



In with the old

From regularly attending international *antiques fairs* as a youngster to becoming the *heartbeat* of interior design studio L'Orangerie, *Francesca Orsi* has developed a life-long *love affair* with period pieces. And she's now *breathing* new life into her once-abandoned three-storey *Baroque* castle helped by *objects* picked up on her *travels*

Francesca Orsi takes a moment on a sofa that was purchased in the South of France; the floral artwork was the result of a project between her and painter Eva Germani

By Grace Cain

The Collector

Francesca Orsi speaks Italian. I speak English. Yet, somehow, we settle on a German word to describe her fascinatingly eclectic collection of antiques. And *Wunderkammer* – which literally translates as ‘room of wonder’, but in English is more commonly read as ‘cabinet of curiosities’ – certainly feels like an apt choice for the opulent former palace that Orsi has filled with treasures gathered on her travels through Italy... and beyond. “I love objects that capture your attention, especially when they are placed in a space that’s otherwise insignificant,” she explains.

Of course, to describe any part of Orsi’s home as ‘insignificant’ would do the three-storey Baroque edifice a great injustice. Nestled among the cobbled streets of Guastalla, a small town in the north Italian province of Reggio Emilia, this particular building has a story stretching all the way back to 1600. And Orsi’s role in its history began more than a decade before she actually moved in: she initially visited during her original Guastalla house-hunt in the early 2000s but, ultimately, opted for another property. The palace never, however, quite left her mind. “I always felt a connection to this place, so it was just a matter of time,” she says. “As soon as it was possible, I bought it.”

By the time Orsi acquired the building, in 2014, it had been abandoned for several years and had fallen into a state of complete disrepair. “I think that was the main reason that prompted me to buy it,” she muses. “I just loved the idea of bringing it back to life.”

To many people, the renovation process (which ultimately took more than three years) might have felt like an impossible chore; to Orsi, it was a challenge to be relished. As the heart and soul of interior design studio L’Orangerie, her passion for transforming spaces – even those in a seemingly irreparable condition – was the fuel she needed to bring her vision to life.



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“My home is always a mirror of my work,” she explains. “I like to experiment and find new inspiration in my own rooms, whether it’s an unusual combination of colours or the union of very different styles of furniture.” This creative osmosis also flows in the opposite direction, from Orsi’s professional life back into her personal one. “When I’m travelling and shopping for work, I often come across furnishings or objects that I decide will be part of my own home,” she says. And while Paris and the South of France are among her favourite haunts when it comes to antiques, she reveals it’s actually northern Europe and Italy where she has unearthed her finest vintage pieces from the 1960s and ’70s.

Orsi’s varied tastes have meant that the old and the even older now sit peaceably beside each other throughout the cavernous high-ceilinged rooms that constitute her palace. She makes no distinction between the contemporary (her Renzo Serafini lamps, for example) and the timeworn (a category that includes a 200-year-old birdcage that lives in front of a 17th-century picture frame that she found in Lucca). The overall effect is pleasantly eerie, evoking the quiet stillness of a place that exists just beyond the parameters of conventional time. Take, as an example, the second-floor living room, where a pair of original Charles Eames chairs convene between iron display cases bought from a Bolognese antiques dealer; or the wardrobe room, where Orsi’s impressive array of shoes lives in an old brass shop cabinet purchased in Milan. Then there’s her extensive collection of mid-century chairs and sofas, the vast majority of which have been updated with contemporary Decortex velvet. (A shell-shaped sofa from Parma is one striking exception, still retaining its original, distinctive green fabric.)

In the entrance hall, the grand chandeliers that Orsi discovered in Béziers conjure visions of bouffant gowns and lavish balls; in the kitchen, Eva Germani’s sweeping floral painting – one of many large-scale works by the >



Clockwise from top left: Chandeliers bought in Béziers in France are offset by a Renzo Serafini lamp; Eva Germani’s vast painting, inspired by a snap of the photographer Momi Merlo, forms the backdrop for two 1970s swivel chairs covered with velvet Decortex, while a 19th-century birdcage – from an antiques dealer in Reggio Emilia – dominates a late-1800s tailoring table; in the wardrobe room, a 1960s sofa sits alongside wooden and glass pieces made to Orsi’s designs; the mezzanine living room – complete with original, but removed and repositioned oakwood floor – houses an old mirror from Avignon and a portrait bought from a Bolognese antiques dealer





This page, clockwise from below: A vintage sofa in the shape of a shell, original velvet upholstery preserved, is flanked by a ceramic-top iron table; Orsi in the wardrobe room; the kitchen features a floral backdrop painted by Eva Germani alongside vintage tables and chairs from Sweden. Opposite page: With a doorway marked by a black marble plaque from an old hotel in northern France, the collection room includes a locally bought antique filing cabinet and two ornate busts



artist that cover the walls of Orsi's home – provides a Romantic backdrop for a mid-century modern scene featuring an aluminium Mangiarotti chandelier hanging above a 1960s Swedish dining table. Meanwhile, in the living room, a 1950s sofa and coffee table (both purchased in Bologna) are reflected in a grand 20th-century mirror, surrounded by a host of smaller antique barber's mirrors gathered over the course of many European trips. And even the cast-iron radiators that hug the plaster walls of each room are relics, recovered from an ancient palace in Genoa.

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Fabrizio Cicconi/Photofyer

The vaguely surreal nature of Orsi's palace is, however, at its height in her 'collection room', where you'll find one of her best-loved finds: an iron table with a ceramic top, on which two plaster busts stand guard over a locally purchased antique filing cabinet. “I bought that table in the South of France, and I immediately loved it because it was so unusual,” she remembers. “I believe it originally had a medical use.” Given her successful career as an interior designer, and ‘Project Guastalla’, it seems hard to believe that Orsi may have gone down a completely different path in her life. She reveals that, at one point, she was training as a lawyer. “But,” she quickly interjects, “I have always had a passion for furniture. Even when I was a little girl, I loved visiting antiques markets with my mother. We went to every single edition of Mercanteinfiera, an international antiques fair held in Parma, the city where I was born. Now, I exhibit there myself.” Which all goes to show what difference passion can make... with the transformation of a certain dilapidated palace undoubtedly proof of that. “I really hope that everyone who steps inside my home will feel the love and the research that I have poured into restoring it,” Orsi explains. “And recognise the respect that I have for this beautiful old building.” Bellissimo. □