

## Real Estate

MB

Section 11

## HABITATS/The Chelsea Hotel

## A Hairstylist Colors His Apartment

By PENELOPE GREEN

"I'M not a real handy person," Gerald DeCock was saying the other day. "I'm not a builder; I'm an embellisher."

Mr. DeCock was not kidding around, or laying only vague claim to the word. He has embellished — with gusto — every single surface of his studio apartment in the Chelsea Hotel on West 23rd Street with, variously (and to name just a few materials): composite gold; silver and copper leaf; squares of colored foil; fluorescent paint; plastic Mardi Gras beads; old album covers; Sharpies; beauty images torn from magazines; postcards from friends; and plastic swords from a 99-cent store. In a building not known for its slackers in over-the-top statements, Mr. DeCock has made his home into the grandest of gestures. And it's

only a rental.

"People ask me how I can wake up to all this every day," Mr. DeCock said. "But I love it. All this color puts me in a fantastic mood, and I am grateful for it every day."

Like most things in New York, getting into the Chelsea is about whom you know. Mr. DeCock, a hairstylist, is friends with Suza Scalora, a fashion photographer and a Chelsea Hotel tenant for 14 years (she moved out last year). Almost 11 years ago, Mr. DeCock had moved back to New York from Paris and was living in a "very scary" apartment on Weehawken Street in the West Village.

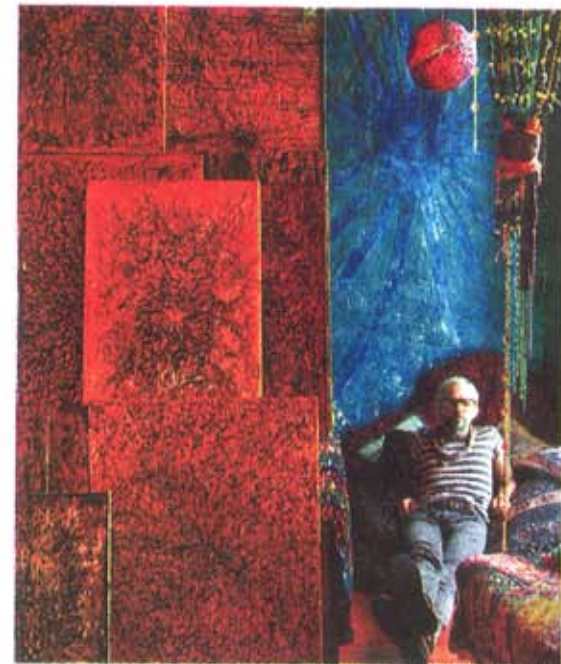
The Chelsea Hotel apartment, a few doors away from Ms. Scalora's, had recently been vacated. Mr. DeCock said it had mostly belonged to George Kleinsinger, the composer of "Tubby the Tuba," who died in 1982, and Mr. Klein-

singer's wife, along with a menagerie of snakes and other creatures. It had been a hotel room for about a year — Anthony Kiedis of the Red Hot Chili Peppers had stayed here — before Mr. DeCock moved in.

The apartment was completely white, Mr. DeCock said, when he took possession. He began with the brick wall, spending his first month covering it with gold leaf (leaf likes a smooth surface, so this task, Mr. DeCock said, was mixed with blood, sweat and tears). "It was very messy," he said. "I really like to use my hands."

Mr. DeCock, who is also a painter, uses hair-dye brushes, squeeze bottles and eyedroppers to make his Day-Glo canvases, which look sort of like metallic Spin Art and are stacked about the apartment, nearly indistinguishable

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Cary Conner for The New York Times

#### UNDER THE RAINBOW

Gerald DeCock in his highly embellished studio apartment in the Chelsea Hotel. "People ask me how I can wake up to all this every day," Mr. DeCock said. "But I love it. All this color puts me in a fantastic mood."

# A Hairstylist Colors His Apartment

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from the worked-over walls.

