



Purely Balthus

INSIDE AND OUT, THE PAINTER'S BARONIAL CASTLE NEAR VITERBO CARRIES THE SPIRIT AND TEXTURE OF HIS ART INTO THREE DIMENSIONS

BY GIULIANO BRIGANTI PHOTOGRAPHS BY EVELYN HOFER



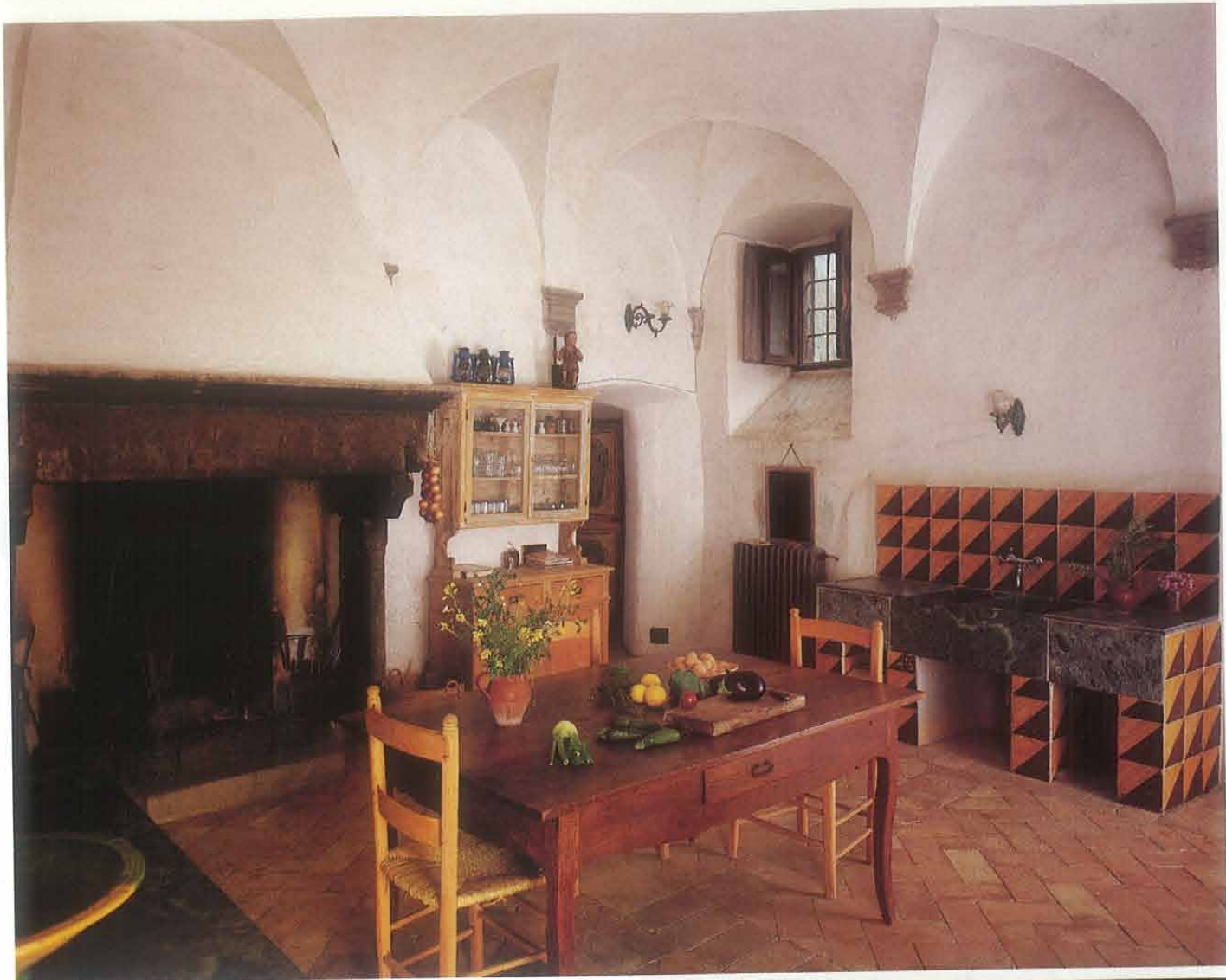
COUNT BALTHAZAR KLOSSOWSKI DE ROLA AND THE PAINTER Balthus are, as everyone knows, one and the same person. But it would perhaps be more accurate to say that they are two people in one, in the sense that Balthus the painter—and a great painter at that—never forgets that he is Balthazar Klossowski, Count de Rola, the descendant of an ancient noble Polish family who, he claims, is related to the Romanovs and Lord Byron, among others. He is a great gentleman, in the meaning that word carried before the French Revolution, during the time of that *douceur de vivre* whose passing Talleyrand so deeply regretted. On the other hand, Count de Rola can never forget he is Balthus—that he was born a painter and therefore cannot keep himself from entrusting all the choices he makes in life to his soul and his eye as a painter.

