



The grand salon celebrates the musical legacy of New Orleans and Daniel Lanois' Kingsway Studio, in addition to the city's West African roots with a silvered fertility bed, and its Italian heritage with carved and gilded wooden chandeliers and the original terrazzo floor.

## Of Elegance Decadence and Music

### A New Orleans Journey

hollywood designer  
transforms renowned  
french quarter mansion

by Lisa LeBlanc-Berry  
photography by Chad Chenier

When actor Nicolas Cage purchased an historic mansion in New Orleans on Esplanade Avenue, he was scheduled to be crowned King of Bacchus XXIV in 2002. He also began directing his first movie, *Sonny*, which was partially filmed at his new French Quarter estate.

LM Pagano, Cage's in-house Hollywood designer, was put on task to redo the Esplanade Avenue mansion that was once star-producer Daniel Lanois' Kingsway Studio where Bob Dylan, Cowboy Mouth, Pearl Jam, Emmylou Harris, Sheryl Crow, and the Neville Brothers recorded. Prior to Prohibition, the elaborate abode was also the former home of Arnaud's bon vivant founder, "Count" Arnaud Casenave, and his daughter, the lusty and dramatic Germaine Wells, who presided as queen over an unprecedented 22 Carnival balls. (Her capacity for alcohol, celebration, and men was extreme.) The house had a colorful history that was decidedly New Orleans. As a jazz artist who regarded the Big Easy as her adopted home, Pagano effortlessly utilized the historical nuances.

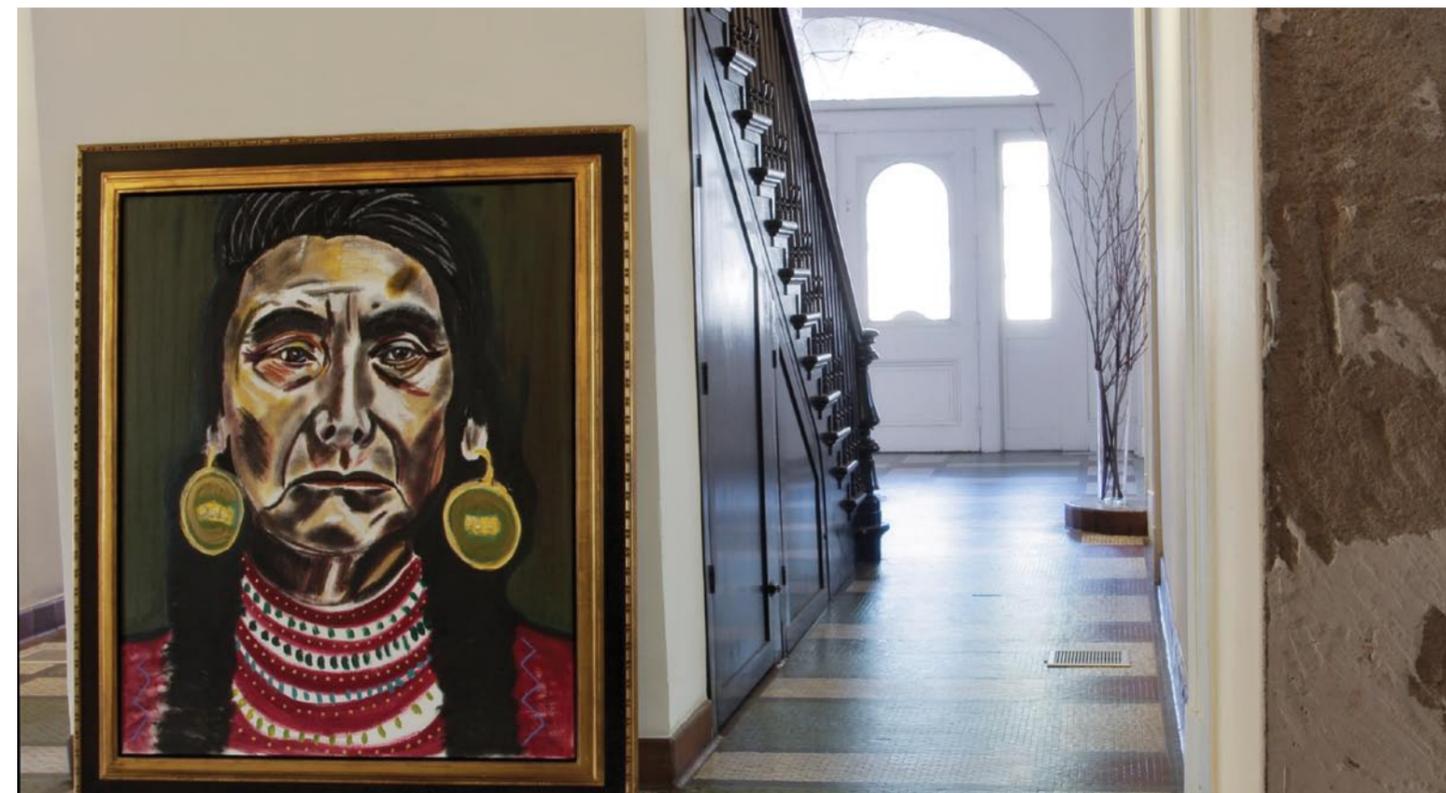
"Nic bought the house, and I needed to get it livable for him in just seven weeks over Thanksgiving and Christmas," says Pagano. "After the movie, he decided to sell the house, and Sean Cummings bought it. I had a real heart-felt connection with this house, and I didn't want to let it go."