When the brick wall was finished, the rest of the apartment began to bloom — color, glitter and leaf seeping slowly over the floors, which are orange; the walls, which are rainbow; and the ceiling, which is hot pink, Mr. DeCock's favorite color. He didn't block out the space, or hatch a master plan. It just sort of happened.

"I was like Richard Dreyfuss in 'Close Encounters,'" Mr. DeCock said, "building that mountain everywhere, lord knows why."

At the Chelsea Hotel, renting is equivalent to a tenured position at an Ivy League college, a kind of golden (spangled?) handcuff. Stanley Bard, the managing director since the 1960's of this 19th-century grande dame — and who turned 71, he said proudly, last Thursday — handpicks his tenants like a club impresario at the velvet rope. "I want them to be here," he said, "I want them to stay forever."

There is no waiting list, he said, "but we go through great expense and detail to decide whether someone would be good for the hotel."

"A Gerald or a Sally, or a friend of Sally's, we value," he added, referring to Sally Singer, the fashion news editor of *Vogue* magazine, who moved with her husband and three children out of the Chelsea, where she'd been a tenant for years, into a town house in Red Hook, Brooklyn, in 2003 — only to return last fall. "I knew she would come back," Mr. Bard said. "They always do."

Of the 250 units, about half are hotel rooms these days, Mr. Bard said, "though my stockholders would like there to be more." Mr. Bard knows that the hotel's value is directly tied to the human capital inhabiting the rental units, which have reportedly been leased for between \$1,500 and \$5,000 a month (Mr. Bard declined to give a range of rental prices).

The largest units are classic sixes, he said. Mr. DeCock pays \$2,700 a month for his 10th-floor apartment, which includes two

## ON THE WEB

An audio interview with Gerald DeCock and more photos: [nytimes.com/realstate](http://nytimes.com/realstate)

rooftop gardens.

The roof gardens of the Chelsea are spread out over two levels and look like the backyards in "Rear Window," teeming with plant and human life. It wasn't until this year that Mr. DeCock began to work on his. "I don't have much of a green thumb," he said. So his best friend, Ariane Canas, helped him plant boxes of "viney things": Virginia creepers, honeysuckle and a trumpet vine now playing in a spectacular rich orange.

Mr. DeCock, 46, is the seventh of 11 children; he grew up in a suburb outside Denver. "It's a great thing to be from such a big family," he said. "You strive to be an individual."

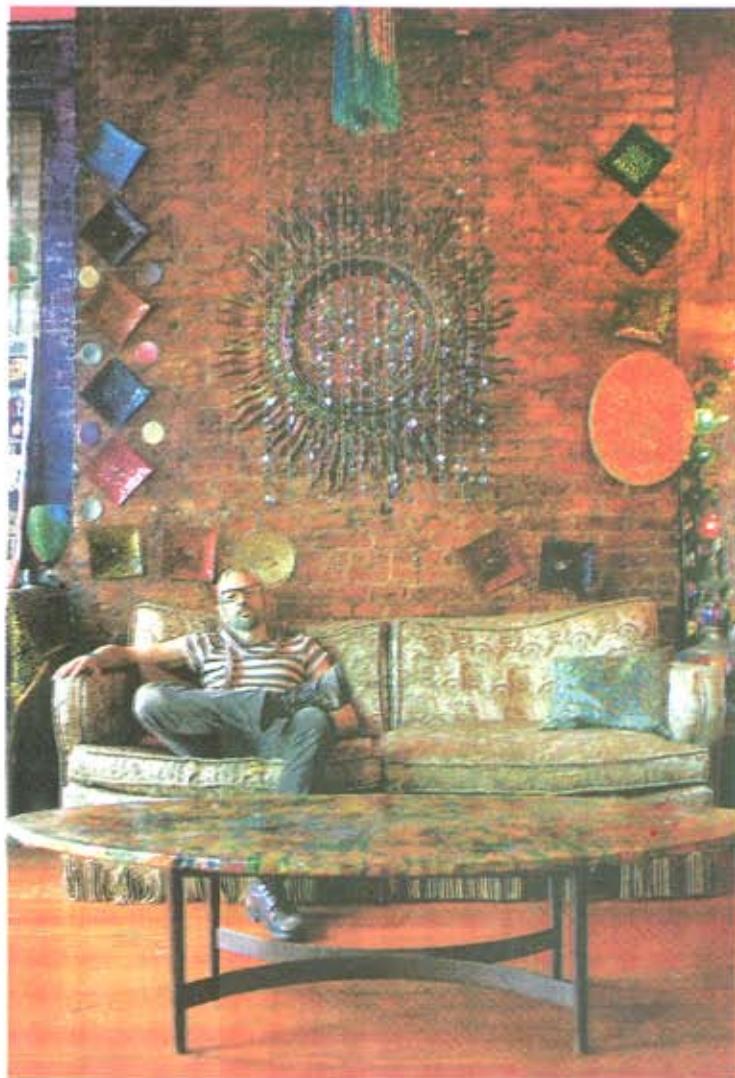
He is thrifty man who buys only second-hand. "I've never owned a pair of blue jeans or cargo pants or Nikes," he said, glancing down at his thrift-shop pajama pants and scuffed leather boots.

