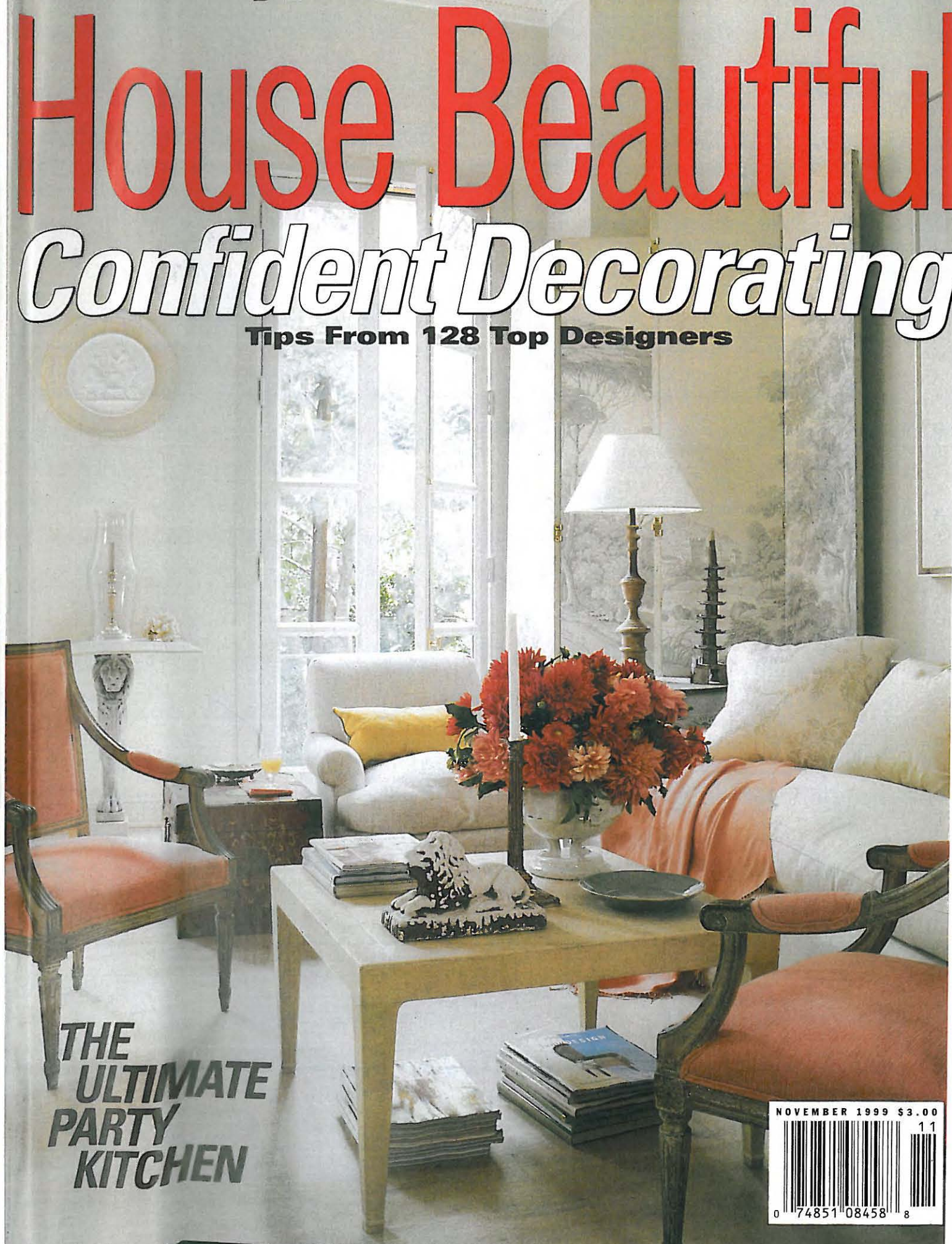


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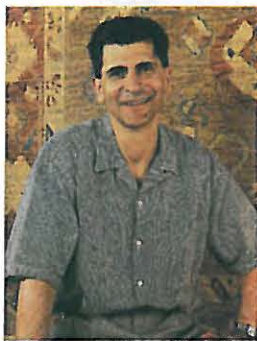


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RUGS TO RICHES

Spurred into action by newspaper articles on the troubles in Armenia, James Tufenkian single-handedly revived the country's tradition of handmade Oushak carpets and helped its economy in the process

BY TESSA SOUTER



Oushak rugs (above left) are characterized by soft colors. Tufenkian (above) has not strayed far from the 19th-century models for his designs. The rugs are hand-knotted (above right) in the factory in Armenia. Balbas mountain sheep (bottom right) provide the best rug wool.

In his twenties, James Tufenkian passed the bar, intending to become a civil rights lawyer. But before buckling down to a life in the courts he decided to travel. Armed with a good eye and a little knowledge gleaned from a summer job at a rug warehouse, he funded a trip to the Far East buying and selling rugs. Before long he was manufacturing his own Tibetan-influenced designs in Nepal, where with his business partner, Tsetan Gyurman, a Tibetan refugee, Tufenkian built a healing and meditation center and a Montessori school for the children of the workers.

Several years later Tufenkian, an Armenian-American, was sitting in his "nice, just-bought apartment in New York" reading about Armenia in the aftermath of the 1988 earthquake and the collapse of the Soviet Union. "There was poverty. Hopelessness. People were living in containers. I had to help." He decided to try to revive the defunct cottage industry of handmade carpets—from breeding the sheep and dyeing the wools to weaving the rugs. But that effort was only a partial success. "I was employing 500 people who were all worshipping me," he said. "But the rugs weren't selling



because reproduction Armenian rugs were saturating the market." Decorators, however, were clamoring for the faded Armenian antique Oushak carpets and a friend suggested he reproduce those instead. The rugs—all handmade using traditional techniques—were a hit when they were introduced at a 1998 carpet fair.

Tufenkian now employs 1,000 people in Armenia, where he also supports several orphanages. "My goal is to eventually employ 10,000 people, as we do in Nepal." Tufenkian may not be practicing civil rights law, but he is helping people. "Only now," he says. "I'm in a better position to implement my idealistic agenda." ■