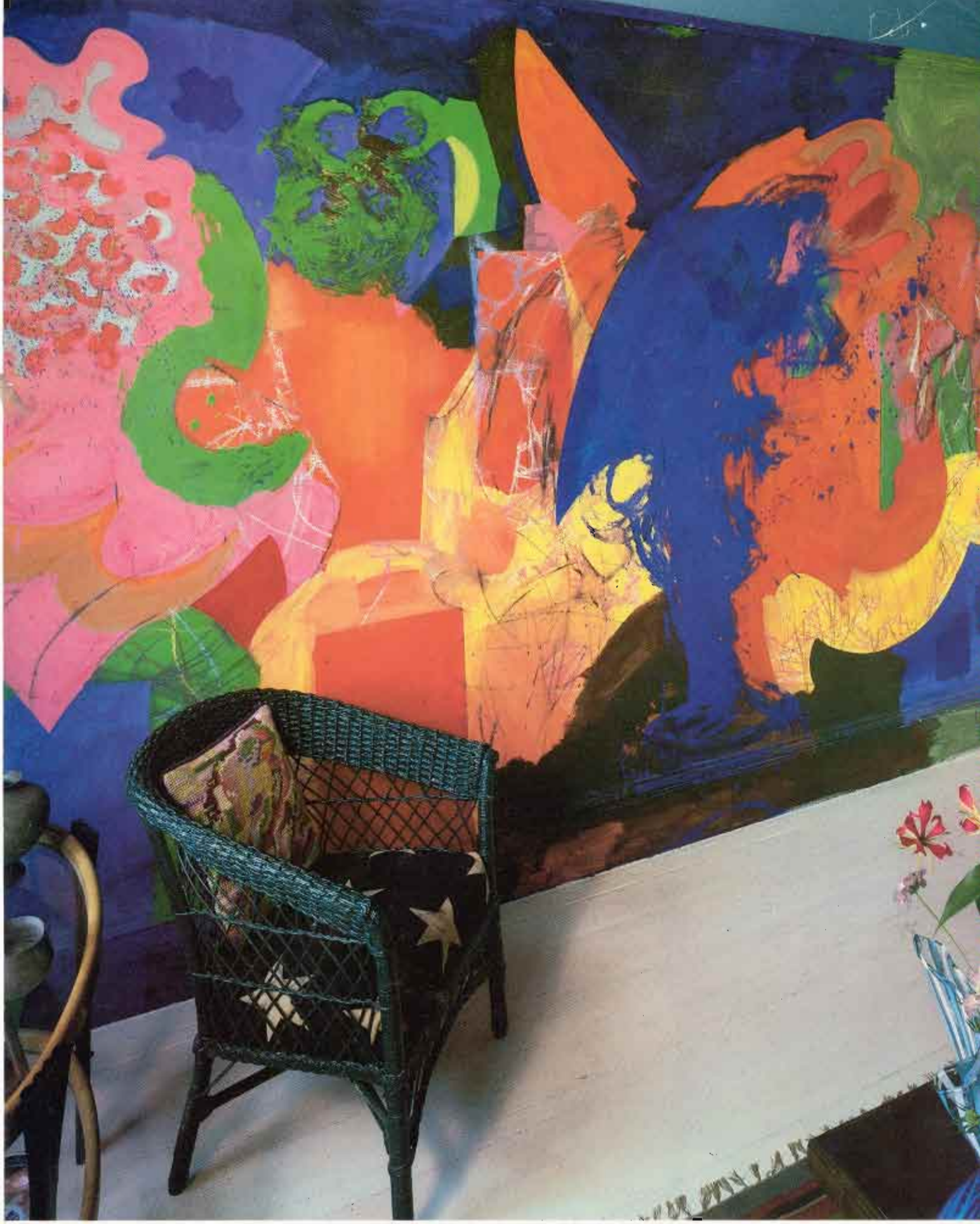

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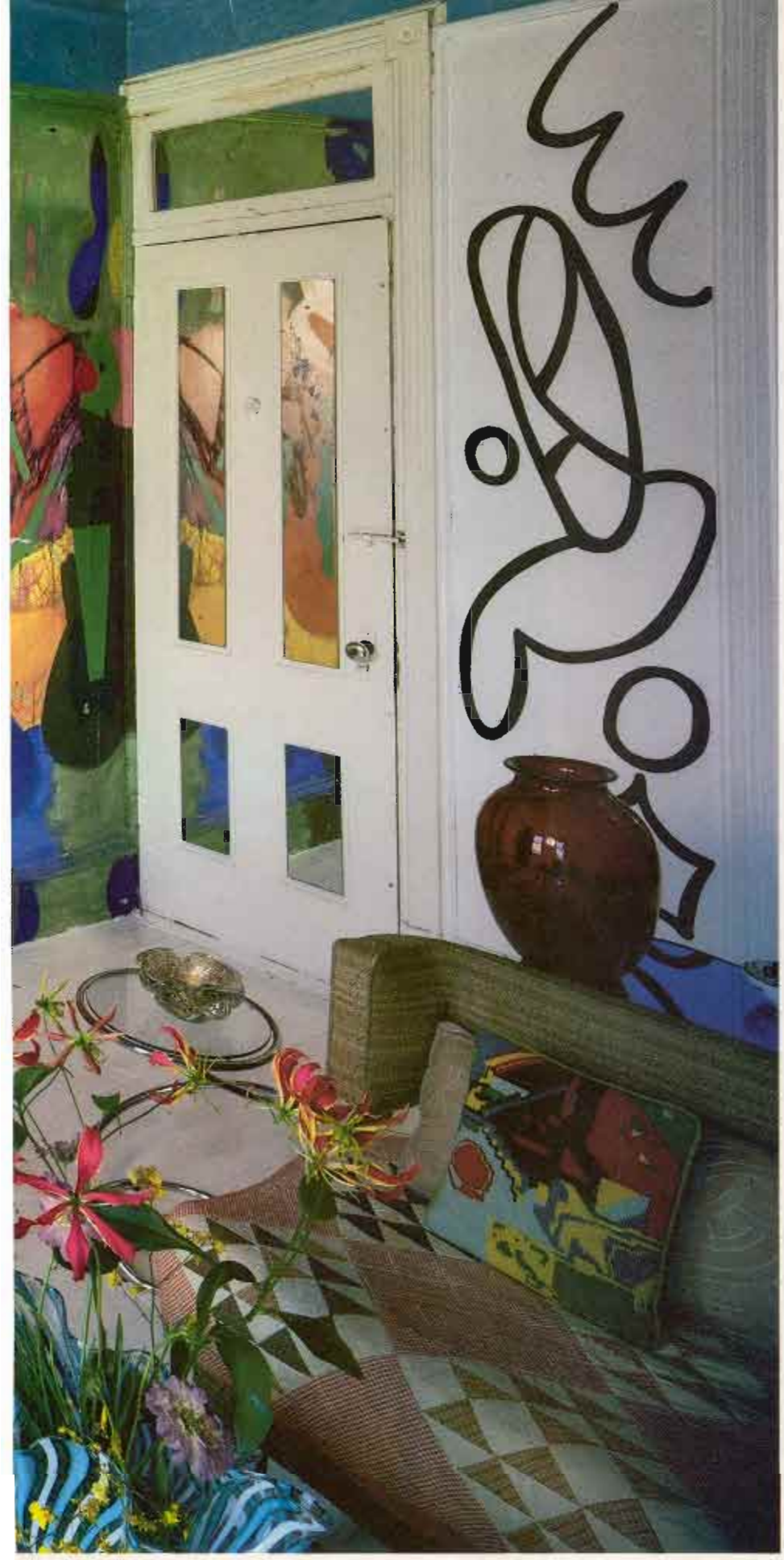


THE ART AT THE TOP OF THE STAIRS

For artist Richard Hennessy only living inside one of his paintings would do

BY OLIVIER BERNIER
PHOTOGRAPHS BY OBERTO GILI

In the living room, petit-point cushions by Francine du Plessix Gray and Charles Ludlam keep company with tenth-century Korean earthenware pots.

Above: Looking down on mirrored forties table with flowers in Venini vase next to the artist's own terra-cotta sculpture. *Opposite:* Reflection of living room in mirror-paneled doors of the next room.

Glowing color, the illusion of great space, and splendors all the richer that they owe nothing to materials and everything to art, these are the hallmarks of an apartment that, appropriately, belongs to a painter. When twenty years ago Richard Hennessy moved into the top floor of a tenement on Manhattan's Upper East Side, he was attracted by light and a view: from his windows he looks down on the tracery of bridges around Devil's Gate, that widest section of the East River known for its treacherous currents. But along with that panorama of sky and water the visitor has another, more surprising treat: after walking up what seems like an endless dark staircase with walls of peeling paint, he suddenly finds himself in a room in which walls and ceilings have become mere supports for a large fresco. Most painters are content with hanging a few of their works around their living quarters. For Richard

It is the light seen through the painter's eye that makes the apartment something only an artist could have created

Opposite: A corner of the studio. *Above:* In the living room a twenties cut-wood lamp sits beside canvas and fresco by the artist. *Below:* A twentieth-century faïence vase on American eighteenth-century drop-leaf table.

