

HOUSE & GARDEN

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Imperial OUTPOST

Decked out in splendid purples and luxurious textiles, and with idiosyncratic juxtapositions of objects and furniture, this Belgravia flat has been decorated by its Italian interior designer owner as a guest annexe

TEXT DOMINIC BRADBURY
PHOTOGRAPHS MARK LUSCOMBE-WHYTE



ALL PICTURES The demilune table (this picture) in the sitting room is an English, George III piece; the red velvet-covered armchair was found in a Paris flea market. The room, painted in Farrow & Ball's 'Mouse's Back', is home to eclectic artworks including Ann Carrington's horns (top), made from bone-handled knives. A Hiroshi Sugimoto photograph (bottom) based on mathematical forms hangs above William Sweetlove's Red Dog



It may be small, but interior designer Nicolo Castellini Baldissera's London pied-à-terre is exquisitely formed. The one-bedroom flat in Cadogan Square is a powerful assembly of vibrant tableaux and deep, rich colours with an individual mix of period finds and family pieces sourced in Nicolo's native Italy, as well as furniture designed by Nicolo himself.

For Nicolo and his wife, Allegra di Carpegna, the modest flat on one floor of a Victorian house usually serves as a guest annexe for visiting family and friends – an outpost from the family house nearby where they live with their two young children. But it is also a treasure trove, a repository for cherished pieces and artwork that have not yet found their moment in Nicolo's other homes.

'Paintings and furniture do get moved around and between our homes constantly, as I travel between London, Paris and Italy,' says Nicolo, who has residential projects for clients spread





The study (left) is dominated by a large Chinese screen (this picture) bought in Pimlico Road; Nicolo designed the low-backed, velvet-covered sofa. A clock once owned by Tony Duquette, bought at a Christie's auction in Los Angeles, sits on the window sill (bottom left)



The intense colours of the flat's three principal rooms act as a backdrop to the owner's eclectic collections



across Europe. 'Things are always changing.'

The intense colours of each of the flat's three principal rooms – from the rich grey/green of the sitting room to the seductive aubergine of the bedroom – act as a robust backdrop for Nicolo's eclectic collections. In the sitting room alone, a clear autobiography is laid out if one cares to look deep enough.

There are a number of Italian and family pieces, including Italian armchairs upholstered in fabrics drawn from the family company, C&C Milano, where Nicolo's architect father, Piero Castellini Baldissera, works as an artistic director and runs the company alongside his cousin Emanuele. A pair of pier glasses either side of the chimney breast once belonged to Allegra's grandmother, while a pair of porcelain horses once owned by Nicolo's Italian grandmother stand either side of an Anish Kapoor watercolour bought to celebrate the birth of his son. Other artworks by William Sweetlove, Hiroshi Sugimoto and Ann Carrington – who made the striking horn sculpture in the Plexiglass box frame above the chimneypiece – join the mix.

Nicolo grew up in Milan, part of a family of architects and designers. His great-grandfather on his mother's side was the much-respected Milanese architect Piero Portaluppi. 'But my father's father was a banker and so were his father and grandfather,' says Nicolo. 'So the family were really split between the creative side and banking. I am creative, but I also come from this solid business heritage – it's a good combination.'

As a child, Nicolo was immersed in a world of design and rich interiors. The vibrant colours of the Seventies and the unusual combinations and contrasts within certain rooms made a big impression on him as he was growing up in Italy. 'I will never forget my grandmother's entrance hall, which had orange walls, a Louis XVI desk and a Cassina chair covered in orange vinyl, all sitting on a chocolate-coloured carpet,' he says.

Like his father, Nicolo is an admirer of David Hicks, particularly his adventurous use of colour. And although his own work is much more restrained, Nicolo is also an admirer of the theatricality of Tony Duquette; a clock once owned by Duquette sits on the window sill in the study.

'Duquette was a great decorator, and certainly flamboyant,' says Nicolo. 'He was a cousin of Allegra's grandmother. I met him shortly before he died and admired his work, although I would never be able to go that far. He was extremely creative.'

Despite his Italian upbringing, Nicolo also has a long relationship with London. He came to study at Sotheby's at the age of 18, and began working as an interior designer shortly afterwards. It was here that he also met Allegra, a painter and actress with an American-Italian background, who first made her name

in the Merchant Ivory film *Surviving Picasso*.

He bought the flat from a Colefax and Fowler designer, who had introduced elements such as the French chimneypiece in the sitting room and the bookcases in the study. The flat offered a perfect backdrop to experiment with colour and the characterful interiors at which Nicolo excels.

In the study, a low-backed sofa designed by Nicolo and covered in a papal purple velvet sits beneath a large Chinese screen that dominates the room. In the bedroom, Nicolo used C&C Milano fabrics to upholster the bed, while a picture of a forest scene by Adam Ball, entitled *Hansel and Gretel*, stands out against the aubergine walls. Above it is an elaborately carved, eighteenth-century Italian bracket supporting a collection of miniature blue china dogs.

It is these original combinations, created with a learned eye for composition, colour and notes of tongue-in-cheek whimsy, that give even this modestly proportioned flat a life of its own □

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The hallway (top left) leads into the bedroom (remaining pictures), which is painted a deep aubergine colour - 'Brinjal' by Farrow & Ball. The round mirror below the console table (this picture) was bought in Camden Passage. The picture above the bed (bottom left) is *Hansel and Gretel* by Adam Ball