Cummings, a New Orleans cutting-edge developer and entrepreneur who owns boutique hotels, including the International House, purchased the grand, rambling manse on Esplanade from Cage and engaged Pagano as the designer. He also had her do the redesign for his tenth anniversary of the International House following Hurricane Katrina. ▶



Opposite: The expansive rear foyer showcases paintings from Cummings' diverse art collection, inviting guests to wander through the corridors.

An 1,100-pound Swarovski cascade chandelier designed with 22,000 crystals graces the historic mansion in a bow to the city's heavy rainfall and the former, diminutive original chandelier that is now located in the master bath.



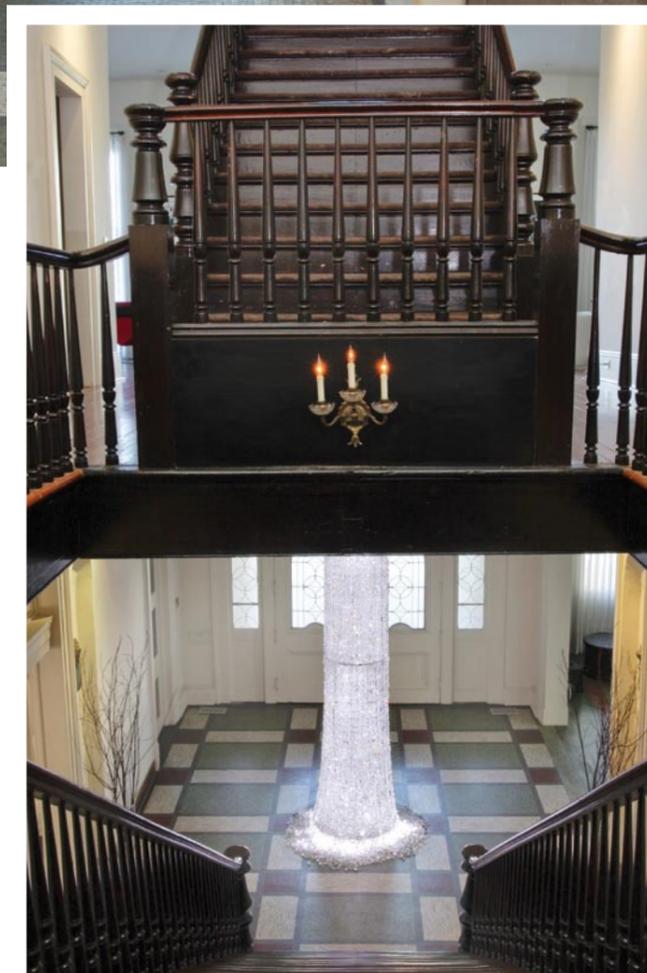
"LM is enormously talented. She has exceptional design sensibilities," Cummings says. "Her work as a private chef, in the fashion industry, and in design all comes together nicely in a place like New Orleans where we mix all of those lyrical elements. She is a very rare talent," he says.