Balthus's luminous spatial vision and his love for the Italian Renaissance synthesis of form and perspective, combined with an equally deep love for the purity and quintessential elegance of Far Eastern art, have guided him in his choice of places in which to live. For his own houses he prefers the vast and severe spaces of the Renaissance, with their sense of true grandeur, to the intimate refinement of later country retreats in the French manner. This preference helps explain why Balthus chose his castle at Montecalvello, in the Lazio region, which he purchased during the 1970s while serving as director of the French Academy in Rome. With the minimum re-touching imaginable and a use of space ineffably balanced between Piero della Francesca and Zen, he has managed to

Balthus restored 16th-century frescoes in the main sala, *right*, a room whose austere grandeur recalls settings in the artist's own paintings. Seemingly plain walls have been layered with shades of yellow and cream and then scratched to create a mottled effect. Wrought-iron lamps, made by a local blacksmith to Balthus's design, stand on an original terracotta floor. *Above*: The castle dominates the hamlet of Montecalvello. *Preceding pages*: Balthus and his wife, the painter Setsuko, in their customary kimonos. Frescoes in the manner of Raphael line Balthus's favorite vantage point for sketching the hilly landscape of the Lazio region.



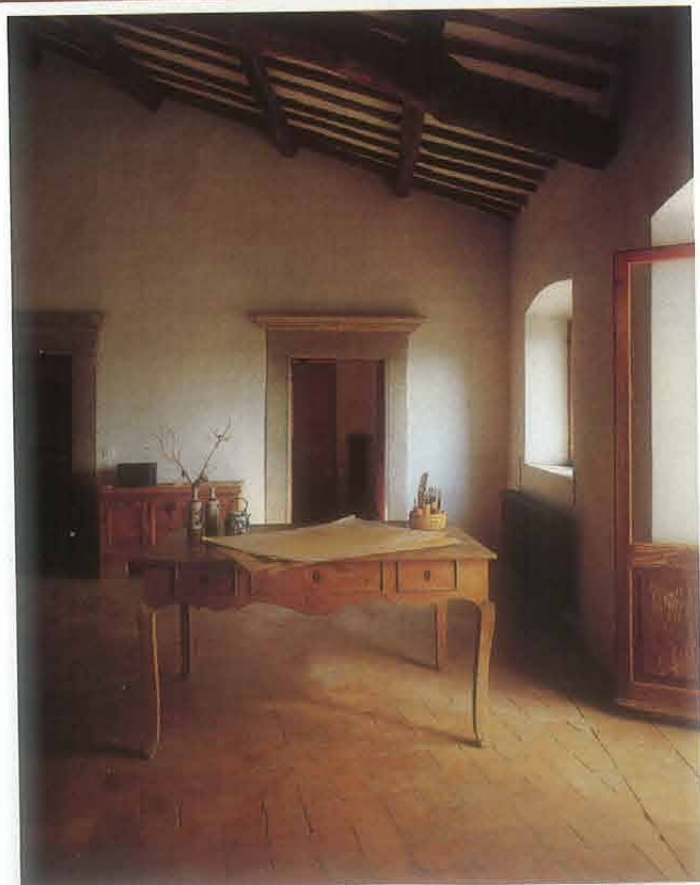
The interiors are Balthus paintings, with scratched layers of delicate tints making the surfaces come alive



impress the clear and shining mark of his personality upon the ancient citadel.

