



# DESIGN INTELLIGENCE

# San Francisco

WALL ART: **Finally, a Patrick Blanc vertical garden in SF**  
HOME AS STYLE LAB: **The new-wave collectors**  
RESTO'S GAMBLE: **Can a CEO sketch furniture's future?**

**"Pieces of His Mind,"  
an exclusive interview with  
Restoration Hardware CEO  
Gary Friedman** [SEE PAGE 78](#)

**WHITE-HOT ALCHEMY:**  
Influential architect-designer Andrew Skurman's  
Nob Hill apartment offers a blank canvas for the  
singular furniture, art, and antiques he collects with  
his wife, Françoise. Key pieces range from a Tom  
Dixon-commissioned sculptural table base and  
chair to French heirloom silver. [SEE PAGE 66.](#)

*April 2011*

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**BACK STORY 128 Right-brain CEO.** Restoration Hardware's iconoclastic chief once channeled Auguste Rodin. **BY JOANNE FURIO**

**Cover. PHOTOGRAPH BY JOE FLETCHER**

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This issue, our editors offer insights into some of the Bay Area's most interesting design ideas.

As the poet famously said, "In the spring a young man's fancy lightly turns to thoughts of...baseball!"

OK, maybe Lord Tennyson actually said that a young man's thoughts are of love, but as regular readers of this column (if there are any) know, one of my great loves has long been the Giants. Last year's triumph was a fantasy come true for the whole Bay Area—and I think we are all ready to continue the dream right where we left off after the parade last November. The race to repeat as champions starts in L.A. on March 31, and the home opener is Friday, April 8, against the Cardinals.

Spring also brings to mind thoughts of renewal and growth. For many of our readers, that means plans to refresh their homes. An astounding 38 percent of them told us they undertook a home remodeling job last year, and we anticipate an even larger number to be similarly active in the months ahead.

This issue, our editors offer us their insights into some of the area's most interesting design ideas. They give us a sneak preview of Drew School's extraordinary "living wall" (think: Academy of Sciences living roof turned vertical), created by the international landscaping superstar Patrick Blanc and certain to become one of the most admired such works in the United States. We also get a rare view inside the homes of four of the region's most influential furniture and art collectors, whose living spaces point the way to a freer new future for interior decorating. And we learn how Gary Friedman, the obsessive and brilliant mind behind the reinvention of Restoration Hardware, not only has opened his first of a kind "design gallery" in the most upscale location possible—across from the San Francisco Design Center—but is betting his business on being able to sell high-end reproductions of striking pieces he's discovered during his travels.

Collecting is a big part of our spring event

schedule as well. On April 6, SFMOMA holds its biannual art auction. Attendees will get an unprecedented chance to admire—and bid on—80 pieces of extraordinary art that have been donated for this purpose to the museum. If your budget doesn't quite allow for a Richard Serra or a Chuck Close, then join us next month at artMRKT, the international art fair at the S.F. Concourse, where more than 50 galleries from near and far will be displaying great works at more accessible prices.

What kind of art do I collect? Hanging on my office wall is a print by Mark Ulriksen—formerly art director of *San Francisco Focus* (a precursor of this magazine) and now best known for his many great *New Yorker* covers. My prize is a limited-edition print of my boyhood hero, Willie Mays, making The Catch against Vic Wertz in game one of the 1954 World Series, the last time that the Giants (then of New York) were world champions. Ulriksen created this image for local master Andrew Hoyem of Arion Press to illustrate Hoyem's fine-press edition of *A Day at the Bleachers*, Arnold Hano's account of that game at the Polo Grounds. An entire book about one day watching the Giants play baseball: Now that's my idea of a young man's fancy.

See you at the ballpark.

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DESIGN  
INTELLIGENCE



RETAIL

## *PIECES OF HIS MIND*

BY JOANNE FURIO

PORTRAIT BY ALEX FARNUM

**GARY FRIEDMAN** PUT A KITCHEN IN THE MIDDLE OF A WILLIAMS-SONOMA STORE AND FOREVER CHANGED THE WAY AMERICANS SHOP FOR TOASTERS. HE INVENTED POTTERY BARN AS WE KNOW IT. NOW, THE UNORTHODOX RETAIL LEADER IS AGAIN AT THE HELM OF A BAY AREA COMPANY, RESTORATION HARDWARE, COUNTING ON HIS OWN EYE TO CHANGE THE WAY WE FURNISH OUR HOMES.