Pagano, who recently opened a satellite design office in New Orleans on Camp Street (her main office is on Hollywood Boulevard in Los Angeles; LMPLA@AOL.COM, 323-848-8475), has a star-studded client list that includes Nicolas Cage and Johnny Depp. She is also a jazz singer (her last album was "Azalea") and is in the process of making a new album in 2009.

Pagano got her start as a jazz vocalist in her teens and by the age of 21, she was singing in all of the top L.A. clubs. With a background in art, she started designing shirts out of vintage fabrics (Bob Dylan was among her biggest clients). Then she delved into catering and became a personal chef to clients such as Harrison Ford and Steven Spielberg. "After eight years I needed a break," she confided. Through a mutual friend she heard that Nic Cage needed an assistant, and she landed the job on the spot.

Her road to becoming a designer was rather serendipitous. Cage dropped by Pagano's house one afternoon and saw its décor and asked her to design his house in Bel Air. For the next eight years, Pagano worked for Cage exclusively as an in-house designer, then for the next six years as a free agent. She completed more than a dozen redesigns for Cage, six for family members, and did two of his yachts.

Johnny Depp, whose newest film, *Public Enemies*, will be released in July, also engaged Pagano after seeing photos of Cage's motor yacht. He needed a yacht to call home during the filming of *Pirates of the Caribbean* in the Bahamas, and Pagano landed that project as well. She had only four months to complete the task for "Captain Jack Sparrow" so that he and his family could feel at home on the classic, 156-foot Vajoliroja (pronounced "va-jolly-rah-ja").





*Opposite: New Orleans vintage mirrors, an ecclesiastical bench, 19th-century Jacobean chairs, and an Italian game table add character to the home's original pub and relocated salon gasoliers.*