You could search in vain for the name Montecalvello in many maps of central Italy. If you find it at all, it might be in fine print, in some road map of Lazio, on one of the byroads that run along the west bank of the Tiber between Bomarzo and Bagnoregio and then branch off toward Lake Bolsena among the foothills of the Ciminian Hills. The Touring Club Guide grants it but a few lines: "Montecalvello, altitude 168 m., a few dozen inhabitants, is a picturesque castle-hamlet whose population is in sharp decline. Once the property of the Calvelli family from Viterbo, it passed into the hands of the Pamphilis in the year 1648. It has an imposing baronial palace with sixteenth-century decorations." That is all. And I suspect that the decline in the population has been sharply progressing, considering that during my last visit there I met only two people.

The walls of Montecalvello enclose a few semi-abandoned buildings alongside a crumbling square overgrown with weeds and dominated from above by the castle's stately sixteenth-century façade. Legend has it that this compound dates back to the thirteenth century, the era of battles waged between Emperor Frederick II and Pope Innocent IV in which one Alessandro Calvello was involved. A Ghibelline from Viterbo, he seized the





feudal estate to which he gave his name from the Guelph family of the Monaldeschis, who, however, in the typical course of such communal feuds later won it back. The member of the Pamphili family who eventually bought the castle in the seventeenth century was the infamous Donna Olimpia, sister-in-law of the reigning pontiff, Innocent X.

The architecture of the castle is connected exclusively with the Monaldeschis, whose coat of arms is carved on the façade and painted in the lovely frescoed friezes that adorn the loggia and some of the rooms. So potent, however, is the reputed wickedness of the woman who later owned Montecalvello that even today people call it Donna Olimpia's castle. When I visited there for the first time, many years ago, the castle was uninhabited and, if I remember correctly, up for sale. I wandered through an interminable procession of large vacant rooms with heaps of debris piled up on the floors in the company of an old caretaker who told me tales of savage crimes and love affairs drowned in blood at the hands of hired assassins. He even showed me a window from which it was said the cruel Donna Olimpia had cast lovers of whom she had tired into the ravine below.

The somber Stendhalian atmosphere and the traces of the dark criminal plots that linked Montecalvello to Donna Olimpia are far removed from the (Text continued on page 224)

In the dining room, *above*, a 17th-century chandelier hangs above a country table. Balthus had the floor level raised more than four feet to make the vaulted room less overwhelming and to bring diners closer to light from the window. *Opposite above*: The kitchen is also furnished with regional pieces. Old tiles surround the marble sink. *Opposite below*: Japanese porcelains and artist's materials are arranged on an antique desk in a third-story sitting room. *Below*: The entrance passageway.



nce
the satin hangings
bedeck a 17th-century gilt
Roman bed. The candelabra
on the leather-covered
taboret is 18th century. A
door surround carved from
pietra serena frames one of
the many vistas through a
labyrinth of rooms.



With a use of space ineffably balanced between Piero della Francesca and Zen, Balthus managed to impress the mark of his personality upon the castle



WEEP NO MORE FOR VENICE. TAKE OFF THE black armband; rid your mind of that stale Romantic equation between Venice and death. And cancel the comparisons to Disneyland, the flip take on Venice as a pop tourist version of its mighty former self. These views of Venice, once fresh, now come between the city and ourselves like a blanket of dust. There has always been a lot to see in Venice; the trick is to refresh

the eye that sees it. Start with the fact that Venice is not in imminent danger of sinking into the sea. Water is no longer pumped from beneath the lagoon, and some measurements even show that the city is rising. Although lovers of decorous decay will not be disappointed by the look of Venice today, restoration projects undertaken since the 1966 floods have given new life to ancient buildings and carved out a new industry in preservation technology. But the real change in the look of Venice today is not due to these efforts to reverse centuries of physical deterioration. Venice looks different primarily because of shifts in our perspective: changes in the world outside and in the way we view ourselves. After all, a visitor from New York, accustomed to crumbling highways, rotting piers, and exploding steam pipes at home, hardly needs to come here for an immersion in urban decrepitude.