The 26th Street flea market is his department store, from which he fur-

nished his entire apartment, from the slippery bronze nylon "damask" couch to the wooden chair shaped like a cupped hand, which he has covered in gold leaf.

Professionally, his style can be more romantic than glam, reminiscent of a time when Stevie Nicks was a witchy female avatar beloved by 14-year-old girls instead of a poignant drag icon.

Along with his print work for the more adventurous fashion magazines, like *Italian Vogue* and *V*, Mr. DeCock has styled album



Photographs by Cary Garver for The New York Times

## MR. EMBELLISHER

Gerald DeCock in his studio apartment in the Chelsea Hotel on West 23rd Street, which he has decorated with his artwork and many other materials, including composite gold; silver and copper leaf; colored foil; fluorescent paint; plastic Mardi Gras beads; old album covers; and beauty images torn from magazines.



someone's home, be treated like a guest and have a great conversation." (Mr. DeCock declined to reveal how much he charges for a cut.)

On a recent, sultry summer morning, the Chelsea was as improbably, loopy, and resolutely bohemian as ever. In a decade when a new, slick boutique hotel is seemingly born each month (each archly chic place indistinguishable from the others, with their poured concrete bathrooms, well-moisturized 20-something starlet clientele and zany hall lighting), it is refreshing to be stared down or barked at by a borderline personality sharing one of the Chelsea's creaky, confoundingly slow elevators.

The 10th floor is residents only. Thirty-one-inch Plexiglas discs printed in Day-Glo colors with portraits of Malcolm X, Dwight D. Eisenhower and Klaus Kinski — the art-

ist is Arthur Weinstein, who has lived on the second floor for 11 years, his second ground, he said — are hung from the broad skylight over the stairwell, an enormous mobile for a precocious pop baby.

Mr. DeCock's apartment is approached by its own staircase, the walls of which are collaged with album covers from the 1970's, magazine tear sheets and test shots from his own work, as well as postcards and family photographs, covered with clear packing tape. A friend had suggested using shellac or polyurethane, he said, "but I wanted immediate gratification, so I used tape."

The tape is kinked in places, which tricks the eye into thinking rivulets of water are pouring over all those images. Mr. DeCock has colorized some of the pictures, or embellished them with Sharpies, gold leaf or paint.

It is a huge — and very permanent — kind of self portrait, a memoir on a wall, another story written on the century-old plaster of the Chelsea.

"Everything is permanent, which is unfortunate because I can't take it with me," Mr. DeCock said, not altogether unhappily.