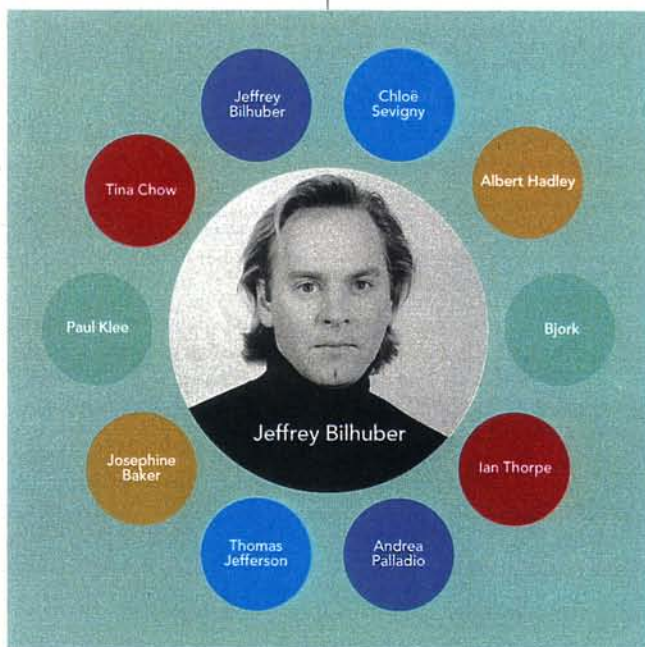


Great Seats

Decorators make it their business to dictate where things go. Chairs. Pillows. Why not people? Three of the savviest arrange their dream dinners.



The logic of asking prominent interior designers to share their visions of a dream dinner is self-evident. As Jeffrey Bilhuber explains: "What we do as decorators is establish a dialogue between chairs, tables, lamps, curtains. That's the reason you want to put a Wormley table next to a Louis XVI chair: because the curved lines of one speak to the other's straightness." Bilhuber adds: "It's not about the mix, it's about the match. And the match is being able to put people together like furniture, so they oppose and complement each other."

The parameters were few: the designers could draw their guest lists from the living as well as the dead, from persons real or imaginary. Which explains how Sheila Bridges decided to seat the Tin Man from "The Wizard of Oz" beside a beloved German poet ("Rilke would talk to him about the importance of getting the heart he so desperately wants"); Bilhuber came to seat the "exuberant" Josephine Baker next to Paul Klee, "an artist capable of very intimate expression"; and Mario Buatta was able to "clone the pre-'Answered Prayers' Truman Capote five times." (Inviting all six incarnations of the late author to his table and positioning each Capote between two larger-than-life grande dames would facilitate a "round robin of gossip" that Buatta, who would do the serving, could listen in on and savor.) Stylish as this fantasy exercise was, there was substance on the menu, too. Bridges envisioned her dream dinner taking place at her Harlem apartment, with Frederick Douglass occupying a seat of honor — "since it would not be possible for me to be sitting around that table if not for him." "Plus," adds Bridges, who is nothing if not practical, "it's always a good idea to invite a charismatic speaker to help the conversation flow." ■



FRED R. CONRAD/THE NEW YORK TIMES (SHEILA BRIDGES)