It was a classically Venetian reflection on death that started me thinking about this shift. I was sitting on a terrace on the Grand Canal, looking across the water at the Salute, the most glorious of the city's "plague churches," wondering at a culture that would pledge to create a beautiful building in exchange for deliverance from disease. Then it occurred to me that we are closer to the people who built the Salute than we used to think: we too belong to a civilization that has yet to banish plagues. We have been to the moon; we can make all kinds of things with plastic. But we are no longer separated by the myth of our modernity from eras past when cities lived in fear of plagues.

Even before AIDS began to chip away at that myth, the modern barrier between ourselves and the past was in pretty sorry repair. For a quarter of a century, architects have been hammering away at this wall, questioning the stability of its foundations in reason, science, and progress. If Postmodernism has not demolished the wall (mercifully, unless you think the status quo can't be improved upon), it has at least punched out huge chunks, creating windows on the world of the past on the other side. And the view through some of those windows is the vista before me: Venice.

Venice Rising

Herbert Muschamp and Ettore Sottsass tour the city and find that rumors of its death have been greatly exaggerated



The pleasure of walking on a floor, top left. Architecture must face the sky, above left



The very serious use of a campo, above

A balcony view is now from below, right.

Permanent means of support, right.



A little decoration goes a long way, below

continuity and renewal, sacred and mundane."

To trace the past in Venice is not to walk the straight line of conventional art history but to describe a curving path that doubles back on itself like the canal coursing through the city's heart. To love Venice is to embrace disorientation, in space as well as time. In other cities you see tourists in a panic when they are lost. Where else but in Venice can you see desperation on the face of the tourist who is *not* lost? The visitor who, held in the grip of the main routes, with their prominent yellow signs ever pointing the way indulgently back PER SAN MARCO, search-

es in bewilderment for that chink in the wall that will open into the labyrinth of some imagined secret Venice?

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Mary McCarthy believed that one searched for that chink in vain: "The tourist Venice *is* Venice." But others have found that familiarity breeds fantasy. In Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, Marco Polo entertains Kublai Khan each night with descriptions of the amazing cities he has seen on his travels: Adelma, Pyrrha, Zirna, Eusapia. They are all, the emperor comes to realize, but different descriptions of Venice, Marco's hometown. Indeed, as the novel's conclusion turns the story inside out, Kublai begins to



grasp that he, his court, and his entire empire are themselves destined to be part of Venice, fabrications of the city's desire to hear Marco's tales of the fabulous East. "It is not the voice that commands the story," Marco teases. "It is the ear."

And it is the eye that commands Venice to assume the shape of its beholder. Even before the 1980 Biennale the city's image was recast in the Palladian quotations of Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown, who have made nearly annual pilgrimages to the city for

(Text continued on page 224)



The stones of Venice, above. Never forget angels, right

It's just over there, a bit to the left of the Salute, that Aldo Rossi moored his floating theater, the Teatro del Mondo, through the summer of 1980. The theater's octagonal wooden tower, an embodiment of Rossi's ideal of architecture as the vessel of memory, held its own in the Venetian skyline for just a few months, then drifted out to sea to become a memory itself, perhaps the most haunting icon Postmodernism has produced. Rossi wrote that his theater was sited "in a place where architecture ended and the world of the imagination or even the irrational began." And for many of the architects who participated in the 1980 Venice Biennale (for which Rossi's theater provided the centerpiece), the city was a symbolic point of departure, a place to leave behind the austere rational world of Modern architecture and embark on a voyage of fantasy, pleasure, color, opulence, and memory. Hans Hollein, Michael Graves, Léon Krier, Paolo Portoghesi, and Venturi, Rauch & Scott Brown were among the architects who participated in a polemical exhibition whose purpose was to proclaim "The Presence of the Past."

