

Holiday 2005

TRADITIONAL HOME

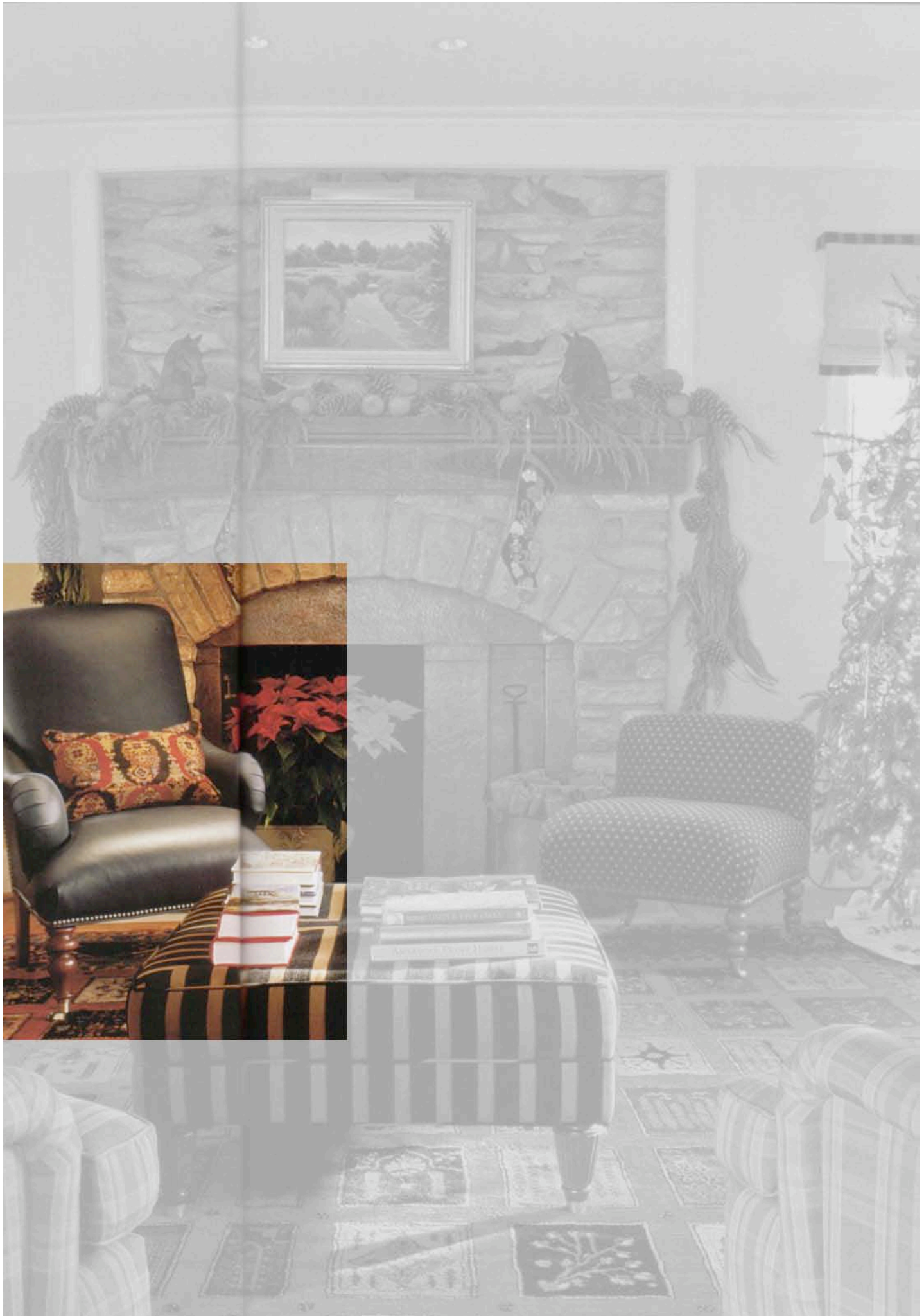
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better than new

FRESH, CLEAN SKIN

Craftsman Dino Carlino gives new life to old leather.

Overstuffed club chairs and button-tufted couches upholstered in chocolate-colored leather have an old-money look that only gets better with age. Unless, of course, a restless four-footed furry friend shreds the hide. And even reading the newspaper poses a threat to the life of a white leather sofa. Heat and sunlight can wreak havoc, too.

"If you don't maintain leather, a lot can go wrong," warns Sicilian-born craftsman Dino Carlino, the go-to guy among decorators and antiques dealers in need of skin care. He regularly reminds leather lovers to "clean and moisturize" to prevent fading and cracking. (He blends his own moisturizers but recommends Lexol leather conditioner to his clients.)

"Stains won't sink in if the leather is in good condition," assures Carlino, who worked for leather restorer Robert Falotico on Manhattan's Upper East Side before purchasing the workshop—Falotico Studio—10 years ago.

Cracked, parched club chairs in various states of neglect populate the fresh-smelling, leather-scented workshop. Some repairs are unavoidable—holes, gashes, scratches, and stains.

To repair a ripped armrest, Carlino carefully applies a natural grain leather patch. And

like a skillful plastic surgeon, he erases the ravishes of time without leaving telltale marks.

Supple leather ages gracefully when treated right, but many people forget to clean and condition, he says. He recommends "sealing" it with a coat of wax for protection and easy care. "When you seal leather, the old color reappears." When leather can't be rehabilitated ("if it turns to dust in my hands"), Carlino can fully re-cover a chair in "aged" leather, a hand-rubbed antique finish he achieves with a woolly pad and some light rubbing. The same mellow patina would take years of constant use to develop naturally.

Another house specialty is gold tooling. "You can feel it," says Carlino, running his fingers over a gold-embossed coffee-colored cushion as if reading Braille. Pizza-cutter-like tooling wheels with different patterns hang on the wall of his shop. Carlino heats the patterned wheel and rolls it across carefully placed 23-karat gold tape, burning in a design. "The heat melts the gold into the leather," says the craftsman. "It won't rub off for many years—at least 75." To replace a leather desk top and emboss it with long-lasting gold, Carlino charges \$85 a square foot.

To preserve leather's natural beauty, he advises keeping leather furniture away from direct sunlight, heat, and friends with sharp claws. "Don't forget to moisturize," reminds Carlino. ■

For more information, see sources on page 134.



Carlino patches badly cracked leather. Cushions and armrests are the most vulnerable spots for wear.

Hides to Seek "Good leather wears in while other leather wears out," says John Edelman, president of Edelman Leathers, a favorite source for high-end leather among interior designers and architects. How to judge the quality of premium leather?

Look for "full-grain" leather, *left*, with its characteristic pore marks and natural grains clearly visible, he advises. "Top-grain" leather sounds good, but surface scars and defects are sanded down and painted over. "Top-grain can appear nice, but they've removed all the leather's breathability. Top-grain can't age," notes Edelman. Top-grain appears more uniform, but full-grain retains its natural glow, which leather lovers pay a premium for. As for dye jobs, aniline dye is the best because it soaks right through the skin. All good leather is aniline-dyed, but that doesn't mean that all aniline-dyed leather is good, Edelman points out.

"Full-grain costs more, but it only gets better with age."