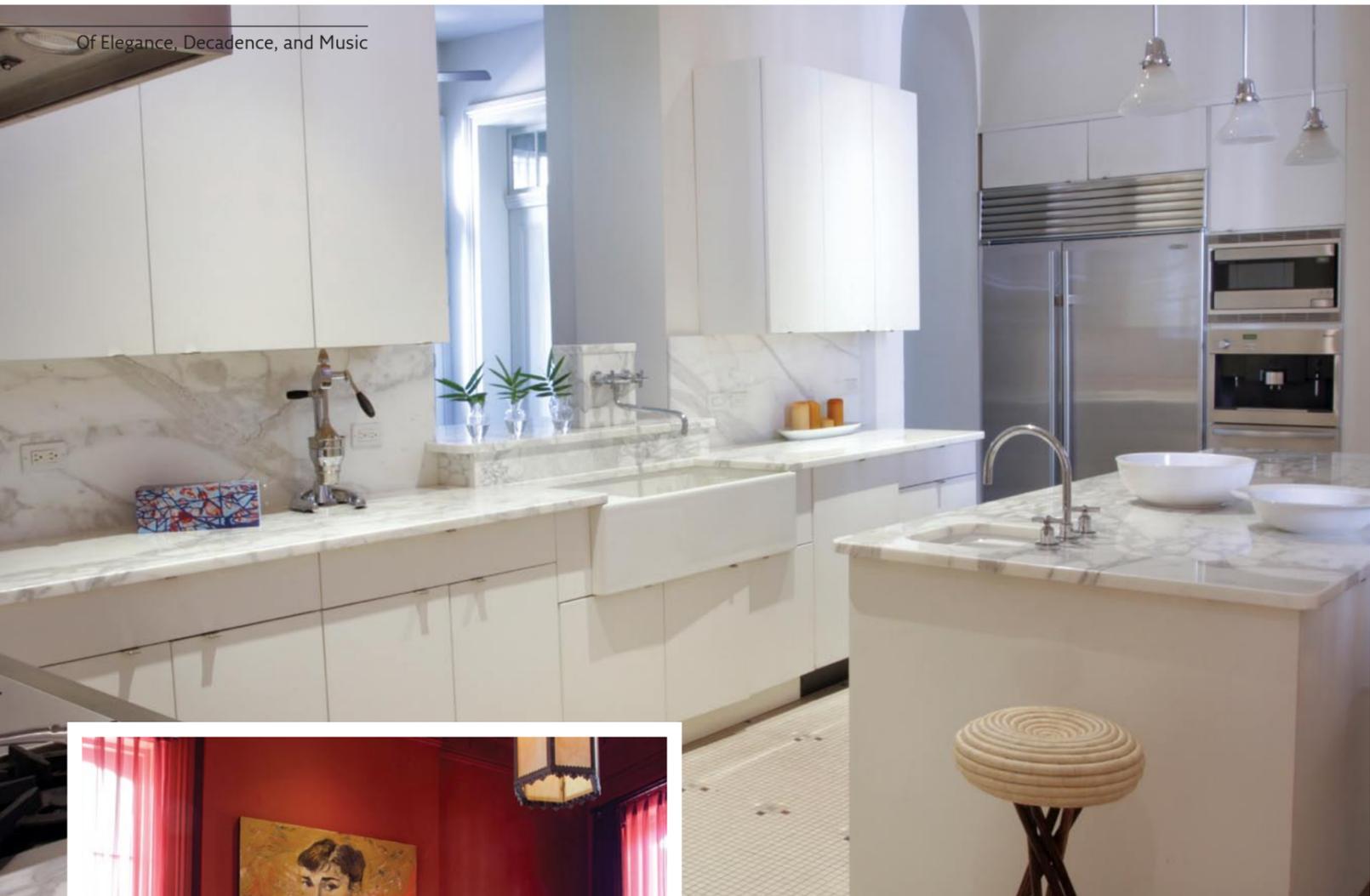
*An 18th-century Japanese lantern illuminates the rear hallway, adding luster to the patina of the original wall and its tile inset.*

"I transformed Johnny's yacht from a very conservative Edwardian interior to a complete gypsy caravan meets the Orient Express," she explains. "Johnny and I had a real dialogue about the boat. We worked on vintage textiles and the overall idea. When I worked on Nic's boat, he just said, 'You do it LM!' I have done quite a few projects like that for Nic, probably 20. Both Johnny and Nic are brilliant, multi-creative guys. Johnny is an amazing painter. I'm a Renaissance woman myself. We are similar peas in a pod."

Pagano's redesign of Depp's motor yacht, *Vajoliroja*, earned the judges's commendation Silver Award for the "Best Refit in the World" by *Boat International* magazine, which ran an exclusive cover story on the project in the March 2009 issue.

Cummings raves about the job that Pagano has done on his Esplanade Avenue mansion in the Crescent City. "I have found New Orleans to be LM's muse in a way. She used to live here," says Cummings, who is currently leading the \$294 million "Reinvent the Crescent" project by the New Orleans Building Corporation that includes the \$30 million Downriver Park project of





reinventing 4.5 miles of connected riverfront property. "I found when I bought this house that it was physically so compelling. There is an intangible spirit of the house. A lot of interesting stuff has happened here. I see myself as a custodian for a bit."

"Sean has a deep connection with the soul and spirit of New Orleans," Pagano remarks. "We share the sense of how important it is to honor a city like New Orleans. He has admirably woven a part of the history and the patina of the city into the house. I think he hired me for the patina!" she exclaims. "Sean's deep appreciation of his native roots, his position as a thoughtful innovative real estate developer, boutique hotelier, and major champion of New Orleans blended with my background in music, art, and embracing New Orleans as my 'found' home."