The show's organizers could not have picked a more poetically just site to mount a Postmodern assault. For in the early years of the century Venice symbolized a past whose persistence the Futurists hoped to bury. "Let us burn the gondolas, rocking chairs for cretins, and raise to the heavens the imposing geometry of metal bridges," exhorted the Futurist ring-leader Marinetti in *Against Past-loving Venice*. This was not the first time Venice had served as a focus for architectural controversy over the relationship of the present to the past. In the 1850s John Ruskin commandeered the city as a symbolic



battleground for the Victorian war of the styles between Classical and Gothic. For Ruskin, who considered Venetian Gothic the noblest style ever produced, "it is in Venice, and in Venice only, that effectual blows can be struck at this pestilent art of the Renaissance." And Ruskin's campaign, in turn, was an echo of a debate that had raged

three centuries earlier when the Classical forms of the Renaissance began to displace the Gothic style. Many Venetians saw no need to revive ancient Rome because they believed their city already was Rome. Why bother to evoke an empire when you already are one? Gothic architecture in Venice was a predominantly secular style that glorified the Republic's pioneering mercantilism and enshrined a system of government that descended from Rome's republican institutions. As Manfredo Tafuri declares in his brilliant book *Venice and the Renaissance*, here "there is no contradiction between tradition and innovation, development and memory,

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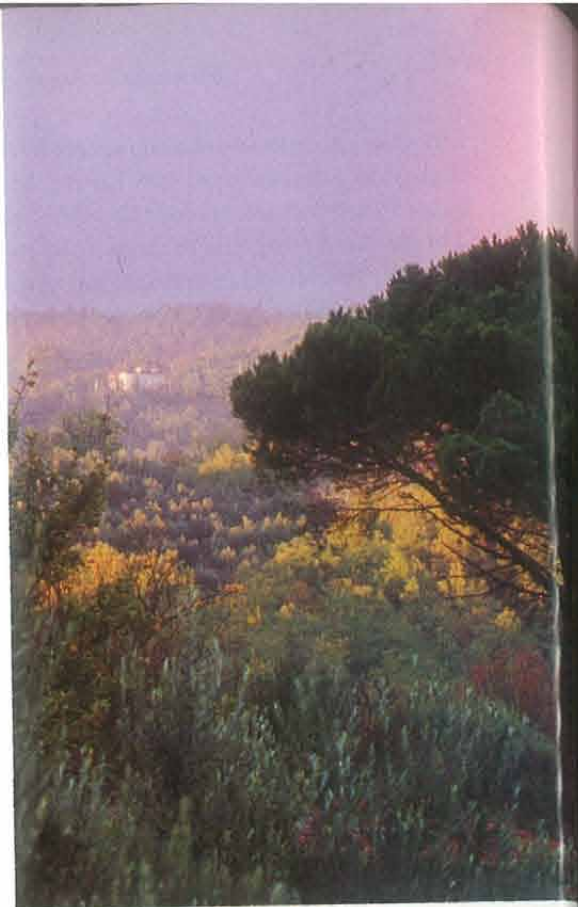


IF THE BUSINESS OF AMERICA IS BUSINESS, the business of Italy is family. Miuccia Prada, granddaughter of the founder of one of Milan's most elegant purveyors of leather goods, is at once the pride and plaint of her parents. In the ten years that she has directed design at Prada, she has elevated the company to international status, an accomplishment that would make any family proud. But in so doing, she put a real spin into a firm that has carried and catered to the traditional for nearly a century. The same free spirit that rejected the family business and took up the study of political science returned to the fold and added women's clothing to the traditional line of luxurious leather trunks and shoes, belts, and gloves. Handbags of man-made materials such as woven nylon now sit alongside those of exotic natural skins. New shops designed by contemporary Italian archi-

itects opened in Paris, New York, Madrid, Los Angeles, Tokyo, Hong Kong, Singapore and elsewhere in Italy, introducing Prada to audiences beyond the well heeled or simply well informed who have long made pilgrimages to Milan's famous Galleria not because it is an architectural masterpiece but because it houses the splendid turn-of-the-century Prada shop.

In bringing Prada up to the twenty-first century, Miuccia has embraced the modern. Her designs, choice of colors, combinations of materials, and acceptance of industrial manufacture alongside old-world craftsmanship render

Miuccia Prada, below, wearing an over-size shirt, tapered pants, and faille stole of her own design, relaxes in her Milan apartment in front of a painting by Mario Cavaglieri. Right: Miuccia and her husband Patrizio Bertelli's farmhouse near Arezzo. Details see Resources.