#### PATINATED

Two Belgian artisans created these pendant lamps in homage to the polyhedron, a classic architectural element, and Friedman snapped them up to reproduce at Resto.



#### ICONOCLASTIC

During a buying trip in Antwerp, Friedman sketches an idea for a symmetrical catalog spread—now a company hallmark.



#### AERODYNAMIC

Friedman found the original version of this piece, inspired by the bent wing of a World War II fighter plane, in the Parisian showroom of antiques dealer Timothy Oulton.

#### DISTRESSED

This signature tufted Kensington sofa, based on the classic Chesterfield style, is exactly the sort hipsters scour antiques shops to find—only this one is oversize and there's no used ick-factor.







### SITTING ON THE BELGIAN CLASSIC

Roll Arm Slipcovered Sofa in the grand entry room of his new Henry Adams Street store, Gary Friedman, co-CEO and chairman of Restoration Hardware, occasionally interrupts his train of thought to greet customers. Friedman speaks with the unbridled, rapid-fire enthusiasm of a leader determined to inspire, so keeping up with him is like trying to attach a pedometer to a galloping racehorse. Stylish charity fixture Summer Tompkins Walker, in design-district black, enters the store with a friend. The interview stops.

"We were just in Pebble Beach playing golf today," says Tompkins Walker, who designs custom-embroidered home ware and who you'd think would be shopping for furnishings across the street, with a decorator, at the exclusive, trade-only Design Center. Instead, Tompkins Walker describes how she dragged her friend into the store, urging her to do her house in Restoration Hardware. "It looks great!" Tompkins Walker gushes. As the women depart, Friedman sizes up the encounter at his previous breakneck pace: "She likes the store, that's good. Her husband's Brooks Walker, one of the best architects around. Her father cofounded Esprit, and her mom, the other cofounder, is Susie Tompkins Buell—a big philanthropist in San Francisco."

Tompkins Walker's endorsement in front of a reporter clearly means something to Friedman, an obsessive marketer on the lookout for signs that what many design cognoscenti have called his insane gamble at Restoration Hardware might just turn out to be a huge win. Two and a half years ago, immediately following the biggest economic disaster since the Great Depression, Friedman decided that what the world needed—or at least what *he* needed to save his ailing company—was a new type of luxury furniture. He had already transformed Restoration Hardware once, from a mall merchandiser of tools, gadgets, and toys into a more upscale purveyor of items for the home. But this time, he would challenge the very notion of how home furnishings are made and sold.

In the spirit of high-end fashion labels, like Hermès, Friedman decided to forgo large-scale mass production in favor of small batches and handcraftsmanship. He also committed to following his own eye as he scoured flea markets from Paris to Pacifica to find the antiques



Friedman on the floor of his "laboratory"—the new Restoration Hardware in San Francisco's design district.

**Friedman has scoured flea markets from Paris to Pacifica to find the antiques that inspire his reproductions.**

## RESTO'S REDO

Two and a half years after the company went even more upwardly mobile, stylistic hallmarks of the new Restoration Hardware have emerged, reflecting the sensibility of its chairman and co-CEO, Gary Friedman.

### Much of the fabric is linen.

"I love the texture of it, the organic feeling of it, the subtle colors—90 percent of my house is in linen," Friedman says.

**The palette is neutral—**beige, brown, and gray—but not, Friedman claims, in order to blend with customers' existing decors. "This is what I like. My home is mostly neutrals."

**Most of the wood is unfinished:** "We love the casualness of it, that it's comfortable. You can put your feet up on it."

**The feel is neoclassical-cum-salvage chic.** You see it in the use of columns or column parts that have been turned into lamps or tables. "When you look beyond what they are, you see all kinds of possibilities," Friedman says of such repurposed furnishings.



## HANDS-ON

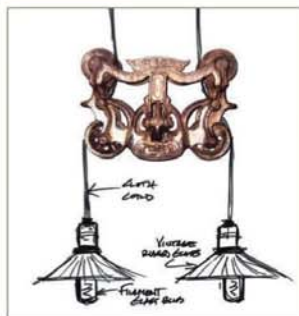
At a furniture factory in Beijing, Friedman rethinks the leg on a prototype reproduction of a burlap chair he found in a Napa antiques store; the chair eventually shows up in a company catalog (above).