Aside from the luxurious appointments, one of the most dramatic elements Pagano and Cummings introduced was a 17-foot-long Swarovski cascade crystal chandelier in the foyer weighing around 1100 pounds. "We had it made in Austria," Pagano says. "We ordered it, and they sent two gentlemen for four days to build it. It's a modern nod to the grand chandeliers of New Orleans. There are only seven like this in the world."

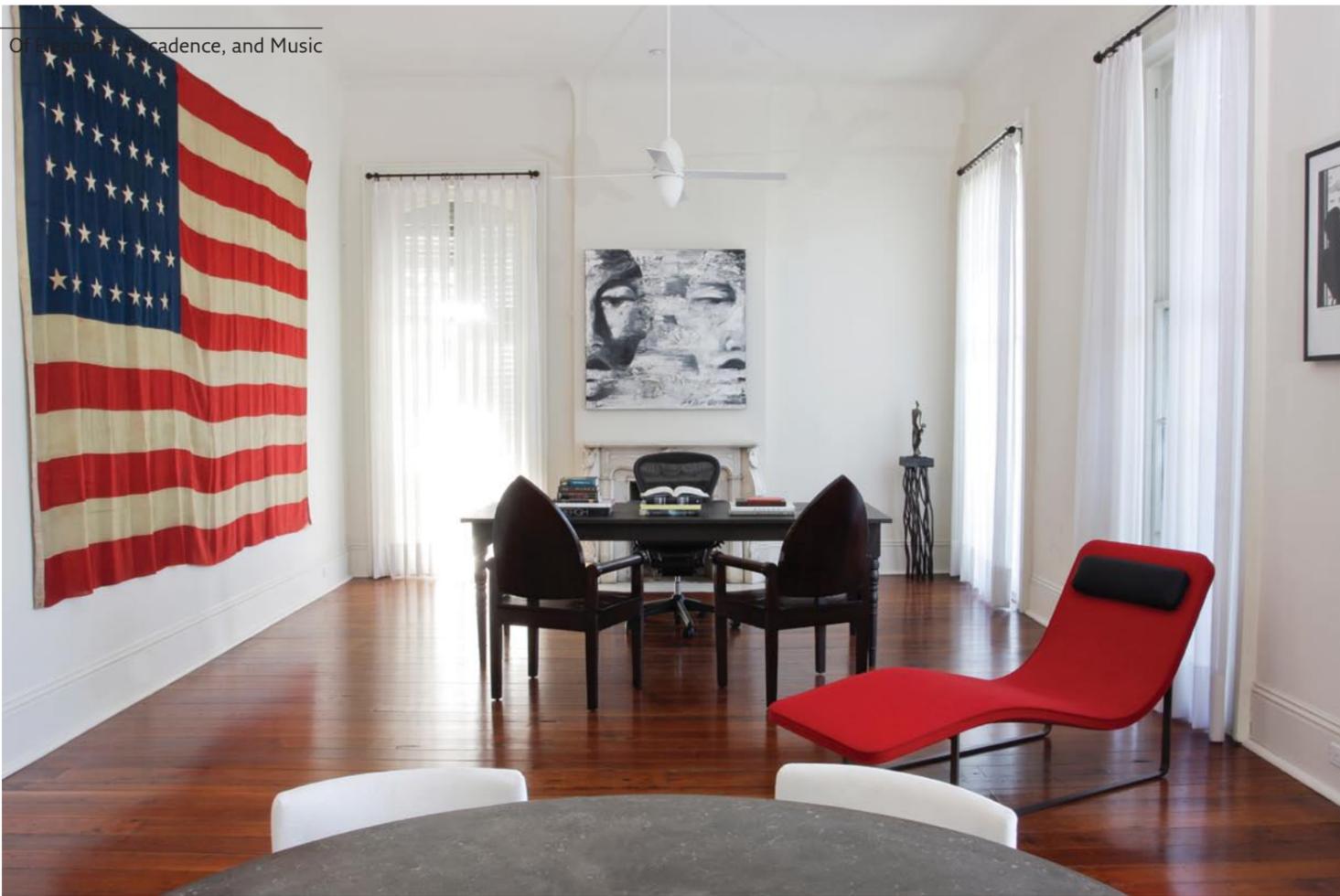
"Sean is an elegant, aesthetic guy, so even though we imported old with new, the house could not be cluttered or feel antique-laden even though there are many found and vintage pieces as



Opposite Top: The kitchen was reinvented by architect Wayne Troyer, Sean Cummings, and LM Pagano with honed Calcutta gold marble.

