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JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2021

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IN A 16TH-CENTURY TUSCAN VILLA BRIMMING
WITH HISTORY, DESIGNER **HUBERT ZANDBERG**
ASSEMBLES A RICH AND LAYERED TABLEAU.

In the grand salon of a 16th-century villa near Siena, Italy, designed by Hubert Zandberg, the sofas in a Mulberry velvet and bronze side tables are all custom. The white armchairs are covered in a de Le Cuona fabric, the chandeliers are Murano glass, and the artwork is by David Schnell.

BY NANCY HASS PRODUCED BY CYNTHIA FRANK PHOTOGRAPHS BY SIMON UPTON

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FEW YEARS AGO, A SOUTH AFRICAN couple in their 40s living in Geneva asked Hubert Zandberg, a fellow countryman with a design and architecture practice in London, for help with a sophisticated problem. The house they had recently built, which fitted in gracefully with the Swiss city's sleek modern residences, was feeling a bit too Brutalist. Could he make some interventions that would soften the effect, without betraying the house's minimalist DNA?

Zandberg, a self-proclaimed maximalist who has made a reputation with projects that combine historical research and a poetic, highly refined sensibility, jumped at the challenge. He was intrigued by the idea of bringing warmth to a structure that was built to seem aloof. To that end, while he kept the shapes crisp, he introduced curves and textured fabrics to soften the Cubist lines.

So charmed was the couple with the result that two years later when they bought a vacation house, a Tuscan estate with 10th-century origins a few miles from Siena, they knew it made elegant sense to hand the project to Zandberg; he would be in his maximalist element in the historic buildings. For the designer, working on this home enabled him to tap a geyser of knowledge from a lifetime of collecting rare and precious objects. He mixes centuries with abandon, enabling the spaces he creates to seem as though they are an accretion of generational memories instead of reading as period pieces. And so, the socially prominent but discreet couple let him have virtually free rein over the expansive interiors of the new property. "We knew each



ABOVE: In the kitchen, the table is custom and the chairs are vintage. The woven chair is from Malawi, the pendant is from a Paris flea market, and vintage cake molds hang on the wall above the sink. **OPPOSITE:** In a sitting room next to the study, the armchair is of a Rubelli fabric, and the Italian cocktail table and Pascal Sarfati floor lamp are both vintage. The 1960s chandelier is from Lorfor's Antiques, and the set of bug plates on the wall is from a London market.

other so well by then," Zandberg says.

The structure and setting of the Tuscan house are spiritually as distant as imaginable from the Geneva property. That was the contrast the couple craved: an immersive escape from polished Geneva to a place where they could gather their large extended family for big meals accompanied by bottles of the region's Montepulciano wines. Set in isolation amid the low rolling hills of Tuscany, the house centers on a brick watchtower from the Middle Ages. The chapel and main residence were built in the 16th century by the architect and painter Baldassarre Peruzzi, who worked with Donato Bramante and Raphael and painted the frescoes in the San

Giovanni chapel of the duomo in Siena. The previous owners had restored the brick exterior and updated the plumbing and electricity, burnishing the original details; the Geneva couple wanted to carry on that respectful stewardship. "We feel we are more like custodians than owners," says the wife. "This property is so much bigger than us."

The proportions of the house, unsurprisingly, are vast, with several large public chambers and a slew of bedrooms. As such, instead of mapping out a color plan room by room with the owners, Zandberg laid in front of them a series of hues, patterns, and textures. Once they signed off on the palette, they left it to him to distribute it.



Perhaps the most challenging space was the grand salon, an enormous beamed expanse with 16-foot ceilings. Now, the room has a Venetian aura, awash in blues and greens, effortlessly incorporating centuries-old furnishings with the contemporary art the couple collects, as well as some heirlooms inherited from their families. Lush upholstered seating that Zandberg designed is interspersed with objects he found in the world's great flea markets and shops, including Clignancourt in Paris and L'Isle sur la Sorgue in Provence. A marble mantel by the 16th-century sculptor Giovanni Antonio Paracca (Il Valsoldo) sits across from antique carved wall sconces and two works from 2016, a moody oil by the Scottish artist Kevin Harman and a 14-foot-long canvas by the German painter David Schnell.

The study, crafted from a long, wide loggia off the salon, provides a vivid example of how Zandberg introduces aesthetic tension: an airy rectangle, it has an austerity that seems Florentine in its simplicity; the ceiling is hung with globe lanterns from Jamb in London instead of the more expected ornate chandeliers.

Zandberg's sense of whimsy is especially evident in the guest bedrooms. In one, a French bedroom chair covered in Fermoie fabric is juxtaposed with vintage rattan, and a French Industrial bedside table is lit with a Paul Smith Anglepoise lamp.

The project, which took two years, was a prolonged exercise in balancing excess with restraint. While maximalism in the wrong hands can "topple over into cacophony," as the designer puts it, when executed with the scientific precision in which Zandberg specializes, it provides a mellifluous bounty. "Every maximalist is a closet minimalist," he says. "It's like writing music. You don't say to yourself, Wow, maybe there are too many notes in this. You ask yourself, Are these the *right* notes? Do they sing?" ■

RIGHT, FROM TOP: In the salon, an antique needlepoint ottoman is topped with a Persian tray and a mancala board, and the chandeliers are early 20th century from Lorfords Antiques. Above a custom console in the study hang two framed works by Giovanni Battista Piranesi (*center*) and pictures of eminent men.



The custom dining table is surrounded by a mix of antique Spanish leather dining chairs and custom chairs covered in fabrics by Rubelli and Lizzo. The vintage birdcage and the framed prints (*left*) are from a Paris flea market, the chandeliers are cast iron, and the sconces are custom. The artwork (*right*) is by Piranesi.



ABOVE: The custom guest bed is surrounded by a canopy in a de Le Cuona fabric and flanked by brass-and-opaline lamps. The side table is a painted plant stand, and the portrait is from the homeowner's collection. **RIGHT:** In the primary bathroom, a vintage brass trolley from a Paris flea market is next to a travertine bathtub. The screen is a custom design.



LEFT: A path framed by boxwoods leads to the fountain, which is original to the property, and a pergola covered in wisteria. The garden overlooks the Tuscan countryside and hills in the distance. **OPPOSITE:** In the main bedroom, the bed is a custom design, the canopy fabric is by Rubelli with a trim by Casamance, and the 18th-century bench is upholstered in a Pierre Frey fabric. The custom nightstands are topped with iron lamps from a Paris flea market. The carved sconces with porcelain flowers are French, and the vintage mirror is Italian. The walls are of a custom plaster finish, the chandelier is French, and the antique rug is Persian. For details, see Resources.

