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*In one of the most storied palazzos in Rome,
an inveterate traveler assembles a
global array of cultural riches and flea-market finds to create a
distinctly personal refuge*

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In the living room of Roberto Beghini's apartment in Rome's Palazzo Doria Pamphilj, the antique trunk and 1920s portraits are Chinese, the lithograph is by Miela Reina, and the watercolor is by Cristiano and Patrizio Alviti; the tiled flooring was installed in the 1930s.
FACING PAGE: The living room's pair of armchairs came from the Teatro di San Carlo in Naples, the red-leather chair is from the 1930s, and the sofa is covered with a Tunisian cotton blanket; the bookcase is custom made, and the antique rug is Iranian.

ROME IS A CITY OF PALACES. THE ITALIAN PRIME MINISTER GOVERNS



from the Palazzo Chigi, the president from the Quirinale; the Senate meets in the Palazzo Madama, the Chamber of Deputies in the Montecitorio. The Trevi Fountain abuts the Palazzo Poli. And art lovers swarm to the enormous Palazzo Doria Pamphilj, which houses a famous gallery filled with glorious works by Caravaggio, Titian, Raphael, and Velázquez—most famously his circa-1650 portrait of the Pamphilj family's most intimidating member, Pope Innocent X.

The Doria Pamphilj has an illustrious, if complicated, history. Begun in the early 1500s, it rose around a large colonnaded courtyard that was reputedly the work of Donato Bramante, the architect who provided the original designs for St. Peter's Basilica. Construction didn't really finish until late in the 19th century, and today the palace is mainly known as a Baroque monument containing not only the Galleria Doria Pamphilj, but also 250 private apartments, among them some of the city's most sumptuous interiors. Italian public relations guru Roberto Begnini occupies one such dwelling. For a culture maven like him, "a place that's so identified with the city," he says, is the ideal home. He calls it "*molto, molto Roma*—the maximum of Rome."

Begnini (not to be confused with the comic actor Roberto Benigni) was born in the northern Italian city of Verona, and when he was 20 he moved south to Rome. There, he received his degree in the conservation of cultural heritage and went on to found Studio Begnini, which over the past two decades has handled publicity for a long list of museums and cultural institutions. It was through Studio Begnini that he came to know the Pamphilj family, whose descendants still reside at the palace and manage the formidable art collection.

Though Begnini's rooms date from around the late 1600s, they have seen a lot of work since then. The beautiful tiled floors were installed in the 1930s; the living room's striking gold-and-white chessboard

LEFT: The kitchen table has a custom-made base and an antique-marble top, the iron garden chairs are from the 1960s, and the bone light fixture was bought at an antiques shop in Kathmandu; the large abstract painting is by Begnini. **FACING PAGE:** The living room's 19th-century table, a family heirloom, holds 1930s Mexican bronze sculptures, and the chairs and English chandelier are from the early 1900s; the 19th-century painting above the door was found in a Palermo flea market, and the wallpaper is by Cole & Son. See Resources.



is laid out in tiles of graniglia, a high-quality mixture of concrete and grains of marble. As for the brilliantly mismatched furnishings and fixtures, they're "the result of years of searching and many, many trips," says Begnini, for whom travel has been a lifelong passion. "Every piece comes from a different place—I've traveled a tremendous amount, loaded down with enormous things!"