## MASCULINE

The CEO admits that many of his pieces have a male-focused feel, like this Aviator Chair, because they reflect his personal aesthetic.

## FARM-TO-TABLE



Another Friedman sketch shows how he transformed an early 20th-century barn door pulley mechanism into an overscale pendant light that can serve as a chandelier.



that inspire his reproductions. The result is a line of items with design DNA ranging from Louis XIV to World War II America that sell for a significantly lower price point than something from Holly Hunt or Baker Knapp & Tubbs.

The decision was "very risky," says Helen Bulwik, president of New Market Solutions, a management consulting firm in Oakland. The economy was bad, and the move put Resto in direct competition with the design trade, something that hadn't been done before. To borrow an analogy from the art world, if a luxury sofa is like an original painting, and a cheap one is like the poster you get at the museum gift shop, a Friedman sofa would be like a signed print—not one of a kind, but still one of anywhere between 20 and 2,000 copies. Friedman believed this new model would be perfect for the customer who had outgrown Ikea and West Elm but wasn't willing or able to shell out Design Center money to furnish her home. He would also be happy to draw the

Tompkins Walkers of the world, who *can* pay for one-of-a-kind pieces but who would also buy something less rare if it was extraordinary and they didn't have to wait many months to receive it.

Friedman launched his experiment of selling luxury brands on a grandish scale two and a half years ago, but because Restoration Hardware is privately held, it's difficult to gauge the response of the market. Even so, Friedman has already transformed 85 of Resto's remaining 91 stores, and he claims the company is doing better than it has in its entire history.

In person, Friedman exudes a visionary meticulousness—no wonder one of his idols is Steve Jobs, and Apple's "Think Different" is a favorite expression of his. And he's trying to infuse his whole company with the same spirit of iconoclasm. He got kicked out of junior college, claims to have read only two books in his life, didn't travel to Europe until he was 35, and didn't live in his own house until he was 44. "I don't know what can't be done, because I wasn't brought up or trained in a certain way," Friedman says, referring to the benefits of his unconventional design background. "I might see things other people don't see because they've seen it a thousand times. In a sense, I can have the perspective of a child."

Yet, he's also a maniacal perfectionist. When planning his own house, he rejected three architects because they told him that putting a perfectly centered, symmetrical building on a Belvedere hill overlooking the Golden Gate Bridge was a problem they did not want to solve. (Friedman's fussiness paid off: His home appeared in *Architectural Digest* in 2008.) »

If a luxury sofa is like an original painting, and a cheap one is like a gift-shop poster, a Friedman sofa is like a signed print.

At Resto, Friedman oversees the slightest details of every piece of furniture he sells, down to the width and finish of a metal band on the wooden trunk where his leather briefcase now rests (he says he spends only five minutes a month at his desk).

As controlling as he is, he has earned the right to have his way. Resto will live or die on Friedman's drive and eye, and he knows it. "What's so great about this, and why I've had more fun than ever, is because, for the first time in my career, I was able to make a business 100 percent personal," he explains. "What you see at Restoration Hardware is an expression of what I believe, what I like, and what I think is a great way to live."

#### FRIEDMAN'S LAUNCH OF HIS RECONFIGURED STORE LAST

September was a potent symbol of the brand's reinvention—and the event of the season for a design community still in the post-2008 doldrums. Instead of choosing Corte Madera,

where Resto already had a store and its headquarters, Friedman decided to open in the 5,000-square-foot, Palladian-style building in San Francisco that housed antique king Ed Hardy's business for 16 years. The space, discreetly set back from the street behind a crushed granite courtyard guarded by 14-foot-high wooden gates, had served as an anchor to the design district, and Hardy had been famous for the lavish themed parties he hosted there. But during the downturn, he'd decided to close.

Friedman was concerned that some of the design locals would greet the new Resto with a

"People said I was crazy," Friedman says of his decision to create a new luxury brand right after the recession began.

"there goes the neighborhood" attitude. But instead, his September 22 opening bash drew 800 people—and a line that wrapped around the block for two hours. The party was cohosted by *Architectural Digest*'s new editor in chief, Margaret Russell, and it was attended by a headline-worthy mix of socialites, including former Gap chair Bob Fisher and his wife, Randi Fisher; the ageless Denise Hale; and *Harper's Bazaar* contributor and haute couture collector Tatiana Sorokko, plus boldface interior designers like Paul Wiseman, Ken Fulk, and Jeffry Weisman—all former fixtures of Hardy's extravaganzas.

