

Architectural Digest

Medford, Sarah: *Lion's Den*

14 November 2024

# LION'S DEN

In Manhattan's West Village, painter *Walton Ford* lovingly touches up a historic town house—and reveals his true colors

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IN A WINDOWED NOOK OVERLOOKING THE BACK GARDEN, ARTIST WALTON FORD STRETCHES OUT ON A MATTRESS LAYERED WITH PATTERNED BEDDING FROM JOHN DERIAN AND ANTHROPOLOGIE, A COLLECTION OF VINTAGE ELASTOLIN ANIMAL FIGURINES IS LINED UP ALONG THE WINDOW FRAMES.

BENJAMIN MOORE'S PALACE  
BLUE COLORS THE LIVING  
ROOM WALLS. THE CIRCA 1890S  
MARBLE MANTELPIECE WAS  
ALREADY IN PLACE. ARTWORK  
INCLUDES PIECES BY FRIENDS  
AND OLD MASTERS WHO  
INSPIRE FORD'S OWN WORK.  
THE VINTAGE FRENCH CEILING  
LIGHT WAS FOUND ON EBAY,  
AND THE 1920S LEATHER  
ARMCHAIR WAS PURCHASED  
ON 1STDIBS.





FORD OUTSIDE AN ARCHED DOORWAY OFF THE BACK GARDEN. ABOVE LEFT THE FAÇADE OF THE 1830 HOUSE.

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alton Ford's town house, in the meandering heart of Greenwich Village, is the one with the lion's-head knocker on its front door. Of course it is: For decades now the artist has made a subject of animals, the more ferocious-looking the better, the ones people go on safari to ogle through binoculars. As depicted by Ford, these beasts are so close you can count the hairs on their knuckles. In his recent show at The Morgan Library & Museum, a monumental watercolor portrays a salivating male lion lounging by a swimming pool in the moonlight.

There's a story behind the painting, needless to say, and another behind Ford's stout little house. The two-bedroom residence was built in the Federal style in 1830, a time when New York City was carving itself block by block out of a rural landscape. "You can feel the hand of the creator and the ingenuity here," Ford says. "I see things in an old house that make me fall in love with the person who built it."

The artist was living above a noisy tequila bar a few blocks away when his studio manager shared a real estate listing for the place in 2016. He dismissed it as unaffordable, but after the price dropped two years later, he pounced. A technically adroit painter in the mode of Dürer or Audubon, Ford subverts his traditional subject matter to expose uncomfortable truths about humans and our bad behavior toward the natural world. Inside his diminutive brick house, the traditional subject matter had been subverted long before he arrived. "It was all suburbanized," he says, sounding wounded as he recalls the blandly up-to-date interior.

Rather than reinvent some glorious past life for the place or enact minimalist perfection, Ford decided to return it to how it might have looked in the 1830s. He wasn't slavish about this. The living room's marble mantel, a bit of gentrifying probably added in the 1890s, remained, as did a Georgian-style rear addition from the 1990s. But the wallboard concealing

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ABOVE *LUCTUS*, A 2024 WORK ON PAPER BY FORD. TOP IN THE LIVING ROOM, VINTAGE MOUNTED KUDU HORNS ARE DISPLAYED BETWEEN WINDOWS HUNG WITH CURTAINS OF A SCHUMACHER LINEN FASHIONED BY FORD'S FRIEND RAFFAELLA HANLEY. THE ANTIQUE GLOBE IS FROM ARADER GALLERIES.



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE MORE ARTWORKS AND VINTAGE ANIMAL FIGURINES ARE DISPLAYED IN THE PRIMARY BEDROOM. FORD HAD THE OLD CEILING BEAMS REINFORCED AND DESIGNED THE KITCHEN'S OPEN SHELVING. A KITCHEN WALL IS CLAD IN ANTIQUE BLUE-AND-WHITE DUTCH AND PORTUGUESE TILES.

“You can feel the hand of the creator and the ingenuity here,” *Ford* says.



**LEFT** A VINTAGE BED IS TUCKED INTO AN ALCOVE TO CREATE A GUEST ROOM ON THE TOP FLOOR. WALLS IN PALE MOON AND OCEANIC TEAL BY BENJAMIN MOORE. **BELOW** A GLIMPSE INTO THE PRIMARY BATH, WHICH IS LIVENED UP WITH TRIM PAINTED WITH BENJAMIN MOORE'S VARSITY BLUES.



floor joists and fireplace surrounds came out, revealing the sins of past generations. “When they did all that suburban stuff, they would drill right through those beams to put in pipes and electrical,” he marvels. “There were parts that looked like Swiss cheese.”

Drawing on the carpentry skills that had supported him out of art school, Ford had his construction team reinforce the faulty beams by pairing them with slender new ones in a practice called sistering. To replace the particleboard kitchen cabinets, he sketched out some open shelving on graph paper and handed it to his builder. “The inspectors came in and were like, ‘Well, obviously this all has been here for a couple hundred years,’” he says, grinning. “In a way they weren’t wrong.”

**FORD’S FURNISHING CHOICES** were informed by the period, but also by the voluptuous contours of his domestic tastes. Surrounding the Lacanche range in the basement kitchen are a mix of antique blue-and-white Dutch and Portuguese tiles, while paint colors upstairs echo his backpacking exploits through India, Mexico, and Morocco. Some pieces speak the language of Americana—a Windsor bow-backed armchair in the kitchen, the primary bedroom’s mahogany four-poster with pineapple finials—and some decidedly don’t, like the Louis XV fireplace tools in the living room or the scattered collection of miniature German animal figurines. Here and there Ford conjured the spirit if not the letter of the past, as in Schumacher archival prints for curtains, which were stitched up by his friend Raffaella Hanley, a fashion designer and fellow Rhode Island School of Design grad whose Lou Dallas label is known for its baroque, punky edge.

The art collection that snakes up the staircase, assembled over decades and finally united here, includes work by Ford’s artist friends and a few idols (Goya, Tiepolo, Maria Sibylla Merian) who share his enduring interest in the natural world.

“Being surrounded by that stuff is really bleeding into my work in a good way,” he says.

Despite its snug size, the new house provides all sorts of comforts. Ford reads in the kitchen by firelight and hosts friends or his two grown children in the spare bedroom on the top floor (“People who hate New York City love my house”). One thing he lacks, however, is a home studio. His setup in a tiny office overlooking the back terrace never felt right, so he made the space into a patterned fantasy where he can crash amid printed sheets, pillows, and coverlet. To paint, he bikes over to a rental studio nearby. And sometimes, when he returns, someone will be standing out front with a question about a plaque on the façade that reads, “Aaron Burr House 1802.”

“That absurd plaque—Aaron Burr never owned this house,” Ford scoffs. “If you want to know the true story, every house here could be called the Aaron Burr house, because Burr owned a farm that took up most of what we now call the West Village.” But he’s never been one to knock a good narrative, and this one is especially close to home. “Go ahead,” he says. “Believe.” **▲**

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that make me fall in love with the  
person who built it.”



FORD STANDS ON THE STAIRCASE OUTSIDE THE PRIMARY BEDROOM. 18TH-CENTURY CHIPPENDALE CARVED MAHOGANY FOUR-POSTER BED FROM SALEM, MASSACHUSETTS. WALLS PAINTED IN DALILA AND TRIM IN VARSITY BLUES, BOTH BY BENJAMIN MOORE.