

via garibaldi 12



When the design community makes its annual pilgrimage to the Salone del Mobile in Milan to seek out the latest interior trends and talent, truly savvy insiders make time for a side trip to Genoa to visit Via Garibaldi 12, a family-run emporium that has made a name for itself in such circles.

Part concept store, part traditional neighbourhood retailer, the shop has become a favoured destination of design buffs and even royalty keen to stock up on well-made objects for the home. Buyers find modern furniture, tableware and glassware from established names next to pieces from up-and-coming designers, and corners given over to bijou displays dedicated to gardening, electronics and home appliances.

Befitting the more reserved character of the Genoese, the Bagnara family don't create extravagant store windows. Instead, shoppers venture up the marble staircase of the 16th-century palazzo to uncover the treasure trove of home furnishings in eight rooms with baroque stucco decorations, two of which contain frescoes of scenes from the Punic Wars. The building is one of a series in the port city's historic centre that are part of a Unesco World Heritage site and has long been a conversation piece – it was part of the Grand Tour and is mentioned in *Pictures from Italy*, a travelogue by Charles Dickens. "People often walk in and confuse our store with a museum," admits Lorenzo Bagnara (above left), who, together with his parents and brother Giorgio,

busies himself waiting on customers and signing up couples to the family's highly sought-after wedding registry.

After renovation work by Lebanese-born architect William Sawaya, the Bagnaras opened up in 2001, convinced the location was a perfect fit. "Past occupants were considered ahead of their time and that appealed to us," explains Renzo Bagnara, Lorenzo's father and a walking encyclopedia on design history. The palatial setting is home to one-off pieces such as One Minute Delft vase by Marcel Wanders (€3,700, below) and leather desk accessories (from €100) produced under Via Garibaldi 12's own B Home Interiors label (fans include David Linley and *FT* columnist Tyler Brûlé).

Rooms catering to the kitchen feature simple KitchenAid rolling pins (from €44) alongside Iittala flatware from Renzo Piano (€75 for a set of five). There are picture frames in pearwood by Pierluigi Ghianda originally designed for the Musée d'Orsay (€534) and Ron Arad's PizzaKobra lamp (€1,060). There's even a selection of jewellery and watches, including an Hervé van der Straeten gold-plated brass necklace (€396) and Pierre Junod watch by Massimo Vignelli (€415).

Asked about the advantages of running an interiors shop in Genoa, the family refers back to a remark made by Peter Paul Rubens: "Since the Genoese Republic is ruled by gentlemen, their buildings are thus very beautiful and very comfortable." **IVAN CARVALHO**

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FOR GOODNESS' SAKE

preserving a poet's worldly wooden paradise forever

With more than 300 historic houses in its care, the National Trust is in many ways a custodian of the UK's period interiors. A conservator of splendid stately homes as well as more modest dwellings with unusual features – the "rammed" floor made from chalk and sour milk at Alfriston Clergy House in Sussex – and ones with exceptional former residents, such as Paul McCartney's childhood home in the Liverpool suburb of Allerton, or the house that arch-Modernist Ernő Goldfinger built for himself at 2 Willow Road in Hampstead, north London (complete with the architect's collection of works by Henry Moore, Max Ernst and Bridget Riley).

Added to these, though not yet open to the public, is a fine, if fairly ordinary, 19th-century terrace house in south London on Wandsworth Road, Lambeth, bequeathed by the Kenyan-born Treasury civil servant and writer Khadambi Asalache, who lived there from 1981 till his death in 2006.

So far, so unexceptional. Inside, however, its walls are decorated floor-to-ceiling with exquisitely delicate fretwork of rococo complexity. Almost every surface, from the architraves to ceiling roses to shelves to radiator covers, is covered with intricate pattern. Some of it is geometric, recalling motifs from Islamic art; other sections depict birds, animals (never carnivores), plants, people on their way to market or dancing figures from *Swan Lake*. Every image is distinct, for, as Asalache wrote in a handwritten explanation of his scheme, a document that references Einstein and the Fibonacci Sequence: "There is no symmetry in nature."

He goes on to explain "the kinds of designs [that] have left a lasting impression on me: traditional African houses, such as those in Lamu and Mombasa that contain carved niches incorporating Chinese porcelain plates that were believed to be 'capable of absorbing evil spirits'; [the] Moorish architecture of Andalusia, particularly the Alhambra and 10th-century mosque at Cordoba; and Ottoman architecture, such as the wooden houses of Istanbul."

More remarkable still, all of the carving was designed and made by Asalache himself from floorboards, doors and pine boxes. The son of a Masai chief, he trained as an architect in Nairobi before coming to London aged 25 to work for the BBC's African Service, and initially started carving panels to conceal a patch of damp in the kitchen. As his surviving partner Susie Thomson has said, he preferred to improvise, making pencil drawings directly on to the wood, for he "didn't like to be dictated to by previous thoughts".

The National Trust has committed £1m to restoring the house but, given the fragility of its interiors, a further £4m is needed to open it and establish a visitor centre where people can learn about Asalache and "deepen [their] understanding of UK heritage and the ongoing debates around migration and Britishness". Indeed, without at least £2.4m the National Trust won't be able to accept the bequest. Let's hope the money is found, for there are few terraced houses with rooms as beautiful as these. As Asalache put it, "I don't know or believe that one needs to bother with concepts from quantum mechanics when doing interior design... [and] I can't say I live up to the intellectual rigour, but the result is one I can live with."

www.nationaltrust.org.uk/asalache.