"I wanted the party to create a kind of aspirational platform," Friedman says, "to signal to the designers and architects that this is a very different Restoration Hardware." It seems to have worked. "The new store has been impeccably done," says Gabriella Sarlo, whose own showroom is down the street. "The space is phenomenal, and they've really cap-



tured a look that appeals to the general public." Interior designer Suzanne Tucker says that the whole area is feeling the love. "There's renewed foot traffic, a new consumer, and a new buzz within the trade."

In a sense, Friedman's entire life and career propelled him toward this moment of convergence between high design and mass marketing. At the age of 11, he had his first encounter with clay—and while his peers were making ash-trays and bowls, he came up with an impressive Rodin-like "Thinker" (see Back Story, page 128). He would always be better at seeing and sketching than at listening and reading, so with college out of the picture, Friedman decided to focus his energies on a job at a Gap in Santa Rosa. That's where he was mentored by Mickey Drexler, the San Francisco retailer who turned the Gap from a small chain into a massive worldwide success. (Drexler eventually moved back to New York and engineered J. Crew's meteoric rise.)

Drexler shares Friedman's famously hands-on approach to his business—at J. Crew, he set up a company-wide PA system, over which he blasts random questions and thoughts from his office. Friedman claims Drexler calls him his "best knockoff in the world"; Friedman, in turn, credits Drexler with giving him the confidence to shake off his sparse résumé. "I started to think maybe I *did* know what I was talking about, even though I didn't go to college and get an MBA." Indeed, Friedman says he eventually became the youngest manager, the youngest district manager, and the youngest regional manager in Gap history.

After that came his first foray into home design—and his second spectacular success. In 1988, at the age of 30, Friedman was lured to Williams-Sonoma by CEO Howard Lester, another Bay Area retail legend. It turned out that Friedman had the merchandising magic that Lester was looking for, and during his 14-year tenure there, he opened the first Williams-Sonoma Grande Cuisine store, with its famous central kitchen, food halls, and tasting bar. And when Lester told him to either "fix, close, or sell" Pottery Barn, Friedman chose the former—and transformed the chain into the fastest-growing, most successful home company in the world, taking it from a \$50 million to a \$1.2 billion business in under seven years.

But then, in 2001, after having been groomed for the position, he was passed over for the role of CEO. "It broke my heart," Friedman says. Lester urged him to stay—if he didn't, he would lose up to \$50 million in stock options. But it wasn't about the money, Friedman insists. "I wanted to do what I loved. If I stayed, the people who worked for me would know I'd sold my soul."

That's when he landed at Restoration Hardware. He had passed the Corte Madera store many times while overseeing the construction of his own house, and he decided to call up the founder, Stephen Gordon, who had opened the first Restoration Hardware in Eureka in 1980, to scout out potential job opportunities. It turned out that Gordon was ready to hand over the reins, and soon Friedman was assembling investors and kicking in his own resources to resuscitate the brand and rescue it from near bankruptcy.

For the next five years, Friedman went about upgrading the store (when he bought it, Resto's catalog featured Oxydol

detergent on its cover), but the big move came in 2008—oddly enough, right after President George W. Bush gave his speech warning of economic calamity. The next day, Resto sales dropped 30 percent, and the future of the company was in jeopardy, but the one thing Friedman did not want to do was imitate his competitors by dropping his prices and compromising on quality. He figured there were still enough people at the higher end of the market who weren't in serious trouble, so he decided that the smart thing to do was to create a brand-new market niche. "People thought I was crazy," Friedman says, "but there was really no premium luxury brand that had brought home design together with a lifestyle view."

**DEFINING ONESELF AS A "CURATOR" RATHER THAN A** retailer, one's stores as "galleries," and one's catalogs as "publications" may seem like putting on airs, yet there's substance behind Resto's metamorphosis. Friedman has tapped a team of professionals that includes old-world artisans and antiquarians and even Ed Hardy himself, who now consults on a part-time basis. Resto still sells familiar offerings, such as bath fixtures and Italian bedding, but the emphasis is on the reproduced antique furniture. For example, at Ma(i)sonry, the Napa shop owned by one of his best friends, Michael Polenske, Friedman found a burlap chair for \$7,000, copied it, and now sells it for \$1,295. ("You can't tell the difference, except maybe the burlap isn't quite as worn," he says). In San Mateo, he found an elegant pair of 18th-century tables for \$3,000 that became Resto's Lion's Head Side Tables. The smaller one sells for \$795; the larger one, for \$995.

