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SINGULAR BEAUTIES

Achille Salvagni is an internationally renowned designer who has created some of the most original interiors of the past five years. He discusses craftsmen from Vatican City and the importance of starting with art

Achille Salvagni trained as an architect in Rome before moving to Sweden in order to understand the design process from a completely different perspective. He has fused these two attitudes into a practice renowned for a contemporary take on Modernism that is both philosophical and romantic. Alongside his interiors, Salvagni creates stunning limited-edition furniture. It is no wonder that his clients include Jeff Koons and Michael Bloomberg.

WHAT MADE YOU WANT TO WORK WITH INTERIORS?

Well, I would define myself much more as a psychologist rather than an architect or a designer, and I'm fascinated by discovering intimate parts of the souls of my clients. Interiors allow you to uncover the secret sides of people that are not often revealed. I love translating someone else's wishes into reality. If I had just been an architect, I probably wouldn't have had this kind of opportunity.

IS THERE A DESIGN PHILOSOPHY THAT YOU BRING TO YOUR WORK?

My philosophy is my method and not a style. I hate to be associated with one style – it makes me feel old and stuck. Following a method allows you to reach different, unexpected results every time.



An interior of a London home
by Achille Salvagni



AT HOME WITH ART

HOW DO YOU BALANCE MODERNITY AND HISTORY?

Growing up in Rome, I had a great sense of heritage. Materials, patinas and architectural references all pattern my designs. And that's why I'm drawn to an aesthetic which refers to a certain 1920s and 1930s experience, because that was, for me, the time when people were looking at the future and taking stock of the past.

IS YOUR DESIGN PROCESS DIFFERENT FOR INTERIORS AND FURNITURE?

Well, of course, when designing a room the space is already defined, and with furniture you have a series of experiments, intuit feelings and sensations are brought together to create a big picture. Designing is more like sculpting and I could never decorate a pre-existing space – I need to physically shape the room before I can decorate it. Looked at from a distance, the two approaches are very similar – even if, when you are in the process, they appear completely different. In both cases you arrange layers of stories that, together, create a bigger scenario.

WHAT DO YOU LOOK FOR IN A WORK OF ART OR A PIECE OF FURNITURE THAT MAKES IT RELEVANT TO A CONTEMPORARY INTERIOR?

I am always driven by beauty and uniqueness. Uniqueness can be ugly sometimes, but if you discover the process behind it, it can transform into the most beautiful piece in the world.

HOW DO YOU ENSURE THAT CRAFTSMANSHIP STAYS ALIVE?

Craftsmanship is essential to my life and work. My creativity as a furniture designer has been formed around a group of extremely talented craftspeople. I give them a canvas to transform their capabilities into reality. Craftsmanship gives breath to a piece. One person who works with me has five generations of knowledge of working with bronze in the Vatican City palaces, and my works become part of this story. It's not me giving him an opportunity, but it's me having the chance to work with him every day, with his knowledge, knowing that the same hands touch Borromini and Bernini bronzes and then mine. It's an honour.



PHOTO: PHILIPPE KLUDT; COURTESY: ACHILLE SALVAGNI ATELIER



(From left) A London interior;
Achille Salvagni in Rome

HOW DOES THE INTRODUCTION OF AN ARTWORK CHANGE THE WAY YOU THINK ABOUT A ROOM OR A SPACE?

I always ask my clients to start with art, because it can drive the design in a completely different way. I remember a project where all these specialist works had to be shown in a space; the mouldings and the way I treated the environment were inspired by the movement of certain surfaces of artworks by artists such as Enrico Castellani, Agostino Bonalumi or Lucio Fontana.

I am lucky enough to have knowledgeable clients that have their own art collections and so it's mostly me suggesting how to display the art in the right way rather than suggesting to them how to complete their collection.

RIZZOLI IS PUBLISHING YOUR FIRST MONOGRAPH. WHAT'S IT LIKE TO LOOK BACK AT YOUR CAREER?

Well, the Rizzoli book covers just the last five years. I wanted to concentrate on my more recent work. It's a testament to what I've done that makes me excited to move into the future. ■

Achille Salvagni (Rizzoli) will be published in October, while Salvagni's forthcoming collection of Murano glass furniture and decorative objects will be unveiled at PAD London (30 September–6 October) and Achille Salvagni Atelier (9 October–23 December)