Above: View through to the living room. *Opposite:* The wall of the artist's studio with a still life made up of reproductions of paintings, fragments of Mexican tablecloths, and photographs of friends including, top right, Henry Geldzahler, Chris Scott, and the artist.

Hennessy, only living inside one of his paintings would do.

It was, in fact, after he had completed a commission that Richard Hennessy realized that what he had done for another he could also do for himself. When, in 1978, The Ridiculous Theatrical Company moved to its new space on Sheridan Square, Charles Ludlam, its founder, director, leading man, and author asked Hennessy to decorate a small ticket-selling lobby, the staircase that leads down to the auditorium, and the large hall that precedes it. The results were dazzling: bold color, inventive spaces, breath-taking trompe l'oeil. When, a few days later, Henry Geldzahler called and told Hennessy that he was entranced by what he had just seen, he added, "Why don't you give yourself a present and fresco your own apartment?"

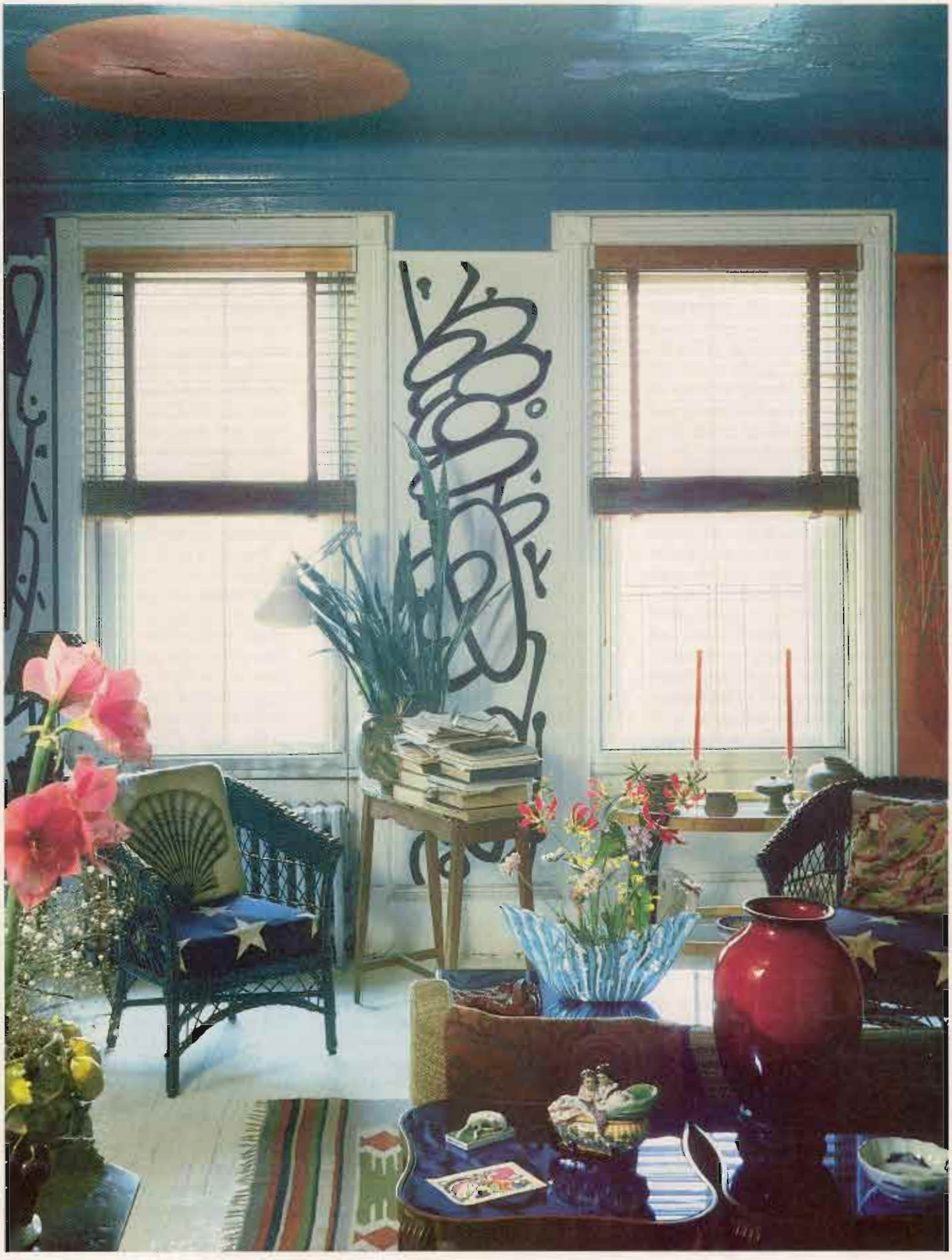
The result is an unconventional, unexpected space where nothing has been left as it was. Set off by a white-painted

