

# THE WORLD OF INTERIORS

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## RIGHT TO ROME

The Eternal City is no easy market for new art. Sauro Bocchi had already sold two homes to keep his gallery afloat when he decided to merge his domestic and exhibition spaces and found himself renovating his new home – in the Palazzo Pamphili. Elizabeth Helman Minchilli discovered an ideal blend of contemporary ingenuity and Renaissance grandeur. Photography: Simon Upton





PREVIOUS PAGES: A SEVENTIES SOFA HAS BEEN RE-COVERED IN RED BROCADE; THE PAINTING IS BY EMILIO PRINI, THE GLASS VASE BY LUIGI STRAFFI. TOP LEFT AND TOP RIGHT: THE APARTMENT IS A SHOWROOM FOR PAINTERS, INCLUDING MICHELE LOSTIA AND ROBERTO DE SIMONE; THE SEVENTIES 'HAND' TABLE IS BY NATALINI. ABOVE: ONE OF THE OVAL WINDOWS. OPPOSITE: THE FLOOR WAS CLEANED TO REVEAL CHECKERBOARD TILES

Since the centre of Rome masquerades as an open-air museum of archaeological artefacts, Renaissance wonders and Baroque extravaganzas, it is not surprising that even private homes mutate into art galleries. Frescoed walls, ancient foundations and soaring ceilings turn even the humblest of abodes into works of art themselves.

Sauro Bocchi, however, has taken things one step further. Leaving behind his traditional, ground-floor gallery of contemporary art, he has retired into his attic apartment where living room, bedroom and even bathroom have become the showroom for cutting-edge Roman artists. 'Once you have a gallery, it's hard to give it up,' admits Bocchi, whose Studio Bocchi closed in 1992. After receiving a law degree and working for his family's firm in Modena for several years, Bocchi returned to school to study art history. 'I came to Rome in the mid-Eighties with very specific ideas,' he explains. 'I knew I wanted to open a gallery, but I didn't want to be merely a merchant. Instead, I sought out younger artists who were creating new languages. And it was through these alternative means of communication that a real dialogue emerged.'

Unfortunately, while the shows were acclaimed critically, the financial rewards left a lot to be desired. 'Rome is horrible as an art market,' says a disillusioned Bocchi. 'After selling two homes just to keep the gallery afloat, I said "Basta!" Enough! This stupidity has got to end.' Yet abandoning the art world completely was not an option. His solution was to merge his living and working spaces, creating exhibitions from the comfort of his home.

'Of course, the first hurdle was finding the appropriate space,' he says. His previous apartment, on the 16th-century Via Giulia, was suitably elegant but far too cramped to exhibit in. From a good friend, part of the Doria Pamphili clan, Bocchi heard of a space for rent in the family palace, centrally located off Piazza Venezia. 'I thought it was a bit strange that the apartment had been available for so long - two years - since there is a long waiting list for any apartment in the palace,' says Bocchi.







TOP LEFT AND TOP RIGHT: BOCCHI WAS KEEN TO RETAIN OLD GLASS IN THE OVAL WINDOWS FOR THE RESULTANT QUALITY OF LIGHT; PALAZZO VENEZIA IS SEEN THROUGH THE WINDOW ON THE LEFT. ABOVE: A FABRIC COLLAGE MADE BY GLORIA PASTORE FROM PIECES OF ANTIQUE SILK. OPPOSITE: THE GLASS DOOR IN BOCCHI'S BATHROOM WAS ETCHED BY ANDREA FOGLI; LIGHT POURS IN THROUGH THE CUT-OUT FIGURE OF A WOMAN

Bocchi. 'However, one room had a Neoclassical decorative fresco on the ceiling, while some of the other rooms revealed traces of rather elaborate painted skirting boards.' These details, including the perfectly intact 17th-century wooden doorways throughout the apartment, hinted at a grander use than mere servants' quarters.