Opposite Bottom: The rear front parlor is embellished with LM Pagano's signature chair-and-a-half and an oversized tufted ottoman in burned black cut Fortuny velvet.

"The room monastery table was custom-made for us by a fabulous Irish artisan, Niles Burke/Kipper in Los Angeles," Pagano reveals. "Designed from 200-year-old solid walnut that was aged in the original manner, it was soaked in linseed oil and red wine and set on fire, in all manner of wondrous things."



well,” she says. “We are two people who are extraordinarily concerned with celebrating and honoring what is innately New Orleans and its jumble of historic influences, the religiosity, the constancy of crumbling elegance, the continuing musical legacy, the decadence, and the rituals.”

Pagano says that she decided to leave the architectural details original to the house by painting elaborate moldings and ceiling canopies in monochromatic tones with the walls, instead of the expected complicated color palette or gold-gilding. “We didn’t want to lose these exquisite details in a busy mix,” she remarks.

“The rooms called out to us in different, specific ways, with warm bordello reds and cozy furnishings in the lakeside intimate front parlor versus cool colors, spare and more dramatic furniture silhouettes in the grand salon such as the West African pieces, the round-a-bout, the grand piano and accompanying musical instruments, the Herman Leonard photographs of New Orleans musicians, the pool table, and the modern extrapolation of a traditional tufted parlor chair. This is the more public space of Sean’s home and also pays homage to the reign of Daniel Lanois’ legendary Kingsway Studio and the incredible musicians that recorded and stayed at the house.”

“Additionally, the house was the home of Germaine Wells and her gowns, so the notorious entertaining and liaisons are reflected in the lighting, the mirrors, and the silent invitation to wander through the party feel of the

salon and the first floor,” Pagano explains.

The plaster ceiling moldings and decorative fixture canopies along with the tile, terrazzo, and heart pine floors were restored. Some of the original fixtures to the house were relocated and referenced in a new fashion, including the Swarovski chandelier in the foyer, which was installed as a modern interpretation of the original small, slightly cascading fixture now residing in the master bathroom. The original gas salon light chandeliers are now in the barroom and the original bar was restored. A wall of various found mirrors was also installed.

A modern Italian Rubicon vanity in the powder bath is evocative of holy water vessels, in a nod to the religious elements so prevalent in New Orleans. An old multi-candle medicinal blessing stand from a defunct church was also added. On the second floor landing are dozens of glass hands reaching out of a vintage Catholic mass candle stand, a creation by New Orleans glass artist Mitchell Gaudet.

“I am elated with the way the house turned out,” Cummings says. “A lot of designers leave their fingerprints, but LM doesn’t. She leaves no tracks or fingerprints in her wake, which is pretty spectacular,” he surmises. “Besides, how could anyone not want to work with a super-hot woman who drives a Porche and dresses in Norma Kamali?” ♦

*Opposite: Top: The sleek second floor front common living area and office is appointed with a Mooii desk, antique American flag, and a modern take on a gothic chair in custom ebonized walnut. New Orleans artist David Harouni’s painting resides over the mantle.*

*Opposite Bottom Left: The serene master bedroom invites relaxation.*

*Opposite Bottom Right: The limestone master bathroom with Agape spoon tub features the relocated original chandelier that was formerly in the foyer.*

*The third floor’s recreated and relocated new bathroom was assembled by Pagano in 2001 for Nicolas Cage with architect Wayne Troyer and New Orleans contractor Hal Collums in a speedy three weeks.*