Above: Among the objects on the shelves, from top: Venini harlequin, Art Deco plate, bargepot with a tiny teapot for a cover, eighteenth-century Chinese cranes and a plate, forties palm-tree plates, a yellow cookie jar. *Opposite:* Another view of the living room. A Royal Doulton flambéware urn is on the blue-glass forties table.

floor and a deep-blue ceiling enlivened in a corner by a pink sun, the longest unbroken wall becomes both spectacle and landscape, a panorama of rich intense blues, pinks, reds, yellows, and greens in which form jostles form to create the illusion of depth both inwards and outwards: while Hennessy's fresco opens up the wall, it also moves forth into our very space so that the spectator becomes a part of the pageant before him; then, too, there is an infinite amount of detail, small, intense areas where, often, several colors meet to create little still lifes.

After the intensity of this composition, the two smaller walls come as a most welcome surprise: large, three-dimensional black abstract forms float on a pure white ground. Powerful in their way, they engage the visitor in an altogether different but equally deep space. That all this should take place in a small, originally uninteresting room may seem surprising at first; in fact, Hennessy has gone through two rigorous forms of training: music, at the Eastman School of Music—he was a pianist until his early twenties—and art history, at the Institute of Fine Arts. He studied and understood architecture as well as painting and admires the great Venetians, *(Text continued on page 198)*

This apparently heterogeneous assemblage of objects looks, and is, like a carefully composed still life



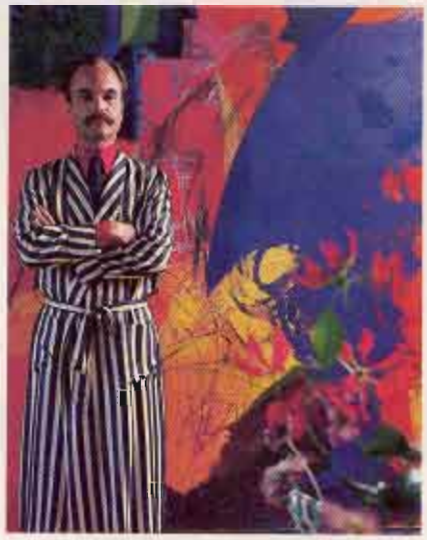
THE ART AT THE TOP OF THE STAIRS

The apartment is an unconventional, unexpected space where nothing has been left as it was

(Continued from page 196) Titian, Tintoretto, Veronese, Tiepolo, as well as Raphael and Fragonard. "Architecture," he says, speaking of New York apartments, "is full of limitations. Windows are not enough; there must also be windows into one's inner life"—a perfect description of his living-room fresco—"while walls become a garden in bloom. It is up to painting to provide the fine tuning and refine the limited visual experience provided by most architecture."

Hennessy's entire apartment, in fact, answers to the painter's sophisticated eye. Next to the main wall is a white door with five mirrored panels whose reflections give a sense of greater space. The living room contains nine tables, one a rare American eighteenth-century tilt-top; others include one of glass held up by a chrome spiral and blue-mirror, wood-frame forties coffee tables. Add to that two wicker chairs painted dark green and a fifties settee and you have a most unconventional but successful mix, one no decorator would have considered for a second. That all this furniture should entail the presence of a forest of legs doesn't bother Hennessy in the least: conventional sofas block the eye from seeing through the entire space of a room; here, one can look through, under, over, and around so as to leave the volume intact and undistorted. He is quite right, of course: a glance at any eighteenth-century room, as he points out, will amply confirm his theory.

