef in several of the area's trendy restaurants. Two early local finds, a cherry Queen Anne chair by a Woodbury, Connecticut, cabinetmaker and a drop-leaf tea table from the same period with a provenance from the Marsh family in Morris, Connecticut, held places of honor in his small parlor. His present house (Pls. III,

XII), purchased in 1979 and also a saltbox, is further north and on a less traveled road in Kent. As his experience in restoration and his collection grew, friends and acquaintances came to rely on his expertise, and he now works as a consultant.

Couturier had grown up in Paris and came to New York City after architecture school, encouraged by the British financier James Goldsmith (1933–1997), who gave him several important commissions. His career took off, and he is now renowned for his elegant interiors filled with European furniture and rare decorative objects. As he began spending weekends with Morgan, visiting local antiques dealers, he gradually came to appreciate American furniture, confessing that he had never considered American antiques seriously until he saw them in context. At the same time, he suggested making the austere interior of Morgan's old saltbox a bit more comfortable with the addition of upholstery. Morgan categorically refused any upholstered furniture, except for a Cromwellian settee that arrived

with Couturier the following weekend. The pair's inspired collaboration in the creation of two marvelous houses can be dated from that gift.

As might be expected with two such passionate and knowledgeable lovers of antiques, the small rooms in Morgan's house began to overflow with treasures, so they built an elegant square outbuilding with a pyramidal roof (modeled on the eighteenth-century brick school nearby) to house Couturier's two shih tzous, and the growing collection (Pl. IV). Not long afterward, land stretching down to North Spectacle Lake from Morgan's saltbox became available, and Couturier bought it. At the same time, Morgan saw an opportunity to rescue an abandoned 1730s house with an exceptional chimney in nearby Dover Plains, New York. The house was carefully dismantled and moved to Kent, but the building inspector withheld approval to reconstruct it on Couturier's new property. This setback fired Couturier's imagination, and on one rainy Sunday afternoon he drew plans for a

house to be built into the slope down to the lake. His initial concept of two two-story pavilions, one for a grand salon with dining room and kitchen below and the other for bedrooms, connected by a one-story entry hall, remained unchanged, although refinements were made in the course of construction. As the house was going up in the experienced hands of John W. Mankin, a local restoration carpenter, Couturier began to acquire suitable furnishings at auction and on buying trips to Europe.

The square pavilions with their pyramidal roofs are French in inspiration, but they are clad in clapboards (see Pls. I, II). Mahogany planks cover the entry facade and that of the larger pavilion's first floor, and they are scored and painted to imitate stone (see Pl. I). Only the upper floors of the pavilions are visible as one advances down the driveway and past the formal garden with its box parterres and reflecting pool (see Pl. II).

The spacious interiors, on a scale sympathetic to the European pieces Couturier admires, are a revelation. The wide-board floors that give an impression of age to the rooms were milled from eighteenth-century chestnut beams. When the new house was completed, Morgan marveled, "It was odd that everything worked and the floors didn't move!"

A window-filled entryway to the salon was recently added on the garden side of the house (see Pl. V). Here a heroic French porcelain urn on a column, stamped "Sèvres





1909," invites a closer look at the modeled heads and floral swags that ornament it. A pair of late eighteenth-century gilded armchairs from northern Italy flanks the urn. Not visible are *Semis de fleur*, a pastel of about 1917, by Edouard Vuillard (1868–1940), and *Rheims Cathedral*, an oil on canvas dated 1917, by Maurice Utrillo (1883–1955), showing the cathedral before the German bombardment in World War I. From the entry, the visitor climbs a few steps into the breathtaking salon, with its soaring coved ceiling and light streaming in from tall windows on all sides (Pl. VII). Suspended from the nineteen-foot-high ceiling is an imposing nineteenth-century Dutch eight-arm brass chandelier; which Couturier found disassembled in Paris and knew would be perfect for the space. One wall is dominated by a spectacular seventeenth-

century walnut cupboard (see Pl. VI). Couturier believes it to be Alsatian and calls it an *armoires*; Morgan insists it is a Dutch *kas*. Whatever its origin, it retains its marvelous original turned finials. On the top are pairs of eighteenth-century Delft platters and lidded jars, together with pairs of painted tin urns and obelisks.

