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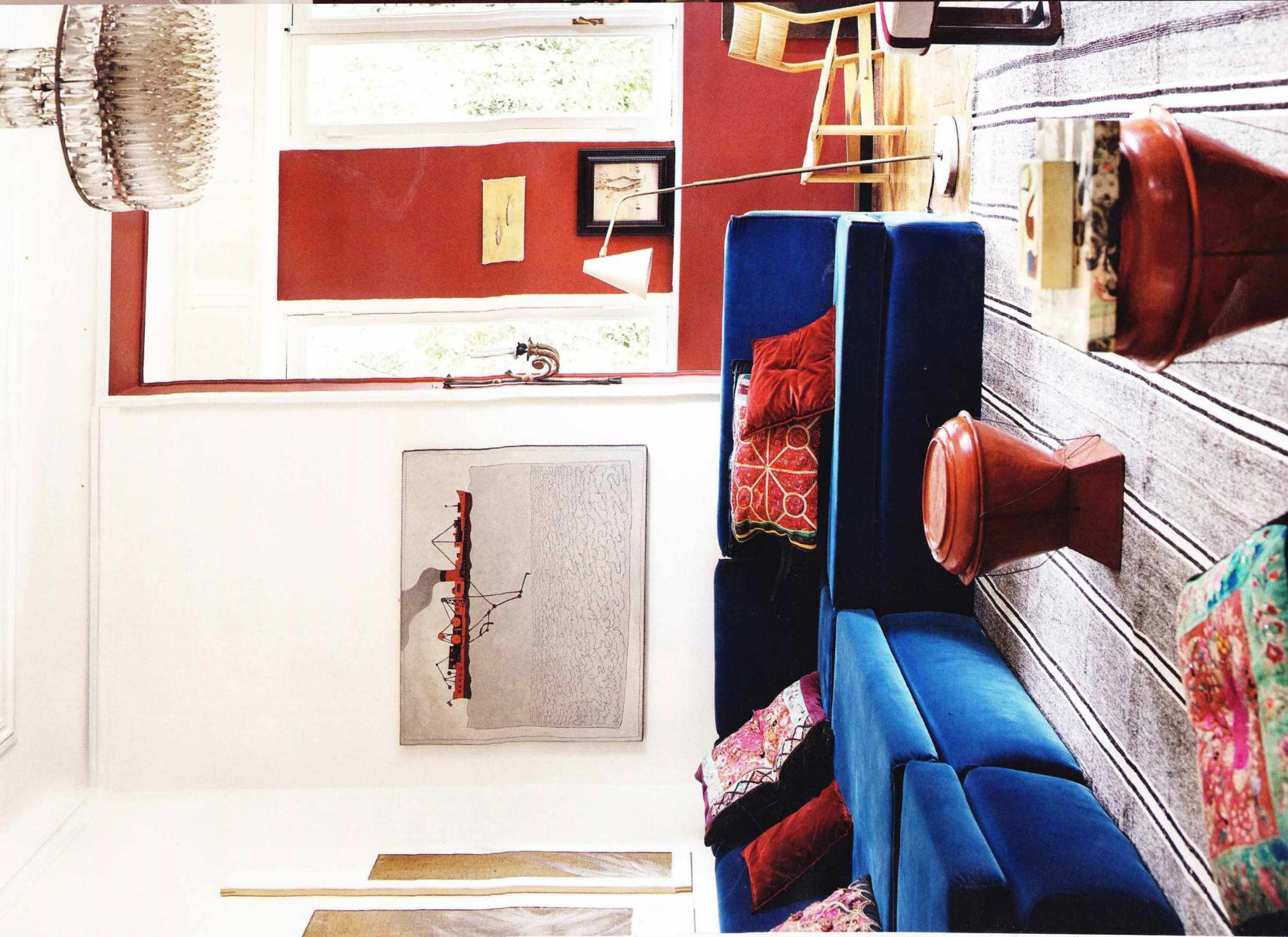
Stefano Vitali's atmospheric apartment in Milan is in a Thirties villa he often played in as a child, and his memories have been behind many of his decoration decisions

