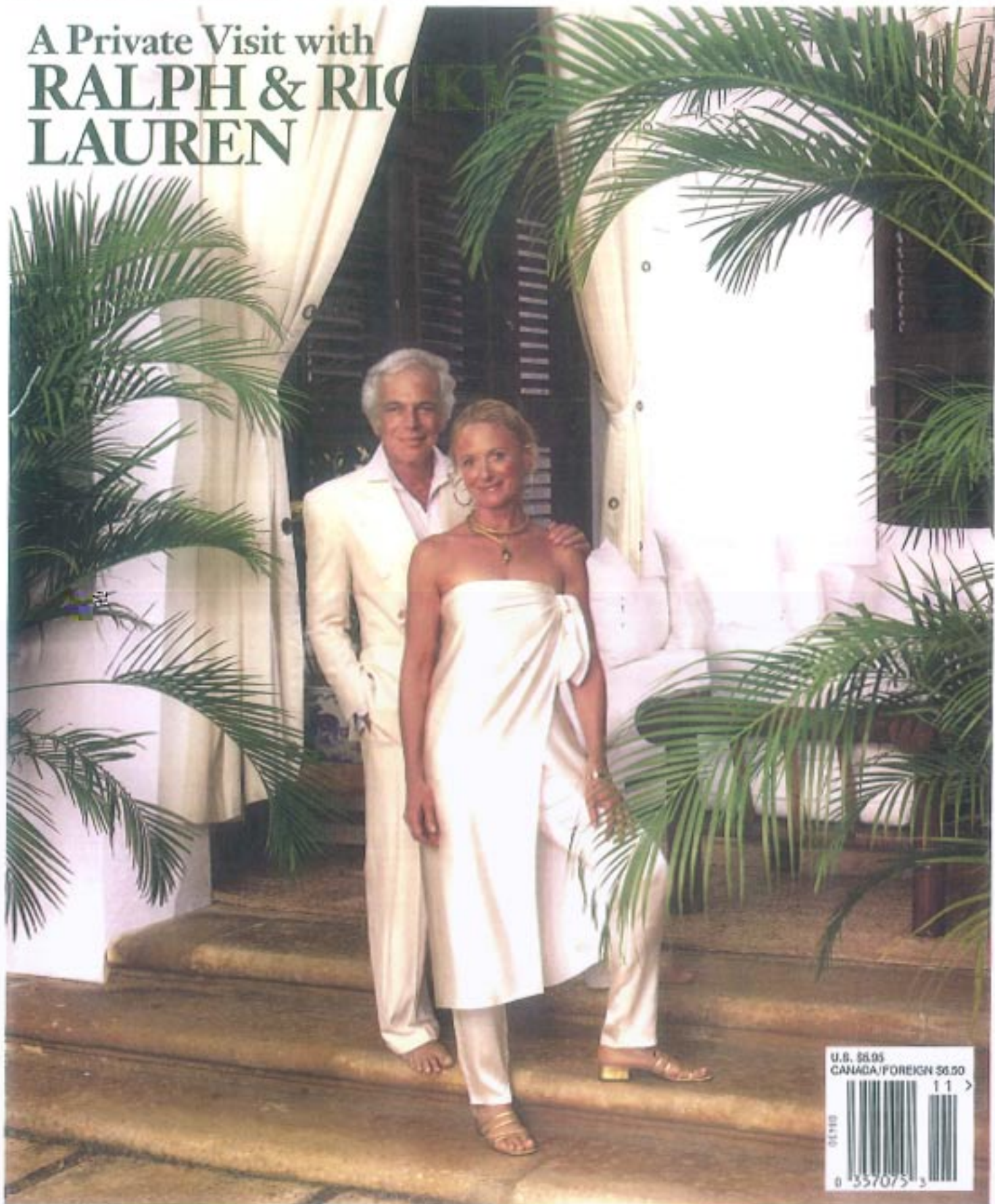


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A Private Visit with
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The St. Regis

A Gracious Fifth Avenue Landmark Gets a Stylish New Look

Interior Design by Sills Huniford Associates/Text by Gerald Clarke/Photography by Durston Saylor



ABOVE: New York's legendary St. Regis hotel—a favorite of Ernest Hemingway, Marlene Dietrich, Salvador Dalí and John Lennon—has undergone a glamorous redesign at the hands of Stephen Sills and James Huniford. RIGHT: The reception area of the 1904 hotel epitomizes the Beaux Arts style.



THE YEAR WAS 1904. Theodore Roosevelt was president, there were only 45 states in the Union, and the word *today* was still written with a hyphen, as in a newspaper headline of September 4: "Palatial St. Regis To Open Its Doors To-Day." Located at Fifth Avenue and 55th Street, The St. Regis was "the finest hotel in America in the way of furnishings and

interior decorations," said *The New York Times*.