The idea of reproductions may sound *déclassé*, but the techniques have come a long way since the days of the industrial revolution, when historical models were often reproduced with excessive ornamentation. Revival-style houses, so popular in this country during the early 20th century, were often filled with such over-designed pieces. The backlash began when modernists decided that mass production could be a noble means of spreading good design. Why would someone want a copy of a style from a bygone era when more relevant, high-concept design was available at an affordable price?

Friedman's approach is somewhat hybrid, embracing the artisanal and the democratic. Some pieces are Friedman's (or another designer's) take on an original design, but most are more or less exact replicas of the real antique. The challenge, he says, is to capture the essence of an original without making it look fake. "Even though many of these pieces were passed down through multiple generations and left in the barn, and the rain got through the roof and washed off the finish, the design, the proportions, and the beautiful patina are all there," Friedman explains. "They lived a life and have a soul, which we try to convey."

He's helped by an array of European artisans working around the globe—in Beijing, Vietnam, Poland, Italy, and Turkey. Resto's May-fair Steamer Trunks, for example, are crafted in the Chinese workshops of Timothy Oulton, a London antiques dealer and furniture reproductionist. Each of the trunks takes three days to complete and features such hand-finished details as 3,000 hammered-brass nail heads. The price: from \$1,495 to \$2,995. »

Friedman uses the San Francisco space as a laboratory for these reconstructed pieces as well as for his real antiques. He'll install new finds, like the mirror that was once two separate architectural brackets holding up a ceiling in a Parisian theater, and wait to see customers' reactions. Once such an item has been displayed, it has gone into "development," which means that artisans are ready to create one especially for you; all you have to do is put your name on a list and wait. Even if no one bites, Friedman will often make one reproduction anyway, just because he has fallen in love with the piece himself. And his Belvedere home is filled with the originals, so at least there's a place for them to go if Friedman decides to keep them.

**WALL STREET IS UNMOVED BY PERSONAL STORIES OF** perseverance and against-all-odds success. It wants to be shown the money. But since Resto's financials aren't publicly available, most analysts we asked would comment only generally on the company's future prospects.

Jerry Epperson Jr., a furniture industry analyst with Mann, Armistead & Epperson, in Richmond, Virginia, thinks the economy is actually starting to favor Friedman's decision. "At the time, it was a daring move," he says. "But if you look at what's happened with the stock market since then—we just hit 12,000—it looks like it was the correct one. The wealthier customers are less likely to have their homes foreclosed and more likely to have their money in the stock market. All those things are making him look pretty smart." He predicts that the company will likely go public once housing stocks improve, a trend that, in his estimation, isn't too far off. "When there's good news in the housing sector, the home builder stocks move, and then so do the home furnishings stocks. The owners of Restoration Hardware will use that as an opportunity to hit the market with a good story."