Pride of the Pradas

**At home in Milan and Tuscany, the guiding spirit of the venerable
leather goods firm continues a long family tradition**

By Heather Smith MacIsaac Photographs by Alexandre Bailhache



leather goods stamped with the names of other reputable houses no less fine but considerably less exciting. The freshness of her ideas, though, is anything but a rejection of the tradition she has inherited. Her appreciation of and respect for the past are as strong as her desire to make something original: "The story of what has come before is important. I'm not aiming so much to invent as to rethink the past and perhaps use it in a different fashion. What engages me is combining opposites in unconventional ways—the old with the new, the refined with the primitive, the natural with the machine-made."

Miuccia's two residences—an apartment in Milan and a country house near Arezzo, the hometown of her husband, Patrizio Bertelli, director of the company that manufactures Prada's wares—are entirely consistent with her design philosophy. Though living in lofts is now commonplace in American cities, in Milan it is rare. Rarer still is Miuccia's

city place, a half-and-half combination of traditional apartment and open loft. The ground-floor offices of a circa 1800 apartment building became bedrooms, bathrooms, and a dressing room. A storage shed behind it was converted into a new white living area spacious enough to accommodate the precious—a collection of Capodimonte bronze figures—and the practical—a playpen of toys belonging to Miuccia and Patrizio's one and a half year old son, Lorenzo.

In the vast skylit living room, nothing matches, yet everything fits. Lengths and bits of fabric serve double duty—as inspiration for Miuccia's collections for

In the Milan living room, *above*, an 18th-century Venetian console, a horn chair found in London, and an antique Italian mirror flank the fireplace. *Right*: One and a half year old Lorenzo presides over the country kitchen where clusters of grapes hang from cane poles. *Opposite above*: Cavaglieri's painting *Romanticismo* and jugs and platters by the Florentine potter Patarino decorate the living room in the country.



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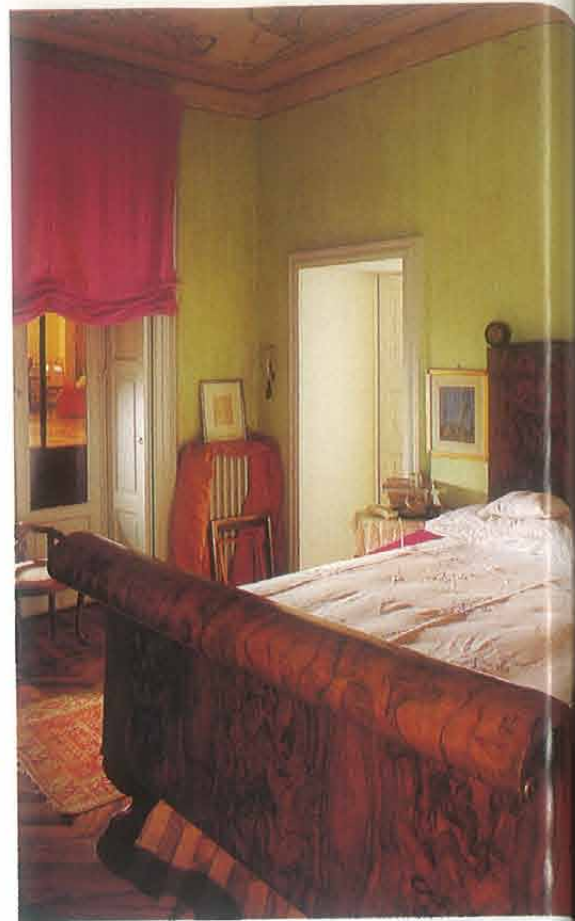
Prada and as covers and ornaments for furniture ranging from an Empire table to a set of 1930s dining chairs. Panels of Fortuny silk hung from the rafters, and freestanding bookcases, whose backs are covered with old striped moiré, divide the big space into seating, library, and dining areas. Drawings by Mario Cavaglieri, an Italian Impressionist whose work Miuccia and her husband have been collecting for a decade, are tucked behind fabric from a skirt by fashion designer Vivienne Westwood which is draped over a Venetian console. Moroccan sashes wind around a Venini vase from the twenties atop the piano.