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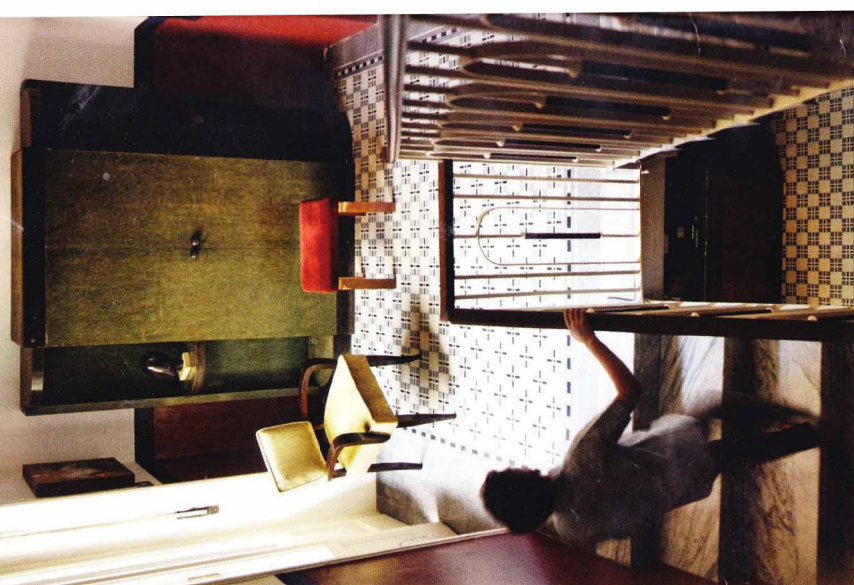
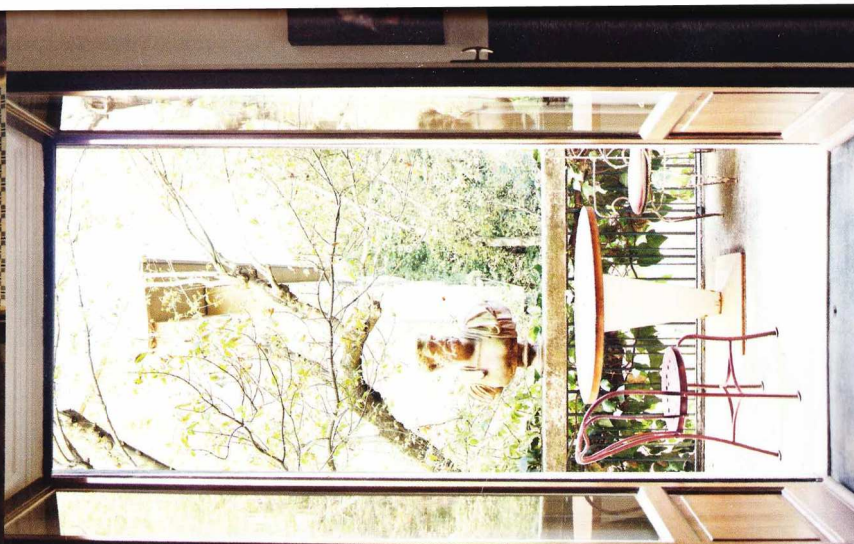
BOTH PAGES The sitting room and study are filled with the type of twentieth-century designs that Stefano sells in his gallery. The red armchair is a French art deco piece, the turquoise desk is a Sixties design by Saporiti Italia and the 'Cetra' pendant light hanging above it is an iconic piece by Vico Magistretti from 1959







OPPOSITE Stefano had an Eighties sofa from his mother's house recovered in blue velvet, while the contrasting stools used as side tables in the sitting room were bought in Burma. THIS PAGE The kitchen retains many of its original Thirties features, including the granite floor



I am drinking espresso in Stefano Vitali's kitchen, where wisps of wisteria creep around the edges of the tall windows and morning sunlight casts a glare on the tiled floor. 'I grew up in a house just behind this one,' he says, gliding towards the window. The family that did to live here – a Thirties villa in a smart neighbourhood to the north of the centre of Milan – included five children, with whom Stefano was friends. Then, 17 years ago, the use he would sometimes visit and play in a child became his home.

