

THE WORLD OF INTERIORS

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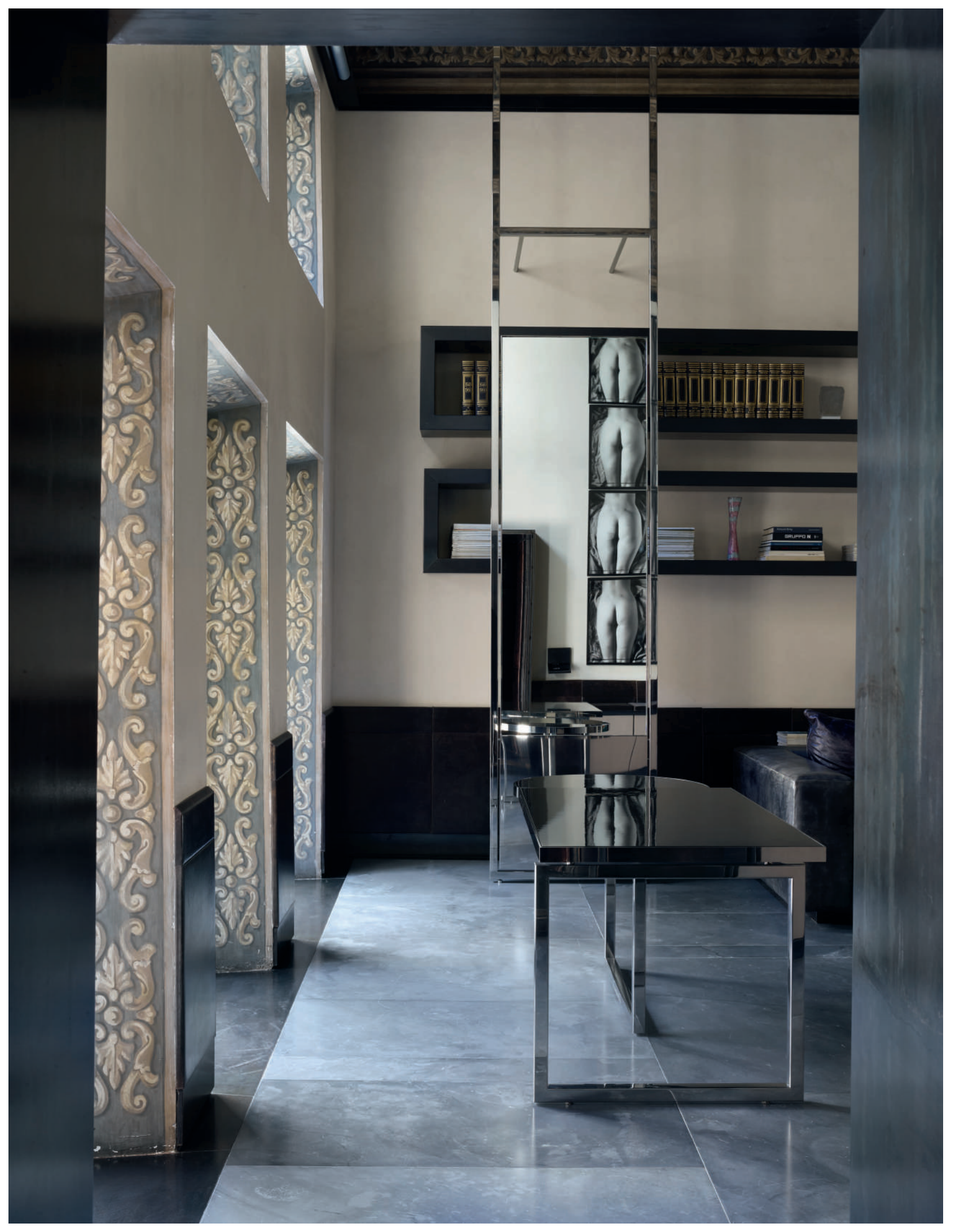


KNOBS

When Guja du Chêne de Vère called on collaborators Lazzarini Pickering Architetti to divide up her vast apartment, housed in an ancient Roman palazzo, the jewellery designer had one stipulation: no handles, switches or other protrusions should distract the eye from the acres of marble and superb postwar Italian art on view. Job emphatically done – but then how on earth does Marella Caracciolo Chia gain entry? Photography: Simon Upton

OFF

Top: the inner courtyard of the late 16th-century palazzo, designed by Giacomo della Porta, has all its original decorations still in place. Opposite: the minimal hallway, with Pietro Consagra's fiery iron sculpture, looks like the entrance to a shrine. Slabs of raw iron cover the dado, while the silk panels above contribute to the hushed atmosphere. LPA designed the chairs for Marta Sala Editions



Opposite: all the painted decorations and the coffered ceiling in the studio are again original 16th-century. The strip of hand-printed hide covering the dado is from Bordini Leathers in Bologna, and the photos reflected in the mirror are by Gabriele Basilico. Below: two metals comprise the kitchen – stainless steel for the custom-made breakfast bar and raw iron for the vertical panels at the rear



The sense of displacement, as one approaches this contemporary home ensconced in a 16th-century Roman palazzo, begins at the main entrance, where the familiar elements one expects to find are nowhere to be seen. Figuring out how to get beyond the monolithic slab of raw iron, encased within a thick cornice of hand-carved travertine of the finest quality, is like being subjected to an IQ test. As questions start firing up in the brain – prosaic stuff like where the heck is the doorbell, what about

a doorknob, and am I even in the right place? – the iron slab clicks open, as if by magic. A handsome woman with blonde hair and intense black eyes appears. She leads the way into a hushed hallway that feels like the entrance to a shrine.

