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The first-floor drawing room, with its Gothic bookcases and jute flooring, comfortably combines traditional and modern elements. A pair of Victorian armchairs is covered in C&C silk; the grey-flannel-covered sofa is from Andrew Martin. A drawing by Kandinsky hangs above a Vietnamese lacquer cube from Nom

## A PASSION FOR CHANGE

In his London house, an Italian interior decorator shows the latest developments of his evolving style

TEXT DOMINIC BRADBURY PHOTOGRAPHS MARK LUSCOMBE-WHYTE



For Nico Castellini-Baldissera, his new London home is an exercise in restraint. Minimalists might raise an eyebrow at the vibrant splashes of colour and elegant mix of English, Italian and Oriental influences, but for Nico this is a step towards simplicity, a pared-down version of his flamboyant, eclectic style.

'My previous houses have always been much more richly decorated, and packed with objects, ceramics and books. But I wanted something a little calmer this time, a little more practical.'

The Milanese-born interior designer and his wife, Allegra di Carpegna – an actress, who made her name in Merchant Ivory's *Surviving Picasso* – bought their Georgian town house last summer. It has taken Nico six months to get it right: there was no major structural work to be done, but the house cried out for redecorating from top to bottom, the layers of chintz removed and replaced with something more chic.

Nico has now lived in London for over a decade. He came to England to study history of art first with Christie's and later with Sotheby's, but decided not to return to Italy to finish his degree. Instead, pursuing a long-term interest in interior design, he began a career here, working initially for friends. Since then commissions have taken him regularly to France, Switzerland and also back to Italy. Nico's own home combines the influence of his Italian heritage with a very of-the-moment approach to colour and fabrics, carefully coordinating Vietnamese, Chinese and Japanese pieces with more ornate family pieces and artwork.

Downstairs Nico opened up the dining room and adjoining kitchen with additional doorways to the hall. He reclaimed the parquet floor from under a layer of lino and unified the space by painting it all Farrow & Ball 'Straw'. To this neutral base in the dining room, he added a red nineteenth-century Chinese cabinet and an ornate pair of wrought-iron console tables found in a junk shop, with gilt mirrors above. The burgundy tablecloth and gauze and linen curtains designed by Nico are from C&C – the Italian fabric company founded three years ago by his father, architect and designer Piero Castellini-Baldissera, and his cousin.

'My father originally thought of C&C almost as a hobby, a sideline to his other work, but it has grown much larger than anticipated,' says Nico. 'The linens are traditional fabrics inspired by Mediterranean colours – warm, sunburnt colours.' C&C now has showrooms and franchises across Italy, and Nico is planning to set up a London showroom in the future.

C&C fabrics are also used in the sitting room upstairs, reached via a rich red stairway, to add a sense of warmth: the vermilion of the armchairs, for instance, and the vibrant stripe used to cover the pair of *chauffeuse* chairs found in Paris, which flank the simple, modern fireplace slotted neatly into the wall.

'When I started furnishing the house, I wanted something extremely minimal next to these Louis XV *chauffeuse* chairs – chairs which, as the name implies, were made for sitting by a fireplace. I didn't want a typical chimneypiece, so I came up

ABOVE Two views of the drawing room, with a Forties portrait of Nico's grandmother, and a pair of Louis XV *chauffeuse* chairs. BELOW Curtains of Indian gauze inset with a linen panel filter light in the warm-hued dining room. Walls are painted 'Straw' by Farrow & Ball. On a late-nineteenth-century Chinese cabinet stands a stuffed monkey. The wrought-iron console tables came from a junk shop in Notting Hill







with this. I like that contrast between the simple and the ornate.'

Vietnamese red lacquer cubes – doubling as miniature bookcases and coffee tables – and Chinese ceramics blend with furniture from Nicolo's mother and his grandmother, whose portrait hangs by the doorway to the hall. A fake zebra-skin rug injects a touch of drama – as do the sandstone pinnacle lamp, and the Gothick-style bookcases installed by the previous owners.

'I love bookcases and books,' Nicolo says. 'I buy books wherever I go. My ultimate dream is to have a square room, with one window overlooking a garden, lined top to bottom with books. Nothing else.'

Creams and whites for walls and woodwork, plus jute flooring, create a tranquil backdrop for furniture and paintings – including pictures by Kandinsky, Anish Kapoor and Lucio Fontana. Through the glass doorway, the crimson landing glows as a flash of colour.

A focus of attention in the main bedroom is a painting of Allegra by Emma Foale, while a Modigliani drawing of the artist's English mistress, Beatrice Hastings, hangs between the windows. Japanese bamboo matting underfoot and two sections of a large Japanese chest of drawers either side of the bed have a warm sheen that complements the 'sunburnt' colours of the bed linen and curtains. Only as you realize the diversity of all these elements do you recognize the value of an eye that can bring them together seamlessly, without a jolt.

'I suppose I've had a passion for design since I was about fourteen,' says Nicolo. 'It's something I have always enjoyed; and I still do' □  
Contact Nicolo Castellini-Baldissera on 07767-420742. C&C, Milan (tel: 00-39-02-780257)

OPPOSITE Nicolo designed the table in the hall – veneered in pewter and copper. THIS PAGE ABOVE In the main bedroom, the portrait of Allegra is by Emma Foale. BELOW A medley of small pictures in the spare bedroom hang on brown-paper-covered walls