An imposing late seventeenth-century limestone mantelpiece from Florence surrounds the fireplace (see Pl. VII). In front of it stands a fantastically carved and gilded eighteenth-century fire screen from Turin, its mirrored insert suggesting a grotto, with a blue-painted waterfall cascading down the center. On the mantel, flanking a seventeenth-century Flemish glass chalice, stand two porcelain sphinxes representing Madame de Pompadour (1721–1764) and Madame Du Barry (1743–1793). Their heads,

cut off at some revolutionary moment, were fortunately saved and are now happily restored. The French brass candlesticks date from about 1760. Presiding above is a grand English portrait of Lady Elizabeth Somerset (nee Dormer; c. 1610–1635), painted by Gilbert Jackson (w. c. 1622–1642) about 1629.¹ She married Edward Somerset (1603–1684), later marquess of Worcester, in 1628. It is evident in the portrait that she is with

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Pl. V. Entryway on garden side of Couturier's house.

Pl. VI. Detail of a seventeenth-century European walnut cupboard in Couturier's living room.

This page:

Pl. VII. Living room in Couturier's house.



child, perhaps Henry Somerset, who was born about 1629 and became first duke of Beaufort in 1682.

The central seating group in the room includes, nearest the fireplace in the view in Plate VII, a pair of Louis XV fauteuils with their original tapestry upholstery illustrating the *Fables* of Jean de La Fontaine. Between the comfortably upholstered modern sofas are two shagreen-covered low tables by the modernist designer Jean-Michael Frank (1895–1941).² On the left are two of a set of four painted beech armchairs of about 1765 by the French master Georges Jacob (1739–1814), a lucky find at auction in Paris.³ To the left of the window hang two seventeenth-century Dutch frames made into mirrors, below which is a French ebonized chest with brass inlays dating to the 1730s. Couturier's joy in assembling disparate objects into an attractive grouping is evident



in the array on top of the chest, which includes a seventeenth-century German wood sculpture of the Virgin, a German tin-glazed lobed dish of the same period, and an English eighteenth-century bisque Neptune on a dolphin. Elsewhere in the salon, but not pictured, several extraordinary objects arrest the eye, such as a pair of four-foot-high crystals with mounts by Serge Roche

(1898–1988), from the collection of Elizabeth Arden (1878–1966); and a monumental marble head of Faustina (c. 125–176), the mother-in-law of Emperor Marcus Aurelius (121–180), that once stood in the Roman Forum. Couturier comments, "I find the head thrilling—the scale, the age, the idea that she surveyed the Forum and now she's looking out over my living room."

The kitchen and dining room under the salon can be reached by interior or exterior stairways. The latter descends to the gravel terrace overlooking the lake (see Pl. I). A formal entry from the terrace leads through book-lined corridors (see Pl. IX) to the dining room on the left and to a very French boudoir on the right (Pl. X). In the dining room (Pl. VIII), the ceiling is lower than in the salon; the fireplace surround is mod-

led on one in an eighteenth-century Rhode Island house. An oak wainscot chair of about 1630 stands at the head of an English oak refectory table of about 1690. At the other end of the table, not visible in the photograph, is an elaborately carved wainscot chair made earlier in the seventeenth century; its crest rail includes a fleur-de-lis, possibly a reference to the exiled Stuart king in France and suggesting a Scottish origin. The Cromwellian settee originally bought for Morgan's saltbox now stands on one side of the table, and similar armchairs with bobbin turnings from the same period are on the other. A notable English oak press cupboard from the 1670s stands against the right-hand wall in the photograph. Among the objects on top of it are an English oak box of about the same date and a late seventeenth-century Dutch copper milk jug found in Litchfield. The Dutch portrait of an unknown wom-



an was painted about 1620 by Nicolaes Eliasz. Pickenoy (c.1588–c.1655). Visible on the mantelshelf are one of a pair of English pewter chargers and one of a pair

of capstan candlesticks, unusual in pewter. On the table is a pair of seventeenth-century turned brass candlesticks from the Netherlands. The carpet is a nineteenth-century Sultanabad.

The era of Louis XV (r. 1715–1774), at once luxurious and aristocratic, sensuous and intimate, has great appeal for Couturier, as can be seen in his boudoir (Pl. X). He designed the fireplace surround and woodwork here as a sympathetic background for the beech alcove bed by Jacob of about

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Pl. VIII. Dining room in Couturier's house.

Pl. IX. Entry hall on the lakefront side of Couturier's house.

This page:

Pl. X. Boudoir in Couturier's house.

Pl. XI. Principal bedroom in Couturier's house.