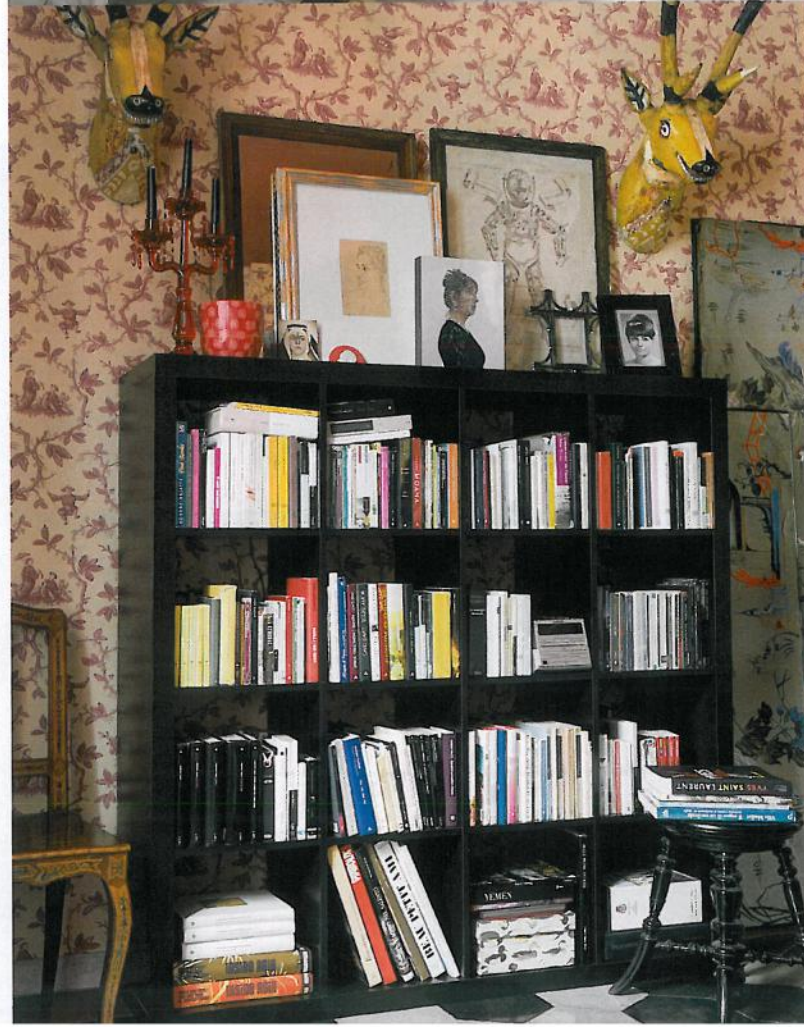
The two bronze statues of North American Indians on the living room table, for example, he found in the Yucatán. The frothy crystal chandelier above them came from a little market in Norwich, England, and the antique rugs are Iranian. The small light fixture dangling over the kitchen table (an old Italian altar yielded up the marble tabletop) is carved bone from Nepal. The bright-yellow wood deer heads on the bedroom wall are Balinese, and the Chinese lanterns around the bed are from shops all over the world: "Whenever I've seen a pretty one, different from the usual, I've bought it," says Begnini.

Every object has a story. He found the living room's two red-velvet chairs in Naples a few years ago, when the city's famous Teatro di San Carlo, where Rossini and Donizetti were once resident composers, was being refurbished and its furniture auctioned off; they were orchestra seats. The pair of portraits of Chinese children were photographed and hand-tinted in Shanghai in the 1920s. Begnini spotted them in the shop of a Roman antiques dealer and immediately had to have them. But he was told they'd been promised to the American painter Cy Twombly, who lived close by. Begnini wouldn't give up: He kept going back and repeating, "I want them, I want them!" And it worked. By the time he brought them home, he says, they felt like relatives.

He's especially proud of the bathroom, with its Carrara marble and tiles, which he designed himself, inspired by Turkish hammams. Glued to the windowpanes are some three dozen mid-20th-century photographic plates, the work of a Palermo photographer who specialized in ceremonies—baptisms, communions, weddings. Begnini doesn't much like curtains; the plates furnish privacy along with a startlingly original effect, echoed by the dozens of religious images and relics on the bathroom wall.

And everywhere there are books—somewhere around 3,000 volumes, including one of his own, *5 Star Houses*, which was published last year in collaboration with photographer Gianni Franchellucci. It highlights 20 luxurious Italian interiors.

Of his vast accumulation of tomes, Begnini says, "It's mainly a big library of art that's tied to my work." But they are also about more than his work: All those handsome volumes provide more evidence of the human type he so beautifully embodies—the collector. ■



In the master bedroom, a collection of Chinese lanterns hangs from the custom-made four-poster bed, the coverlet is of rabbit fur, and the silk-paneled screen dates from the late 1800s; the toile wallpaper is by Colefax and Fowler. **FACING PAGE, FROM TOP:** The walls of the master bath are lined with religious relics, and photographic plates on the windows serve in place of curtains; Begnini designed the backsplash of Carrara marble. The piano stool in the bedroom is 19th century, the deer sculptures are from Bali, and the tile floors were installed in the 1930s. See Resources.