He says it hasn't changed much since he was boy: the colour-block 'retro' kitchen units are the same and the pleasingly patterned floor is still in place, cool underfoot on a warm day. The daffodil-yellow Formica table and chairs are a recent addition, but are certainly not new. 'I was 28 when I moved in,' Stefano says. 'I didn't have the money to buy a new Boffi when, so I had to buy old things.' He now owns Avanguardia Antiquaria, a showroom on the edge of the elegant Brera district, where he sells collectable twentieth-century designs to the great and the good of Milan. 'I rarely he could afford to replace the old cooker? Yes, but why would I?' he says. 'I like it. And this is the mood that I want.'

When the house was put on the market, Stefano and his two older siblings decided to pool their money and buy it together, with each taking one of its three floors. His sister Antonella chose the top floor, once a handful of bedrooms set into the eaves and now a one-bedroom apartment. Brother Luca wanted direct access to the garden, so he picked the ground floor, which had been used as a studio or dance classes. This left the first floor – the villa's piano nobile, with rooms of grander proportion and finer detail – to Stefano, who shares what is now a two-bedroom apartment with his 13-year-old son Niccolò.

'Some people would come into a house like this and want to create a loft-style open space,' says Stefano. But he describes the idea of doing such a thing as 'violent' before explaining, 'There are houses where you can do that, but not here.' A wide and beautifully tiled staircase climbs one side of the building and the apartment is accessed from the first-floor landing. Once inside, a wide entrance hall serves as the fulcrum from which all of the rooms are reached: its azure-blue walls, woodwork picked out in white and cardinal-red rug also establish the dominant colour themes of the apartment. On the left, a set of glazed doors leads through to the large sitting room and an adjoining study, which is in the former dining room. These rooms were originally clad in dark-wood panelling, which the previous owners took with them when they moved out. Still, today it must feel infinitely brighter with



OPPOSITE
CLOCKWISE FROM
TOP RIGHT The
landing opens onto
a small balcony at one
side (bottom right)
and the turquoise-
painted entrance
hall of Stefano's flat
opposite (top left).
Stefano and his son
Niccolò. THIS PAGE
The back of a Thirties
wardrobe has been
modified to allow for
a secret passage
from the main
bedroom to the study

the walls painted in white, stone and red, and the honey-tone oak floors buffed to a shine. This new, bright canvas is all the better for taking in Stefano's collection of furniture, lighting, art and objects. It is a feast for the eyes, although he is quick to point out that it's a moveable one. He is a dealer, after all. 'The desk is for sale,' he says of the Sixties turquoise piece by Saporiti Italia. So, too, are a couple of Burmese lacquered stools and a Twenties chandelier that comes with apocryphal connections to one of Mussolini's wives. 'But not this,' he says, pointing to a red velvet art deco armchair. He pauses for a moment and smiles. 'Unless they wanted to pay a lot of money for it.'

Stefano is more assuredly attached to the contemporary art he's been collecting over 20 years. A few times a year, he uses Avanguardia Antiquaria as the backdrop for contemporary-art exhibitions and allows himself to buy one piece – a print, a ceramic piece or a kinetic sculpture – from each show. These help to connect the space to the twenty-first century.

Back in the entrance hall, the bathroom and kitchen lead off to the right, both overlooking the garden at the back of the house. Behind these is Niccolò's bedroom, which Stefano says he remembers playing in when he was the same age. To the left, behind the sitting room

and study, is Stefano's bedroom. The room is beautifully decorated with fine examples of Thirties furniture. And it is here that he shows me something that makes me gasp. At first glance, the curvaceous, carved cypress bed topped with a muslin canopy is the standout piece. But then Stefano points out the enormous mirror-fronted wardrobe that runs the length of the left-hand wall. As he opens the last of its five doors, it reveals not a rail of clothes, but a secret door. A section of the wardrobe's back has been cut away and a doorway carved into the wall behind it. Invited to open it, I find myself stepping back into the study.

It's a completely unnecessary feature – a folly. And it is brilliant. With a smile, Stefano explains that he wanted to create the feeling of circularity in the apartment, and now he can walk from the hall to his bedroom through the secret door to the study and sitting room and back into the hall. Perhaps it's his way of being respectful of the building's original layout without being beholden to it. But I suspect it might also have something to do with Stefano's memories of playing here as a little boy, and not wanting the fun to stop □

Avanguardia Antiquaria:
avanguardiaantiquaria.com