Guja du Chêne de Vère may have inherited her name from a French ancestor who made a fortune in late 19th-century Italy through billboard advertising, but says she feels thoroughly Italian. Her museum-quality collection of the nation's postwar abstract art, part of

which she acquired long before its comeback, gives the measure of her taste. As a designer, she employs the lost-wax technique to make jewellery. According to Claudio Lazzarini and Carl Pickering, the architects who helped her realise this home – by no means their first collaboration – Guja is meticulous in her planning, building and decorating. 'She will stop at nothing,' Carl explains, 'to achieve a classical sense of harmony and proportions.'

The story of Guja and her Roman home began in 2000, a time in her life, she says,





when she was eager to take on an ambitious project. She and her then husband, plus their two young sons, were living in a plush flat in the leafy residential quarter Parioli. 'But I wanted to go back to the essence of Rome,' says Guja, 'absorb its light, touch its stones and feel the presence of the Tiber slowly flowing by.' She zoomed in on Via Giulia, the road designed by Bramante for Pope Julius II. And specifically, on a whopping 600-square-metre apartment tucked into a palazzo built by Giacomo della Porta, one of Michelangelo's assistants, that had come up for sale.

As she always does before embarking on a new venture, Guja called her friend Claudio. The two had met in 1980 when she was part of Fendi's PR team and he was designing the scenographies of the brand's fashion shows. Two years later Claudio and Carl, who are now married, founded Lazzarini Pickering Architetti (LPA), their Rome-based studio (*VoI* Dec 2015). A quick glimpse at their website will give a sense of the versatility of their work, from historic restorations and museums to high-tech skyscrapers; cosmopolitan restaurants and hotels to secluded retreats in the depths of the Umbrian forests.

'The starting point in Guja's apartment,' says Claudio, 'was the genius loci. After all, this area is home to some of the most visionary examples of early Renaissance architecture.' Taking their cue from the splendours of Palazzo Farnese, Palazzo Spada or the Villa Farnesina just across the river, they stripped out the heavy-handed redundancies of recent renovations: cheap reproductions of ancient *cotto* tiles, layers of faux-marble paintwork and pastiche decorations on the ceiling.

The next step was devising ways to create a contemporary interior while simultaneously tuning into the palazzo's history. At this stage, materials were key. Hand-cut slabs of a particularly sumptuous Bardiglio Imperiale, the luminous grey marble often used by Roman and Renaissance architects, were laid down at a slight distance from the walls, their

A large painting by Tancredi Parmeggiani looms over the living-room area, while Carla Accardi's 'Trasparenze' is flanked by a standard lamp and a vitrine. Bar the yellow velvet chairs, all the furnishings are custom-made LPA designs. The tiny bronze lecterns alongside the doors conceal switches that control lighting, thermostats and the Dolby sound system



Above: Guja's objection to handles – it is keys one can see– has inspired LPA to design vertical slits (visible in the raw-iron dining-room door, left) that can just be prised open with one's fingers. The chairs are 18th-century Roman. Opposite: the second bathroom is dominated by a cantilevered monolith of marble out of which the sink has been carved. It points to a Maria Dompè sculpture



Below: all the furniture in the owner's bedroom, including the headboard studded with 'Rose' by Paolo Canevari, comes courtesy of LPA. The artwork on the mantelpiece is by Emanuele Becheri, and the sculpture on the metal base is another Maria Dompè piece, titled 'Guja'. Opposite: chocolate-coloured Emperor marble defines the tub, accessed via a travertine step, in the main bathroom



edges rounded and smoothed to create a sense of softness, as if they were carpets. The heavy iron doors – another potent elemental feature – were all individually burnished, their oxidised marks shimmering like flames. And though the pigments on wet lime are the same as those used at Pompeii and Herculaneum, what lies beneath the surfaces is a cutting-edge lighting system. The custom, stainless-steel kitchen, meanwhile, is properly futuristic.

Or rather, it *was* when it was installed 20 years ago; since, there has been a lot of water under the bridge. Guja's children are now adults, her marriage is over and she has grandchildren. And though her days still revolve around family affections, she has embraced the shift. Which is why a handful of years ago she announced to Claudio and Carl that it was time to get back to work. Her enormous apartment

was to be divided into three separate lodgings: one for her and one for each of her sons. A maximalist passion for marble – look at the bathrooms – and sleek metalwork is now counterbalanced by an ultra-minimalist approach to furnishings. Handles, a feature Guja dislikes intensely, have been replaced by invisible slits that allow her to open every door, window and cabinet with a single finger. Likewise, light switches and doorbells – alas! – have become practically invisible. Most of the furniture, including the Scarpa-inspired dining table, was designed for Guja by the LPA team; other pieces are heirlooms.

If this apartment feels like a shrine, the deities are its chattels. 'Objects have a soul,' the owner says. 'They must be treated with respect.' In the 1980s, Roberta du Chêne, Guja's mother, co-founded a gallery, Il Millennio, that specialised

in postwar Italian art. It is she who laid down the foundations of this stunning collection, which includes works by artist Maria Lai, a close friend and fellow Sardinian, and ceramics by Fausto Melotti. Roberta and Pietro Consagra – whose monumental red sculpture in the entrance sets the tone – were in a relationship for many years. Guja has fond memories of him. The two sculptures he gifted her to mark the birth of her sons sit in her bedroom like milestones. She has carried on her mother's artistic legacy by acquiring seminal pieces by the likes of Carla Accardi, Gastone Novelli, Emilio Vedova. 'Creating a new space for these works, and for myself, was an opportunity to map out my life. It made me think of the journey behind me and helped me figure out new directions' © Lazzarini Pickering Architetti. Visit lazzarinipickering.com