Just as Hennessy's paintings, no matter how ample their sweep, are always rich in detail, so his apartment is full of countless objects. Some are full of transparent color like the Venini vase carefully placed on a blue-mirror table and set off by one of the artist's terra-cotta sculptures. Others combine a harmonious form with a deep, intense hue like the dark red Doulton flambéware urn. There are unexpected pieces: four Korean earthenware pots that date back to the tenth century sit



Richard Hennessy poses at home in bold stripes in front of his work.

on one table; here, rarity combines with the appeal of shape and texture. Elsewhere, an Italian vase made, probably, within the last eighty years stands wreathed in faïence oranges, lemons, and grapes. Clearly, no period, no style is excluded from Hennessy's collections. Indeed, he takes pride in their wide range: "I own," he says, "ceramics from every major ceramic-producing culture in the world—Chinese, Japanese, Persian, French, English, Spanish, German—because they are a museum of brushwork and color"; and he goes on to point out the extraordinary economy of the little strokes that are used to produce the décor: there is so much to learn, he thinks, from an art in which a mere touch of the brush can produce a convincing leaf. And, of course, ceramic provides him with a variety of shiny colored surfaces that reflect the light, so it is no wonder that it is to be found in abundance throughout his apartment.

Hennessy seems to be a born collector who uses his painter's eye to create a setting not unlike his paintings. He wouldn't think of denying it, but, he says, there is more to it than just acquisitiveness. All too often in modern interiors where paintings are the only ornaments, far from being more important because they alone claim attention, they become mere décor instead. There should, he feels, be a hierarchy of objects. Paintings then become the supreme element, but, he feels, objects are just as important because they create the contrast that points up the superiority of the canvas; and then, on a more practical note, he adds he always feels that small objects make a room seem larger. His rooms are, in fact, quite small, but they appear very much larger as the eye, perhaps fooled by the profusion of sometimes tiny objects, makes us see the illusion of space.

Putting a great variety of things together is not easy, though. Just a few little mistakes and the apartment could take on the air of a thriftshop. Nowhere is Hennessy's ability to avoid that particular pitfall more evident than in his kitchen. The only other large room of the apartment, it also serves as a dining room and there, next to the table whose checkered tablecloth reminds him, Hennessy says, of a Bonnard interior, is a collection of things he is fond of. Two paintings are hung on the wall, the smallest one dated 1974, the largest 1977; above them, in counterpoint, a gray French plate covered with grapes and nuts, dated 1905 and signed F.B. de Blois, balances an English cake plate edged in dark blue and gold with a center image of fruit on a white background.

These visual harmonics continue on the shelves. A French Art Deco plate decorated with swirling fish stands between a Venini harlequin and an English bargepot whose cover is itself a tiny teapot. Then, below, there are two Mexican tiles, a couple of eighteenth-century Chinese cranes posed before a Chinese blue plate of the same period, a vase lavishly festooned with acorns, and a forties lamp, while on the lowest level a green-striped Picassoesque vase stands next to a yellow porcelain cookie jar that *(Continued on page 200)*

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ART AT TOP OF STAIRS

(Continued from page 198) looks like a stack of plates, a toaster complete with a fifties cover on which rests a piece of signed, modern English earthenware and two plates painted with palm trees, pyramids, and the gaudiest of sunsets. Just why this apparently heterogeneous assemblage looks, and is, like a carefully composed still life becomes evident as one looks farther down at the 1983 Hennessy canvas leaning against the wall: the colors of the objects are in the paintings and vice versa; the different sizes, looks, and sheens of the faïences balance one another just like the abstract forms so that the entire setting, transformed into an entity of its own, becomes yet another of Hennessy's works.

With all its objects, its hanging saucepans, and its butcher's chopping block, the kitchen takes on an intimist character not unlike that of a small Dutch master painting; but then, one only need look toward the living room: through two doorless and very small spaces, the perspective is unbroken to the windows and their surrounding black-and-white frescoes. A long hall, starting in the kitchen, opens into illusion: the paintings—and reality: the windows—so as to create an apparently endless space.

Across the landing, Hennessy's studio parallels the apartment. Although of necessity most of its walls must be bare, there is still room for a collage-like assemblage of photographs, brushes, and paint-pots, while the floor, once white but now gaily adorned with an array of accidentally dripped paint, adds a random quality to the otherwise austere environment. Of course, the focus of the studio is Hennessy's most recent painting, always an arresting and colorful composition that instantly draws the eye while brilliant daylight floods in through the windows. Most especially here, in the painter's studio but everywhere and always, it is the ultimate luxury: analyzed in the canvases, reflected off the ceramics, glinting on the glass tables, captive, friend and inspiration, it is the light seen through the painter's eye that makes Richard Hennessy's apartment something only an artist could have created. □

Produced by Nancy Richardson