

“My Great-Uncle Louis Gautier-Vignal bought this place because he said the view would never change,” says Fabrizio Chiesa as we walk through the flat overlooking the Esplanade des Invalides that his family have used for the last four decades as their Paris perch. A close friend of Proust, Gautier-Vignal was at the heart of the literary *beau monde*. He was the author of *Proust connu et inconnu* and collected rare Asian art and objets, acquiring the apartment shortly after World War Two as a space for entertaining his friends. He furnished it simply and welcomed dinner guests such as Somerset Maugham, André Gide and Jean Cocteau, for what must have been some of the most scintillating nights Paris has ever seen. His beloved sister, Comtesse Elisabeth, known by all as “Bilou,” was celebrated as one of most *soignée* women in the city. She was the muse of several great designers, as well as an explorer—with a glacier in the Rocky Mountains named after her. Bilou joined her bachelor brother in hosting soirées against the backdrop of his famous collection of 18th-century Tibetan art and that eternal view.

Having inherited the apartment, Gautier-Vignal’s nephew, Piero, scion of the Milanese Chiesa family, and his Swiss wife, Henriette, longed to make it a beguiling property of their own, to be used mainly as an entertaining space, while paying homage to its intriguing past.

Meeting the revered architect and interior designer Renzo Mongiardino in Milan was a stroke of serendipity for the couple. There was an instant meeting of minds, according to their son. The designer recast the once spartan interior into rooms that “sing and dance,” with inspired illusion, echoing the words of another devotee, Lee Radziwill, talking about her English country house transformed under Mongiardino’s hand. While not large in scale—there are two bedrooms—the apartment had the graceful bones and perfect proportions for the “conjurer of the eye” to create layers of startling beauty that could be only his. Between 1988-9, Mongiardino collaborated with Emilio Carcano to conceive a space both filled with his own signature genius and charmingly personal to the family who lived here.

The current owner, Fabrizio Chiesa, recently gained the jewel-box interior, swimming with, in his words, “illusionary wall effects, layered with texture and lined with pilaster strips under glass; the columns in faux marble; the pale, creamy beauty of the stucco bas-reliefs alongside rich velvet seating...” Utterly untouched since it was decorated, the apartment is entered through a book-lined hall enveloped in *bois de placage*. The family are discreetly private and their home remains one of the last undisturbed set pieces of a great visionary of 20th-century design.

Madeleine Castaing ‘Rayure Broderie’ stripes in the double drawing room are a pleasing foil to the reverse glass pilaster strips and handsome columns. The intimate grandeur is given an appearance of authenticity with the addition of *courty portraits*, including *The Countess of Berkeley* by Jacob Huysmans, the blue silks of her dress in complete harmony with the fabric walls. Mongiardino himself designed the seating, covering voluptuous sofas and armchairs in deep-red paisley and textured brown velvets; they remain as vividly arresting as the day they came to roost. True to form, Mongiardino had the vast Mughal-style carpet created in northern India, its motif inspired by a painting by Venetian artist Lorenzo Lotto admired by Henriette. “It took one single family, including grandmothers and children, an entire year to weave, and is a treasure in its own right,” reflects Fabrizio.

In the bedrooms, Mongiardino’s Orientalist reveries take full flight with walls, beds and windows all cocooned in stylized Indienne toiles by historic fabric house Braquenié. Conceived by the designer as backdrops for the Tibetan *thangkas* inherited with the apartment, the effect, to use a phrase of Umberto Pasti’s, “weeps with emotion.” The shimmer of oil paintings including the Emperor of Prussia on his horse adds depth to the ravishing scenes. “We see this as a sanctuary, the flourish of a great hand,” says Fabrizio as we stand gazing out of the long windows onto the golden dome of Les Invalides and the moody autumn skies of Paris. “Living here is both a privilege and an aesthetic fantasy—what more could we ask for.”



A Beautiful World in Paris

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