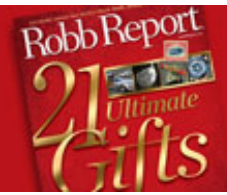


Give the gift of luxury — Give Robb Report and save 40%



# RobbReportCollection.com

## History Refined

*Nancy A. Ruhling*

09/01/2007

The Federal townhouse, as elegantly simple as an 18th-century brass candlestick, may look formal, but behind its red-brick facade it lives a kick-off-your-shoes lifestyle that makes Jim Spencer and his eight-year-old daughter, Jean Li, feel right at home.

Designer Sabrina Balsky incorporated entrepreneur Jim Spencer's vast collection of Asian art into the interiors of his historic SoHo townhouse. The ca. 110 b.c. Han Dynasty soldiers on the fireplace mantel are from Xian, China, and the giltwood Thai Buddha is mid 18th century. Balsky, who custom-designed most of the home's furniture, embellished the dining table with a Greek key pattern. The 1940s Jean Pascaud chairs were found online at [1stdibs.com](http://1stdibs.com).



To create the cozy and comfortable space in Manhattan's SoHo neighborhood, Spencer called upon Manhattan-based interior designer Sabrina Balsky and her partner, interior architect Peter Mason. Playing upon the landmarked house's illustrious past, they turned to the present to make it a modern family-friendly home suitable for parties and play dates and a showcase for Spencer's extensive collection of Tang Dynasty pottery.

The old floor plan was antiquated: The kitchen was on the garden-level floor, and the dining room was above on the parlor floor, making formal entertaining something of an Olympic event. Balsky and Mason added an addition on the back of the parlor floor, which includes a powder room and a utility room with a washer, dryer and additional dishwasher, and revamped the open living area on the garden level, turning the two floors into the perfect gathering spot for friends, family and business clients. Balsky and Mason chose contemporary color schemes and designed kid-friendly, adult-slugging furniture to make the lower and upper floors equally inviting.



Recessed display cases show off green-glazed Ming Dynasty burial attendants and a ca. 7000 to 1600 b.c. warrior, one of the oldest pieces in the collection.



"The whole parlor floor wasn't very usable," says Spencer, who owns Everpower Renewables, an energy company. "But now the furniture is arranged in conversational groupings so I can have small, intimate gatherings. There's a refrigerator, wine refrigerator and butler's bar in the dining room now, and the parlor, which has the large daybed, has become my favorite."

The heart of the transformed home is the open living area, where a 16-foot-long durable Nubuck leather banquette, oversize ottomans and a dining table may be rearranged like a child's set of building blocks to suit the mood and the activity. It is here that Spencer and Jean Li enjoy casual meals and spend many of their evenings lounging around. "Her friends like to hang out here and play," says Spencer.

In the parlor, a contemporary Cheung Yee piece, reportedly the largest the artist has made, hangs opposite a painting by French artist Katherine H. Monnier, which is placed above the fireplace. A 19th-century "flying" Buddha from Thailand or possibly Burma, set between two chairs, beckons visitors into the room. On the left, a large 19th-century gilt figure of Kuan Yin, the Goddess of Mercy, rides an elephant.



Spencer's collection of ancient art, which he assembled a decade ago while living in Beijing, adds its own special history to the updated townhouse, which is a very potent symbol of old New York turned new.

"Most of them are pieces that were buried in emperors' tombs," he says. "It was believed that they would protect the person; that's why some are shaped like sword-bearing warriors. I was attracted and fascinated by their sheer age—they are 2,000 years old and still have their painting and details."



The den has built-in niches that were designed to house Spencer's cherished collection of Tang Dynasty pottery. The opium pipes are from the mid 18th century, the time of the opium wars between Britain and China. The prominent horse and rider statue is from the Han Dynasty, and the temple, with its dark green glaze, is characteristic of the Ming Dynasty.

To show these gems to their best advantage—and to keep them out of harm's way—Balsky and Mason showcased some of them in recessed and illuminated custom built-ins that spotlight them much as they would be in a museum. Some, like the 19th-century Tibetan drum in the guest bedroom, were hung on the wall like sculpture; others, like the mid-18th-century Thai Buddha in the dining room and the gilt figure of Kuan Yin in the parlor, were placed on antique tables and boxes for a casual look. That nod to the past also serves as a reminder that history is a fine if fleeting thing. Although the Spencer townhouse is part of Manhattan's Charlton-King-Vandam Historic District, which at one time

was the site of Richmond Hill (the colonial mansion that was George Washington's headquarters, the official residence of the vice president of the United States and Aaron Burr's home), today it is next-door-neighbor Kate Hudson who attracts all the paparazzi.

---

In the guest bedroom, a 19th-century Tibetan drum hung above the fireplace becomes a work of art—the piece is flanked by a pair of cabinets, one of which conceals a TV. The gray color of the walls references a pinstripe suit, as does the duvet, which is made from gray and white taffeta. A similar fabric also lines the cabinet doors. Another painting by Cheung Yee, one of the more noted artists in Southeast Asia, hangs between the windows. The elephant statue is modern, produced in Selangor, one of the 13 provinces of Malaysia.



---

Spencer, his partner, Michael Lin, and Jean Li love the Bohemian feel of the neighborhood, where everybody knows everybody else and where all the great attractions of the city are right outside their front door.

And when Spencer and Jean Li do go out for a stroll, more often than not they end up at Chez Jacqueline, the charming neighborhood bistro that Jean Li calls her favorite. The chef has taken quite a shine to her and always makes her pasta Bolognese. Jean Li likes it almost as much as her pink and yellow princess bedroom.

**Sabrina Balsky Interior Design**, 212.585.0441, [www.sabrinab.org](http://www.sabrinab.org)