Times change, and so does spelling. But The St. Regis, the oldest luxury hotel in New York, is as impressive now as it was then, a temple of comfort and elegance. So it was with a mixture of respect and awe that the design team of Stephen Sills and James Huniford approached their task: to brighten up the interior of that

grand old centenarian and to give it a new and more integrated look. "In the past there had been piecemeal changes," says Huniford. "We wanted our design to reflect an overall vision."

Their respect was for the hotel's superb Beaux Arts design. Their awe was for the hotel's storied history—Maxfield Parrish's *Old King Cole* mural, which stretches 30 feet

behind the bar, is a Gotham landmark—and for the glamorous people who have stayed there, from Marlene Dietrich and Marilyn Monroe to Salvador Dalí and John Lennon. But respect and awe did not translate into intimidation. Though they had never designed hotel interiors, Sills and Huniford approached The St. Regis just as they would a house or an

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apartment. And with good reason. The hotel's managers chose them because they admired their residential interiors, and they wanted their guests to feel they were entering a warm and elegant apartment rather than a soulless hotel room. For that reason, says Sills, "we didn't go through books with pictures of other hotels. We wanted our design to be like our residential work."

Employing a staff of five, the partners devised two color schemes—pale blue and celandon

was one; pale yellow and cream was the other—that they thought were both soothing and flattering. "Architecturally the rooms were beautiful," says Sills, "but there were heavy damask draperies and valances that came down to the lowest pane of glass. You didn't realize that behind them was a big, beautiful window."

Down came the draperies and oversize valances. Out went much of the furniture. Except for the desks and the Louis XVI-style chairs, Sills

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RIGHT: The Astor Court—named for the hotel's founder, John Jacob Astor IV—has an anteroom used for tea and cocktails. **BELOW:** In the main dining room, the designers replaced an enormous chandelier in favor of multiple smaller ones, which allow clear views into the hotel's celebrated King Cole bar. Pollack banquette fabric; Jim Thompson chair fabric.





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In the Cognac Room, they took their cue from the Tiffany chandelier. "We wanted to keep the spirit of that fabulous chandelier," says Sills, "and we gave the room a kind of Oriental design, with ivory and tobacco-brown colors. When you're drinking cognac, you don't want to look at the same color."

Generations of New Yorkers have made merry in front of Parrish's mural of Old King Cole and his jolly men. But guests in the neighboring dining room found their view of the good king blocked by a

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ABOVE: The famous Maxfield Parrish mural that hangs in the bar—which had been "swagged in green velvet," Sills notes—was recently restored. Edelman leather on chairs and barstools. **RIGHT:** The designers redecorated the Cognac Room in shades of ivory and tobacco brown. The sofa and club chair, covered in a Scalumandrè fabric, are by Sills Huniford Associates, as are the low table and armchairs. Stark carpet.

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and Huniford designed all the furniture themselves, from the cabinets with the pop-up television sets to the wardrobes and the lamps. "A dramatic bed is a signature of our work," says Huniford, "so we draped the beds to make a cocoon for the sleeper. The St. Regis gets a range of clients, from rock stars to royalty, and we wanted everyone to be comfortable."

Rock stars and royalty can be as hard on furniture and fabrics as ordinary folk, however. The biggest challenge Sills and Huniford faced was to find materials that looked and felt as if they belonged in

a private apartment yet could stand up to constant wear and meet fire codes. Their search was so successful, says Sills, that "you could put our fabrics in a raging fire and they wouldn't burn."

"No morbid desire for mere originality activated the architectural designers of The St. Regis," bragged one of the hotel's brochures a century ago. That is one way of saying that the original designers favored restraint over ostentation. Sills and Huniford followed the same rule—a light touch can be the best one. The marble-and-bronze lobby needed nothing but new fabrics for the chairs.





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huge crystal chandelier. Sills and Huniford replaced it with four small chandeliers, thus opening the view to the bar, to the mural and to the mural's colors, some of which, like eggplant and chrome yellow, they borrowed for the dining room fabrics.

Dulled by decades of tobacco smoke, the mural itself underwent a six-week restoration. It now looks as fresh as it did when Parrish put down his paintbrush in 1906. "Old King Cole was a merry old soul," says the nursery rhyme, "and a merry old soul was he." Now, entering his second century, he is even merrier—and so are his fiddlers three. □



"We looked at the hotel's archives for inspiration, but we wanted a residential feel," Sills says of their designs for the 227 guest rooms and suites. **ABOVE:** Soft yellow and cream hues set a restful tone in a guest suite. Wallcovering and drapery stripe and chair and ottoman damask from Kravet. **LEFT:** A crown-canopied bed offers a sense of intimacy.

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