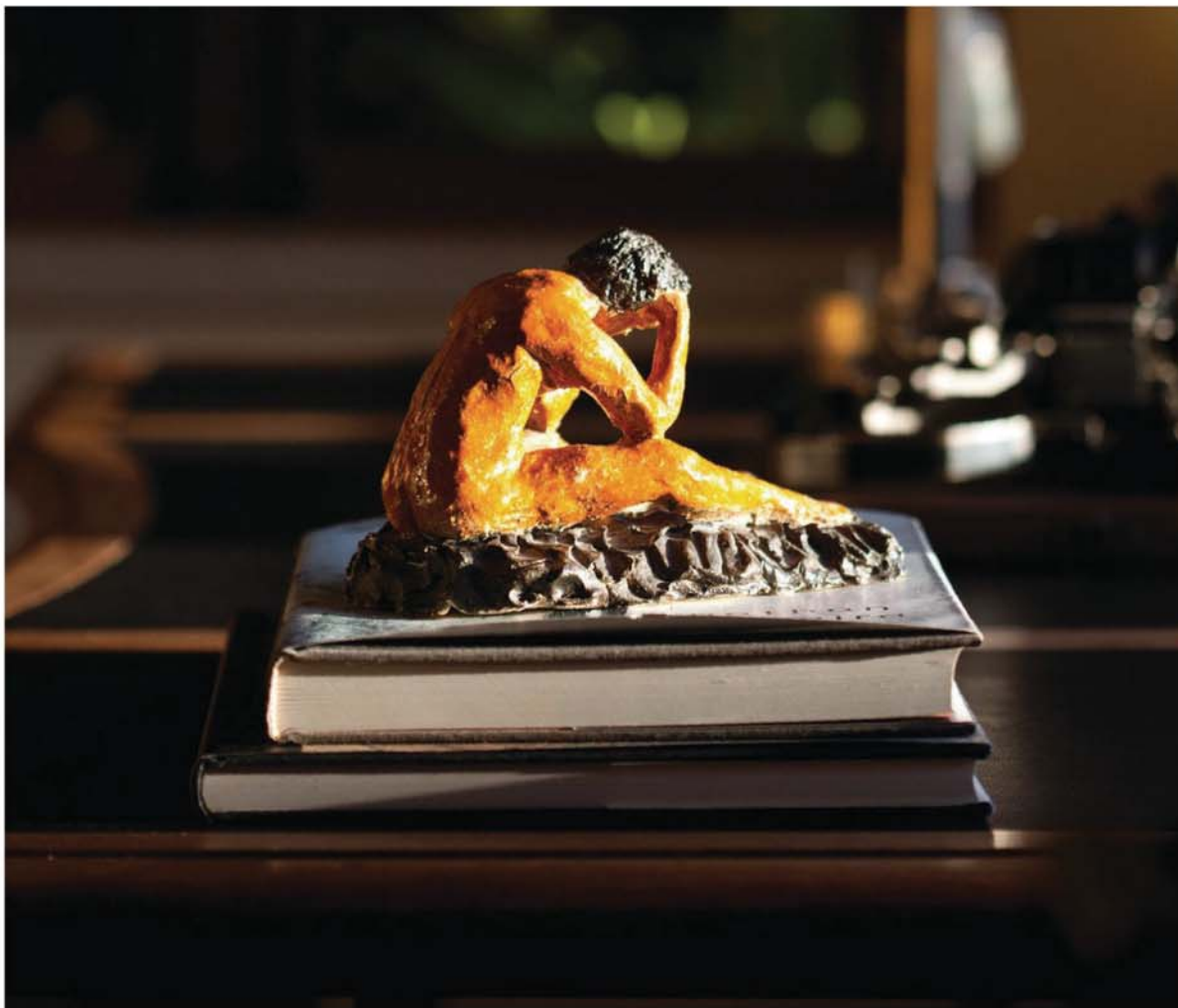
But Gordon Segal, the cofounder of Crate & Barrel and its CEO for 46 years, who has known Friedman since his Williams-Sonoma days, worries that even if all that happens, the market for Friedman's aesthetic just might not be large enough. "It's a very interesting new look, but you have to have a very big home or a very big apartment," he says. "Gary's great skill is reconceptualizing his stores, but we don't know how it will turn out."

Congenitally uninterested in the pack, Friedman is moving full steam ahead. Next month, he's opening a swanky East Hampton store, and he's begun construction on a 20,000-square-foot store in the heart of Los Angeles's design district. He is also heavily involved in the creation of a coffee table book, *Hierarchy: The Natural Order of Design*, that will codify the Resto brand's upscale look and reflect his personal design interests, which include the theories of the Roman architect Vitruvius, a master of symmetry. And he would love to one day sell French reproductions in France, England, and Spain—with Asia beckoning on the horizon.

"We're just warming up," he says. ■

**JOANNE FURIO** IS A CONTRIBUTING WRITER. FOR THIS ISSUE, SHE ALSO WROTE "OFF THE WALL" (PAGE 60).





## BACK STORY

### Right-brain CEO

**Gary Friedman**, the mind steering Restoration Hardware's bold new makeover ("**Pieces of his Mind**," page 82), is a whiz at selling, but his true gifts, which were apparent at a very young age, have always been visual. When he made this Rodin-like sculpture for an art class, he was only in seventh grade. "If I can see things, I have an almost photographic memory," says Friedman, who never pursued art formally but has always been good at sketching. "I'm just oriented that way." Now he's banking on his eye to propel the new Resto: He personally decides on all of the pieces the 91-store chain makes and sells. And to this day, Friedman's "Thinker" sits in his home office in his Belvedere residence overlooking the Golden Gate Bridge. ■

**BY JOANNE FURIO**

PHOTOGRAPH BY ALEX FARNUM