

# P O V

## Read the ROOM

ONCE THE DOMAIN OF THE CIGAR-CHOMPING AND BRANDY-SWILLING, **HOME LIBRARIES** ARE BECOMING THE PLACE TO BE.

BY SHEILA MARIKAR



Keith Richards in 1995 in the library of his Weston, Connecticut, home, which was designed by Mica Ertegun. Produced by Charles Curkin

CHRISTOPHER SIMON SYKES/HULTON ARCHIVE/  
GETTY IMAGES

**T**HE FIRST LIBRARY I EVER KNEW TOWERED OVER my childhood bed in a split-level Colonial in suburban New Jersey. There were two floor-to-ceiling wood-laminate bookcases stacked with books that my father, an insatiable reader, generally didn't need but wanted to keep nearby. It was a weighty enough collection that my mother sometimes worried about the cases toppling over and crushing me as I slept. What happened was far more dire: I amassed my own collection. I got a job at the local library, then a liberal arts degree. I attempted to make a living reading, writing, and thinking, a folly in which I remain actively engaged.

During our long, international nightmare of isolation, the personal library—which has always been stereotypically thought of as a refuge for professor types with patched elbows to chomp stogies and sip brandy—has emerged as a tool to convey the intellectual wherewithal of talking heads Zooming onto cable news from their own homes. On social media, onlookers gave a coup d'oeil to the contents of celebrities' bookcases—20 volumes of the *Oxford English Dictionary* neatly lined up on Cate Blanchett's sage-green shelves, a row of bobbleheads and a bottle of Maker's Mark in Andy Cohen's modular oak unit. But a dissection of a person's bookcases obscures the visual cue that a library is more ▷

# POINT OF VIEW



A sun-filled modernist home library in New York City by Workshop/APD.



The library in a Fifth Avenue apartment designed by Stephen Sills.

likely to suggest: that of contemplation.

Since most of us lack the soaring ceilings of the New York Public Library or the made-for-Instagram atrium of the Tianjin Binhai Library, in China, the bookcase, in many homes, serves as a signpost that here is a room or a nook to stop scrolling and consider something of more permanence. It embodies a greater purpose, though it's easy to get it twisted. "I remember the trend that all books should be white," says *ED* A-List designer Martin Brudnizki. "That's not what a library should be. Thought is not minimalist."

Home libraries had it bad for a while. The very thing we were taught not to

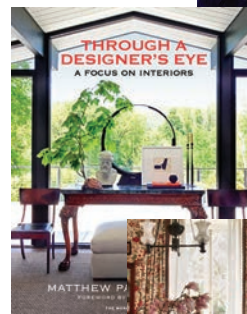
do—judge a book by its cover—fueled myriad design trends. Thanks to companies that charged by the linear foot for ready-made collections of leather tomes and paperbacks, appearing to be well-read suddenly came at an attainable price. Then there was the Instagram directive to arrange books by color, thereby creating an installation with all the nuance of a Rainbow Explosion cake.

But that was then—i.e., before March. This newly found time at home invites an opportunity to consider not only which books are on our shelves

and what they look like, but also how the library makes us feel. We now want to be like Keith Richards in his Mica Ertegun–designed Connecticut library, to kick up our feet and stay awhile. To find solace in the warmth and beauty of humankind's vast creativity and acquired knowledge. There's now a growing need for interior designers to create "sorbet for the soul," as *ED* A-List designer Katie Maine of Maine Design describes the modern library. "The world outside is crazy," she says. "You can go to this place to shut it out."

But how does one set about creating such an oasis? For *ED* A-List designer Alyssa Kapito, it's simple: "We wrap libraries in oak paneling or fabric," she says. "Not only to create warmth, but also to allow you to visually disconnect from everything else around you."

My own library consists of a bookshelf and a single-cushion love seat. Books and records culled from my late father's collection stand alongside candles and photo albums. "I have two bookcases piled with lights and tchotchkes," Brudnizki says. "It's an eclectic, mishmashy-looking thing, which is the whole point." Unlike the tyranny of color coding and social-media moments, the new trend in personal libraries concerns what's on the inside: ideas, inspiration, and respite from the rest of the world. ■



## ON SHELVES

THESE NEW BOOKS ARE **MUST-HAVES** FOR ANY PRIVATE LIBRARY.

