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Classical Epiphany

NEW LIFE FOR A ONCE-ABANDONED MEDIEVAL PROPERTY IN ITALY

Restoration Architecture by Marco Vidotto

Interior Design by Susan Schuyler Smith, ASID, of Spectrum Interior Design

Text by John Loring/Photography by Kim Sargent



BEFORE



AFTER

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OPPOSITE TOP: A couple bought the deconsecrated church and an adjacent apartment in La Convertioie, a fortress in Italy's Chianti region that dates to the 11th century, and asked Siena architect Marco Vidotto and Vero Beach, Florida, designer Susan Schuyler Smith to fuse them into a single residence. ABOVE AND OPPOSITE ABOVE: The nave—now the living room—was restored to reflect its original design. The 16th-century oil depicts Christ's presentation at the temple.



In their serene detachment from the momenta of the modern world, Tuscany's hill towns today maintain all that exquisite simplicity so beloved of Florence's and Siena's Renaissance masters, who regularly depicted them in the backgrounds of their paintings of the holy and the heroic.

Artists and designers have long been drawn to the tranquil beauty of these villages' clean lines, plain geometrical forms and graceful proportions situated in hilly landscapes of vineyards and olive groves punctuated by cypress and live oak trees.

Indeed, between 1503 and 1506, Leonardo da Vinci painted the *Mona Lisa*, which likely was set at the Villa Vignamaggio, in the Chianti region, some 20 miles south of Florence. In 2005 Vero Beach, Florida, designer Susan Schuyler Smith began the restoration of a historically significant property in Le Convertioie, only three kilometers away.

Le Convertioie was fortified around the turn of the 12th century to guard part of the route between Florence and Siena; and, like most such towns, its church and houses formed a central conglomerate with shared walls. In the late Renaissance, the fortifications of many small outposts were demolished, but Le Convertioie today probably looks little different from what Leonardo da Vinci would have seen 500 years ago.

The property that Smith's clients purchased in 2000 included the village church and the attached apartment and its garden. The church, once dedicated to Saint Sylvester, had been deconsecrated. Abandoned in the 1950s, it was stripped of



Restoration of the church was done under the direction of the institution charged with preserving Italy's cultural heritage. Smith's goal was to "create a warm and cozy space with the use of lighting, furnishings and color," while honoring the structure's rich history. Vidotto brought the fresco above the altar's replastered arch back to life.



AFTER

ABOVE AND ABOVE RIGHT: Converted to a study, the sacristy had been added in the 1800s; Smith chose a wainscot chair and trestle table from that period. Kravet sofa fabric.



BEFORE

its religious art, with only its altars, confessionals and baptismal font left behind. The sacristy, which the previous owners used for storage, was filled with rusted, obsolete farm equipment, an old stove, wine and oil bottles and hunks of salt pork hung from the rafters to cure. The house and garden were not in much better repair.

Smith had already done the interiors for her clients' homes in Florida and North Carolina; however, the prospect of restoring a historic property in Italy and dealing with the Soprintendenza per i Beni Architettonici (part of the strict Italian historic preservation institution) was a whole new adventure. Luckily, the owners saw the work of an architect in nearby Siena featured in a book they were studying on the restoration of Italian homes. They contacted the architect, Marco Vidotto, and learned that he was working on a commission to design an important new church. "His affinity for churches both old and new," the wife says, "made him a natural choice for our project."

Vidotto recalls, "It was a fascinating project, not simply from an architectural standpoint but also from a historical one. I took the approach that the work should be finished to the highest degree, much as it would be in the renovation of an important church in Siena or Florence. We made this remarkable effort to restore the building to its original state—not because the Soprintendenza required that, but because it was important to the owners and to me that it be done that way."

In July 2005 work on the chapel began. Before replastering, walls were stripped



The dining room, with its original beams, previously served as a loggia connecting the apartment to the church. Lounge chair fabric, Kravet.



ABOVE: Smith installed the center island and cabinetry in the kitchen. The mid-19th-century fireplace “was kept as the focal point,” says the designer. RIGHT: In the terrace garden, Chianti-based landscape architect Nancy Leszczynski planted Italian sage, rosemary, a pomegranate tree and assorted other flora.

down to the *galestro*, a marl unique to the Chianti region. The unstable roof was removed and rebuilt. An unforeseen construction peculiarity caused the vault above the main altar to collapse in the process. A new vault was built. As the outworn floor was being removed to make way for underfloor heating and wiring, a large central cruciform section was discovered to contain the church crypts. They were left undisturbed, and heating and wiring were routed around them. The remaining floor was then resurfaced with handmade *cotto* pavers, from the Viterbo area of Italy, chosen for their pale rose shade that matched the color of the original flooring. The two side altars of dark *pietra serena* were cleaned and restored. The two confessionals were resurfaced and repainted their original darkest green.

Although the interior was undoubtedly once well populated with religious paintings and sculptures, “artwork was kept to a minimum,” Smith observes, “to emphasize the architecture of the church.” A 15th-century wooden statue of a saint

occupies the niche above one altar, which is appropriately furnished with two tall candleholders. Above the facing altar there is a 16th-century Florentine painting of the presentation of Christ, whose architectural background of receding Renaissance arches complements the architecture of the church now gracefully transformed into the central living room of the house.

Restful colors and the lavish use of lighting play no small part in the great success of the interior. “Exact measures were taken to ensure the authenticity of the colors used in the renovation,” the designer explains. “We were not only respectful of colors used in the original building but matched them perfectly with samples from the original walls.”

“If one thing comes to mind when I think of this project, it’s integrity,” she concludes. “Part of the beauty of the building is its history, and by incorporating that into the design of the renovation, it took the project to the next level and maintained the dignity of this timeless property.” □



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