

# PATRIOTIC PASSIONS

SUZANNE SLESIN VISITS MERLE AND BARRY GINSBURG AND GETS AN ENLIGHTENING LESSON IN AMERICAN HISTORY

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOSHUA McHUGH

A few years ago, Merle and Barry Ginsburg—who have been married for 36 years, and have four children and nine grandchildren between them—decided to do something a bit unusual for people at their stage of life. Instead of downsizing, the Ginsburgs, who both had separate and very successful careers in real estate—she in commercial properties and the legendary founder, 37 years ago, of the Association of Real Estate Women—and he, as a developer of premium factory outlet shopping centers—wanted to upsize. After looking at dozens of apartments, they gave up their much-loved view of Manhattan’s Central Park, and moved into a larger Upper East Side apartment—with a view of the East River—that offered them the feature they were most looking for: a dining room that could accommodate all the members of their family for holiday dinners. And there was a subplot to be considered: the Ginsburgs’ avid interest in American history. That passion would play itself out both in the ceramic work by the Williamsburg, Massachusetts-based artist Mara Superior, and the couple’s enviable collection of rare early American documents. “The underpinning of our interest is a strong belief in civil liberties,” said Merle, who, with her husband, commissioned Superior to make a commemorative tribute in porcelain to America’s founding fathers and the best of 18TH-century American democratic ideals. “We supplied the history, she did the creative work,” explained Barry, whose interest in history and politics goes back to his college days. It took Superior three years to complete *The Pursuit of Happiness*, an impressive wedding cake-like ceramic piece that is an amalgam of the White House and the Capitol—the whole surrounded with elements of American iconography—including Abraham Lincoln’s top hat, a hot dog, miniature presidential busts, and an apple pie. “The sculpture is not political, but historical and patriotic, and reflective of early American history,” said Barry. Fittingly, *The Pursuit of Happiness* sits on an extraordinary antique sideboard that the Ginsburgs captured at a Christie’s auction a few years

ago. David Kleinberg, the New York-based interior designer known for his elegant and soignée schemes, was hired to create rooms that would be both suitable backdrops for their collections and what Kleinberg described as “in the contemporary esthetic” the Ginsburgs craved. “My job was to blur these two esthetics,” he said. The design element that everyone was enthusiastic about was the spectacular Zuber et Cie scenic paper *Views of North America*—that envelops the dining room in a whirl of color and faux historic narratives. “*The Battle of Weehawken* over the mantelpiece and the scene of the battle of Niagara Falls never actually existed,” said Barry. Kleinberg designed the impressive expandable pedestal dining table, pairing it with intentionally non-period-painted chairs that provide a fresh graphic contrast. A traditional paneled library that would house the Ginsburgs’ historical documents—one of the few known William Stone copies of the Declaration of Independence, and two pages from a draft of an undelivered inaugural address by George Washington, in his own hand, are two such treasures—was also on the Ginsburgs’ wish list. “But I didn’t want it to be of knotty pine or mahogany,” said Merle. So Kleinberg, who resisted making the room look “too-Upper East-Side,” designed raised panels that were lighter in color and had more contemporary lines. Again, the juxtaposition between the past and the present is a theme of the Ginsburgs’ world. While the old documents that formed the ideals of the new country make a powerful statement, the Ginsburgs are especially aware of how those tenets can be carried into their lives today. “The strength and magnificence of this country is the beneficiary of 300 years of welcoming strangers,” said Merle. “We’re far from being solely ‘political,’” she added. “The activities we engage in are to support people to be able to grow and live where they want to, and to work against the sense of inequality in the way women, and people in general, are treated.” The signs of true modernism could not be better described. —SUZANNE SLESIN

OPPOSITE AND OVERLEAF **DAVID KLEINBERG** DESIGNED THE DINING ROOM WITH *VIEWS OF NORTH AMERICA*, AND *SCENES OF THE REVOLUTION*, FROM THE FRENCH COMPANY. **ZUBER ET CIE**. THE MANTELPIECE, FROM **BARRY H. PERRY**, IN SOUTHOLD, NEW YORK, INCORPORATES A PAIR OF AMERICAN EAGLES. THE VENETIAN CHANDELIER IS FROM **BERND GOECKLER ANTIQUES**, IN NEW YORK. THE GILT MIRROR IS FROM **GEORGE SUBKOFF ANTIQUES**, IN WESTPORT, CONNECTICUT. **KLEINBERG** DESIGNED THE MAHOGANY TABLE, AND HAD THE DINING CHAIRS, FROM **ARTISTIC FRAME**, IN NEW YORK, UPHOLSTERED IN A LEATHER FROM **KELEEN LEATHERS**. AND *CITY STRIPE*, A FABRIC FROM **LEE JOFA**. ALL THE CERAMICS, BASED ON AMERICAN HISTORICAL AND POLITICAL THEMES, ARE BY ARTIST **MARA SUPERIOR**. *SMART PLANET: HOMAGE TO SCIENCE* SITS ON THE DINING TABLE AS A CENTERPIECE.









PREVIOUS PAGES THE GINSBURGS COMMISSIONED **SUPERIOR** TO CREATE *THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS*, A 2012–2014 WORK IN WHICH THE WHITE HOUSE IS TOPPED BY THE CAPITOL. THE ANTIQUE NEW YORK SIDEBORD, FROM ABOUT 1800, HAS UNUSUAL SMALL INLAIS DEPICTING LIBERTY CAPS—THE ICONIC SYMBOLS OF FREEDOM ASSOCIATED WITH THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION. *OPPOSITE* **KLEINBERG** OUTFITTED THE LIBRARY WITH LIGHT-HUED PANELING THAT GIVES THE ROOM A MORE CONTEMPORARY FEELING. A RARE WILLIAM STONE VELLUM COPY OF THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE SITS IN ITS NICHE. THE CHAIR IS A LATE 19TH-CENTURY REPRODUCTION OF A DESIGN BY **CHARLES-HONORE LANNUIER**, AN AMERICAN CABINETMAKER BORN IN FRANCE. THE LIVERPOOL JUG WAS MADE IN ENGLAND AROUND 1800 FOR THE AMERICAN MARKET. ABOVE THE FRENCH ART DECO SCONCES RECALL THE QUILLS USED FOR SIGNING THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE. BLUE ENGLISH TRANSFERWARE PLATES DEPICT GEORGE AND MARTHA WASHINGTON. THE CERAMIC BOWLS ARE BY **SUPERIOR**. ABOVE THE MANTEL, ORIGINAL TO THE APARTMENT, IS A PORTRAIT OF GEORGE WASHINGTON AT THE BATTLE OF PRINCETON, JANUARY 3, 1777, A 1799–1800 WORK BY AMERICAN ARTIST **CHARLES PEALE POLK**. THE STAR-SHAPED ANDIRONS ARE A MODERN NOTE.