### *The Lives of Others* (RIZZOLI)

The first monograph for photographer **Simon Watson** is a voyeuristic journey of epic interiors, from Roberto Peregalli's riad in Tangier to the late Duchess of Alba's home in Madrid.

### *Young, Gifted and Black* (ARTBOOK)

This important survey of contemporary art by Black artists, edited by critic **Antwaun Sargent**, includes work by Mark Bradford, Mickalene Thomas, and Kerry James Marshall, among others.

### *Through a Designer's Eye* (THE MONACELLI PRESS)

The world as seen by *ED* A-Lister **Matthew Patrick Smyth** includes a look inside his own beautiful 1970s prefabricated home in Connecticut.

### *Décors Barbares* (VENDOME PRESS)

A survey of interiors showcasing the exuberant textile designs of **Nathalie Farman-Farma** (see page 94), with photographs by Miguel Flores-Vianna.

—Bebe Howorth

# POINT OF VIEW



**CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT:** The White House solarium, which was designed by Michael S. Smith. A gallery wall in the treaty room. President Barack Obama, First Lady Michelle Obama, and their daughters Malia (far left) and Sasha watch a World Cup soccer game in the treaty room in July 2011.



## Michael S. Smith

THE ED A-LIST DESIGNER DISCUSSES HIS NEW BOOK ON DECORATING THE OBAMA-ERA WHITE HOUSE.

Your book *Designing History* (Rizzoli), out in September, tells the story of how you designed the White House private residence for the Obamas in 2008 and 2009. It's a good, long read—not your typical coffee table book.

**MSS:** We thought a serious

subject warranted a serious examination.

*A friend of yours, real estate agent Katherine Malkin, who was close with Desirée Rogers, the White House social secretary from 2009 to 2010, wrote you a letter of recommendation for the job. She stated that you move at the speed of lightning, stand by your convictions, and are socially responsible and a genius. Did she forget anything?*

**MSS:** I make it a practice not to question positive hyperbole. When Rogers called to say that the Obamas were considering you for the position, you were sunbathing on a beach somewhere. How did the call go?

**MSS:** In a movie, you always think those kinds of calls are fake. But she was very definitive and factual, so I knew it was for real. The call came during Thanksgiving break, so I was on vacation. It was an extraordinarily nerve-racking time. What did you first take into account when starting to design rooms at the White House?



**MSS:** Mrs. Obama was very clear: The number one issue was that they would be transplanting their young children from a place where they were super comfortable. I needed to create within this very large national landmark a space that was homey and tucked-in. So creating the girls' rooms was the big agenda item. During your first meeting, Mrs. Obama mentioned that her daughters, Malia and Sasha—10 and 7 years old at the time—wanted “pops of color.” Do you have to change modes when designing for children?

**MSS:** These obviously weren't the typical kids' rooms, but the big thing was to be as thoughtful and investigative as possible, knowing that their interests will change quickly. What they want at 5 years old, for example, will be different by the time they're 8. Anything permanent and age-specific in a child's room is a bad idea. What were some other challenges you faced?

**MSS:** Designing in the White House is like building a model ship in a bottle. The process, the scheduling, the security: It's a lot of labor required to

make very small movements. As a decorator, you were also tasked with designing the presidential china. What other unexpected jobs were you given?

**MSS:** I was asked to suggest state gifts for the Obamas to give to visiting dignitaries. You chose works by great American artists like Robert Rauschenberg and Ed Ruscha for the private quarters. What did they bring to those spaces?

**MSS:** What's surprising about the White House interiors is that the rooms are super tall. A big contemporary painting is really wonderful, and the walls can accommodate one. Art made the spaces feel more 21st-century.

*Upon meeting you, then president-elect Barack Obama commented on your demeanor, saying, “I suspect you must be really good at this.” Is that line a contender for your epitaph? Something like, “Here lies Michael S. Smith. He was really good at this?”*

**MSS:** It's pretty nice for him to say. It would be great if one aspect of my character was that I was good at my job, though I hope people have other things to add.

—Charles Curkin



**LEFT:** The White House family sitting room.

**BELOW:** The cover of *Designing History*.