And so the walls were 'restored' back to their original colours. 'I was more interpretive than restorative,' admits Bocchi. The furnishings are as eclectic as the art that he shows. Sleek pieces from the Fifties and Seventies mix with rustic 18th- and 19th-century works. 'I used what I had,' says Bocchi, who ransacked his mother's storage in his hometown of Modena for many of the 20th-century pieces. His artists too played their part in furnishing his flat. Anton Rocca designed the massive copper tub located in a hallway off the master bedroom. Chloti Ricciardi, better known for her sculptures, painted a fresco onto the cement floor of the master bath. A work on fabric by Eliza Montessori snakes its way from the master bed up the wall and across the ceiling to create a type of canopy.

'The built-in pieces by the artists remain the same, of course, and the exhibitions I put on mean that the artwork on the walls is a constant presence,' says Bocchi. 'I have to admit, however, that my favourite "works" are the ones that have always been here,' he says, pointing to the strange floor-level oval-shaped windows that illuminate the apartment. And while all Romans play 'my view's better than your view', Bocchi's views are indeed special.

The small scale of each window, and their oval shape, frames each view to painting size. Each 'composition' is different: the heavy cornice of Palazzo Venezia with the Victor Emmanuel monument looming in the background; the massive cupola of the Baroque church of the Gesù softened by the branches of a tree from a nearby garden. 'When I wake up in the mornings and see that cupola from my bed,' says Bocchi, 'I am immediately happy, no matter what the day, or the art world, may bring' ■

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TOP LEFT AND TOP RIGHT: THE KITCHEN, WITH ITS MIX OF OLD AND NEW FURNITURE; BOCCHI ADDED A SKYLIGHT TO THE WINDOWLESS ROOM. ABOVE: IN THE BATHROOM IS A MIRROR BY FONTANA ARTE FROM THE FIFTIES AND A BATHTUB BY ANTON ROCCA. OPPOSITE: THE HEADBOARD IS DESIGNED BY ELIZA MONTESSORI, AND THE SIDE TABLE IS A 17TH-CENTURY OAK KNEELING BENCH; THE LAMP DATES FROM THE SEVENTIES

Once he had seen it, though, he understood the fear it had instilled in prospective tenants. 'The floors and walls were a uniform, grungy grey. There was no heating, one extremely minimal bath and the only light came through floor-level windows, half of which were broken. In other words, a complete wreck. But exactly what I was looking for.' Palazzo Pamphili is a listed building, so work was inhibited by certain restrictions. However, this was all in keeping with Bocchi's plans. 'What I really wanted to do was liberate the soul of the place, what it was originally, or what it could have been.' Structural changes were minimal. The original small bath was enlarged, another added next to the master bedroom, heating and lighting brought in and, of course, a kitchen installed. 'In the kitchen we punched a skylight through the roof, to bring light to the windowless room, but otherwise I kept it all as it was.'

One of Bocchi's first tasks was to clean the floors. Working tile by tile, with steel wool and sandpaper, he chipped off decades of grime to reveal dramatic red and black tiles laid down in a checkerboard pattern throughout the apartment. And while the irregular surface of the 19th-century flooring meant that it could only be polished by hand, its undulating surface was just what Bocchi craved.

The oval windows located at floor level along the front of the apartment were another architectural feature that Bocchi wanted to emphasise. 'It would have made more sense, I guess, to replace all the glass with double-glazed, soundproof panes,' says Bocchi, 'but I love the way the old glass looks, rippling the light as it comes through and bounces off the floors.' So, to the flea markets it was, in search of old windows whose glass could be re-cut to replace the broken bits in his own apartment.

The walls presented a different set of problems. While most art galleries are painted a blinding white to set off the paintings, Bocchi knew this wouldn't do. Scraping down the walls revealed tantalising bits of colours from the apartment's mysterious history. 'In theory the attic floors in these palaces were reserved for the servants,' explains