Fabrics in gold, chartreuse, salmon, violet, and cream accent comfortable sofas and banquettes upholstered in a clear purply red. "I don't like brilliant red on people, but I adore it in the house," she explains. Red appears in a stripe on material covering the dining chairs, in the candles supported by nineteenth-century Italian silver candelabra, in the shades on bedroom double doors leading outside, and in paintings by Cavaglieri.

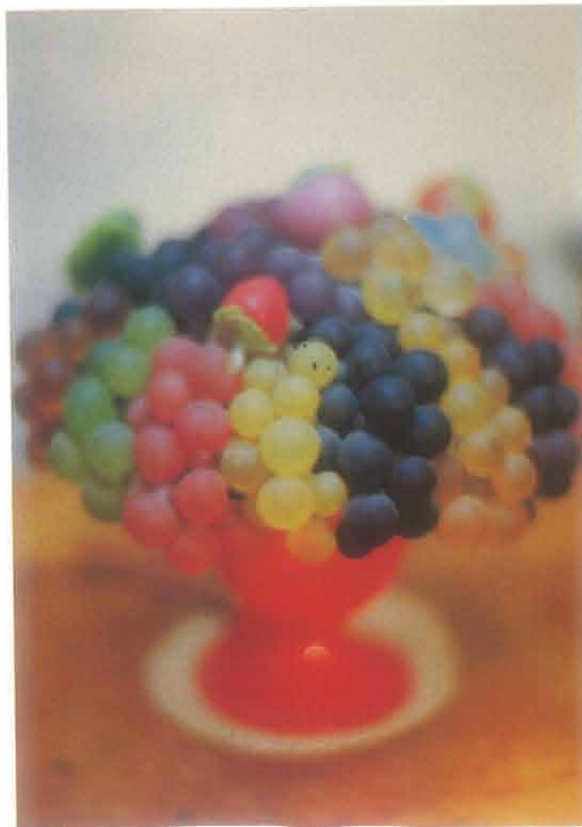
Paintings by Miuccia's favorite artist reappear in the country house, as does her color of choice. A purple and red striped fabric covers the upholstered furniture in the living room. Scarlet canvas curtains pull across the arches of the loggia, and a crimson club chair in the kitchen is Lorenzo's chosen post. But the feel of this former monastery turned farmhouse is intentionally different. "The house is only ten minutes from Arezzo, but there is not another building in sight," says Miuccia. "We've been proceeding slowly with the renovation, so it still looks as though no one has intervened in centuries. Outside, we've planted four to five hundred trees; inside, we've just brought the house up to the standards of modern comfort. It's an irregular house, but rather than straightening out the layout, I decided to play up the informality by decorating in a fairly grand way. Our place in the city has a formal plan with the furniture casually arranged. Here it is just the opposite."

Miuccia, who is pregnant with her second child, works everywhere—at home

in the city, in the elegant villa on Via Melzi d'Eril which houses her showroom and offices, on the plane en route to the more than twenty Prada shops. But judging from her spring collection for Prada, the four to five months she spends in Tuscany every year are an invaluable source of ideas. Miuccia has harnessed the natural world and given it new elegance. Colors of the earth, sky, and olive trees turn up in raw and iridescent silks and finely woven cottons. A dress reminiscent of traditional peasant clothing is done up in hopsack, its bodice encrusted with beads of stone and wood. Feathers adorn sandals of snakeskin. Bits of shell and coral and brightly colored glass are embroidered onto collars and spell out the name Prada on handbags of woven nylon. The primitive and luxurious have never been so compatible. Be it an interior or wardrobe, as Miuccia says, "the idea is one—what I'm trying to do is create a certain atmosphere." ▲ *Editor: Deborah Webster*



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The bowl of crystal grapes, right, is one of a pair of lamps. Far right: Fortuny fabric suspended from a rafter sections off a dining room in the loftlike living area. The buffet and set of dining chairs are from the 1930s.

