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JULY 2008 USA \$8.99 CAN \$9.95

# INTERIORS

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## *Shelf Life*

Books abound in Anna Vivante's 17th-century Paris flat. Arrayed floor to ceiling in her study, lining a Neoclassical case, or tucked away in a bedside niche, printed matter draws together this intellectual's ruling passions. Mix in ancient relics, Italian family furniture and a singular palette, and these rooms speak volumes about a life less ordinary, concludes Marie-France Boyer. Photography: Bruno Suet

*Main picture: in the drawing room, a sculpture by Catherine Willis, 'La Forêt, Portrait en Pied', stands between two armchairs covered in green brocatelle. Top: a paper lampshade by Orsina Sforza sits on the mantelpiece, behind which can be seen reflected a bookcase by Marianne Pascal. Fragments of fluted marble columns lie on the floor*





*Above: a prototype Fornasetti lamp and a small ceramic by Louisélio rest on a Roman florist's table in the study. Louis XVI chairs from Anna's family home in Siena face out from the floor-to-ceiling shelves. Opposite: in the hallway, Anna's photographic series 'Vanities' lines up above a velvet Italian Empire sofa. The carpet is from Bukhara*

*You couldn't live* in a more secret or a more genuinely Parisian street. Very narrow and lined with tall 17th-century houses, Rue Visconti is not named after the director of *Senso* or *The Leopard*, but after an obscure 19th-century sculptor, the son of an Italian archaeologist. But long before that, one night in 1572, this street was red with the blood of the St Bartholomew's Day massacre. It is said that Queen Margot (Marguerite de Valois), a key player in that event, had her kitchen garden here. Later, it was here that Racine died and that Balzac printed *The Physiology of Marriage*.

All this suits Anna Vivante down to the ground – a strong personality and a fine figure of a woman, she's a young forty-something in jeans and shirt with a cigarette always within reach. It's been 13 years since this Italian, who is Parisian by adoption, moved here, into a magnificently proportioned building dating back to 1690. The house was designed for a family of Jansenists, but a publisher, who left behind some unusual woodwork that suits Anna's free spirit and fanciful nature, lived here just before her. Anna obeys no aesthetic laws; she does what she likes. All the same, certain items of furniture inherited from her grandmother's big and much-loved house have come here, as modest and elegant traces of a past that she has assimilated and revisited.

Brought up in a cultured family in Milan, Anna attended university there before going to Rome to study Middle Eastern archaeology. Then she spent eight enthusiastic years at the excavations of Ebla in Syria, where an entire city, known from Sumerian texts, is being unearthed. After her thesis on religious installations in Mesopotamia, and angered by a dispute with her college, she left Rome and moved to Paris, where she worked for several Italian cultural institutes before devoting herself to writing and photography. In the meantime, she found herself falling in love with the city. 'The French are more hypocritical than the Italians, but more civilised. I feel free in Paris,' says Anna.

All these different strata of her life can be seen in her lovely apartment, with its 4m-high ceilings and three large rooms shot through with fresh bright colours. Anna has kept these colours to the kitchen, the small spaces and the linking areas which are, like the folds and interstices of a space that has been repeatedly altered, one of its luxuries and charms. The entrance hall and corridors are generously painted, including radiator pipes and doors, in a luminous yellow-green: 'I was struck by a wonderful scarab that I still have somewhere,' says Anna. She was also inspired by a deep, what she calls 'Matisse', blue that she had in her childhood bedroom in the big house in Siena. By contrast, the kitchen is blood-red – 'When I repainted the apartment I had in mind a portrait of Louis XIV with red, really red, heels,' she says.

The entrance hall features a rather theatrical 19th-century Russian chandelier that is juxtaposed by an Italian Empire-



