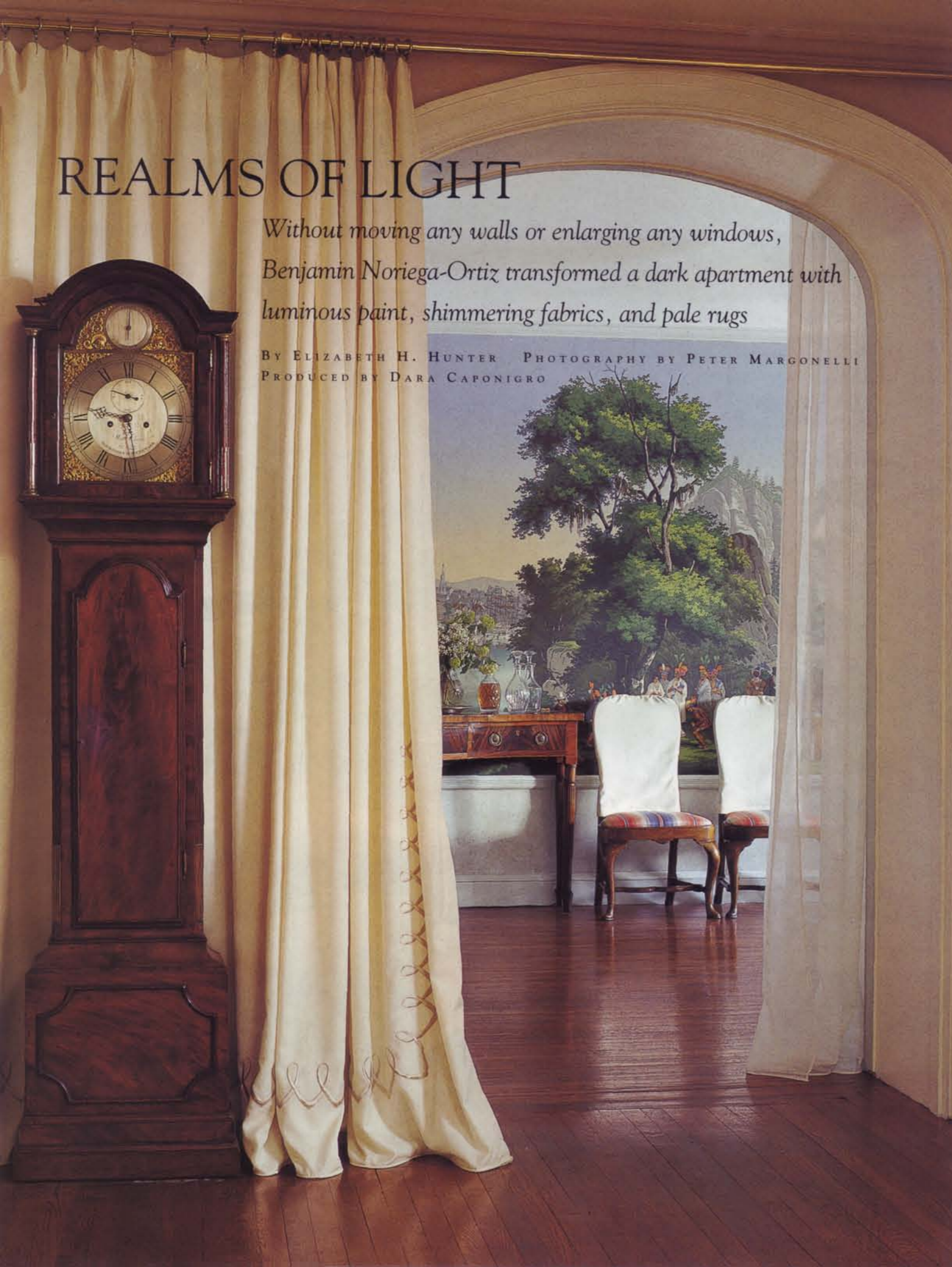


REALMS OF LIGHT

Without moving any walls or enlarging any windows, Benjamin Noriega-Ortiz transformed a dark apartment with luminous paint, shimmering fabrics, and pale rugs

BY ELIZABETH H. HUNTER PHOTOGRAPHY BY PETER MARGONELLI
PRODUCED BY DARA CAPONIGRO



"I really don't like to go in and destroy everything," says Benjamin Noriega-Ortiz, who designed a dramatic makeover for this New York apartment but left the dining room basically intact with its Zuber wallpaper and brass chandelier. Opposite: Some of the most luxurious touches—silk embroidery on the heavy wool curtain, covered buttons for the sheer wool slips on dining chairs—were inspired by the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Costume Institute exhibition "Haute Couture." Curtain fabric from Coraggio Textiles.





For fifteen years chintzes, stripes, dark floral rugs, and heavy antiques worked well in this New York apartment. “All the pattern covered a multitude of sins—perfect for three children and a dog,” says the owner. But once their last child was off to college, she and her husband decided to lighten up. They told designer Benjamin Noriega-Ortiz to make the place peaceful, elegant, a good background for the photography they had begun to collect, and not too serious.

Noriega-Ortiz knows how to lighten rooms. Born and raised in sunny Puerto Rico, he was shocked when he came to New York and saw so many dark apartments. “I always want to open up everything—let in light and air,” he says. In this living room he took down fussy balloon shades and replaced overpowering antiques with bleached burl tables—pedestal and drum styles. He re-covered brown-toned chintz sofas with pale ribbed silks and textured cottons, and sent the figured rug out to auction. He even took books from the shelves because “they make a room dark,” creating space for a rotating display of photographs instead.

Although the owners had given Noriega-Ortiz free rein to change anything he needed to, they were amazed at “the magnificent job he did of working with what we had.” Indeed, the dining room stayed almost the same. Noriega-Ortiz loved the fine scenic wallpaper, but spiffed up the chairs with buttoned covers that look like fragile little blouses. Glamorous new curtains swish across the arch between hall and dining room. “I like the drama of keeping the table hidden until just before dinner,” says the designer, “but doors would have blocked too much light.” The wool curtain conceals dinner party preparations completely; the gossamer curtain is pulled across when many small candles light a buffet table.

Noriega-Ortiz’s creamy palette contributed most to the incredible lightness here. Wall colors for hall (pale khaki), living room (sage green), and master bedroom (oyster white) are so close in value that the overall effect is subtly monochromatic. “I love the way everything works together,” says the owner. “Before Ben redecorated, each room had a different look. Now the whole apartment has one serene flow.”



Preferring paint to wallpaper and textured fabric to prints, Benjamin Noriega-Ortiz depends on shapes to engage the eye. In this living room (above and right), the variations in form include the pedestal tea table, curved loveseat, coffee table with sculptural base, Louis XV-style armchair. Photograph above sofa by Tina Barney.



"If I had to choose a favorite room," says the owner about her redecorated New York apartment, "it might be the powder room." The seemingly weightless glass wash basin is ideal for a tiny space, as are reflective walls—one of mirror and three of silver-leaf paper. Benjamin Noriega-Ortiz designed the tall lamp attached to the stone ledge. Photograph is The Brick Layer by August Sander. Opposite: The master bedroom's original ornateness—chintz bed hangings, elaborately upholstered headboard—gave way to Zen-like serenity. The bedspread recalls a tatami mat. Blue silk from Christopher Norman; cream-colored chenille at KirkBrummel. Swing-arm lamps of brushed brass from Nessen.

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