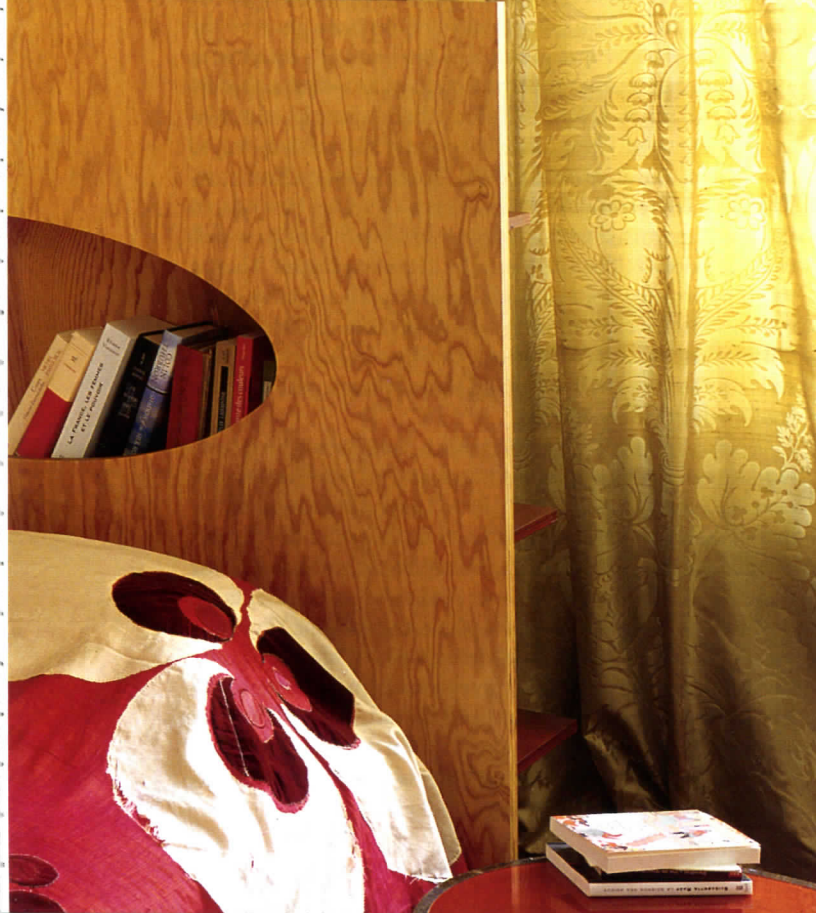






*Main picture: a 19th-century replica of a horse's head from the Parthenon is stabled in the niche of a Neoclassical bookcase looking towards old lime-green silk curtains. Opposite, top: Marianne Pascal's bed has shelves at the back, and a recess in the front, of the ply headboard. The cover, by Isabella Ducrot, is contemporary. Bottom: next to a 1930s studded French armchair, Tina Maselli's take on Manet's 'Déjeuner sur l'Herbe' is painted directly on the wall*









*Above: in the corridor that doubles as a dressing room, Sudanese panther slippers lie in front of a 19th-century family easy chair covered in a striped cotton found in a Cairo souk. Opposite: dominated by a 1940s Italian men's wardrobe, the kitchen is entered via a replica of 16th-century doors found in the Château de Anet*

style sofa, recently covered in orange velvet. Via a double door, often left ajar, it adjoins a study, the space of which is almost entirely occupied by a zinc-topped florist's table. Anna works on this table next to her computer, which stands against a wall of bookshelves designed by a friend, Marianne Pascal, like the one in the drawing room. There are lots of small showcases in orange wood in this storage unit, containing fragments of pottery or other unusual objects that are hard to identify.

Anna began taking photographs as a student, when she went on an extended road trip, for which she bought herself a Nikon camera. For two-and-a-half months she photographed Islamic architecture, ancient Muslim statues and flowers. All these subjects are passions she still has, even though she sometimes works for more frivolous magazines such as Italian *Elle*. These days, she exhibits in Paris at the gallery of Bénédicte Siroux, and since Nan Goldin bought one of her photos the future is opening up for her.

Crossing the study, back in Anna's Paris home, you come to the drawing room that has an odd 1900 ceiling with doves and cupids inspired by Boucher. 'I would have preferred a Braque, like the ceiling with birds all over it that you can see in the Louvre,' she laments with her usual humour. Opposite the marble fireplace she has arranged a set of comfortable chairs covered by a very skilful upholsterer in a sumptuous green brocatelle. The same treatment has been given to the chairs in her bedroom, giving this intellectual's apartment a comfort that makes conversation easy, as well as a sophisticated and timeless air. In the large bedroom, she commissioned her friend Titina Maselli, a painter and set designer, to paint a fresco straight onto the wall. Anna wanted a Bronzino, Titina was determined to paint Goya's *La Maja Desnuda*, so they compromised with a *Déjeuner sur l'Herbe* that goes well with the bookshelf bed designed by Marianne Pascal. Then, a vast blue dressing-room corridor leads to a white marble bathroom. This private part of the apartment benefits from very tall windows with small panes, offering views over Roman-style roof terraces with vines and potted plants, and different roof levels in blue-grey zinc.

Books, archaeological fragments, rugs, family furniture, works of art by friends, and African and Middle Eastern objects are arranged in a strict order – 'I have a little Swiss blood in me, that'll be why,' says Anna – but also relate to one another in a way that evokes time, literature, art and history. 'For the private individual, the private environment represents the universe. In it he gathers remote places and the past. His drawing room is a box in the world theatre,' wrote Walter Benjamin. In Anna's apartment, colour gives a modern dynamic to the late 17th-century architecture and the faded old silk fabrics a sensuality that harmonises them. From the chandeliers on, it all seems inhabited by an owner who very much resembles the place where she lives ■



