



Home Tour: Stephan Janson

How did an avowedly minimalist designer wind up as guardian of a Milanese temple to maximalism?



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When Stephan Janson opens the door to the densely saturated *wunderkammer* that is his Milan home, the only sensible response is to gasp. A taxidermied alligator stares stiffly at you, mounted on a 17th-century gilt wood settee of ripped silk, bought for a pittance from an antiques market. A full-wall vitrine encloses a riot of feathers: African and Amazonian headdresses, Native American war bonnets, Chinese hairpieces. Floor-to-ceiling shelves of books—part of the apartment’s 25-year-old redesign by Roberto Peregalli—line every available wall, organizing the more than 20,000 volumes by art, history and other subjects. Hand-knotted carpets conceal the wooden floors, decorate walls as fragments in frames and even hang on curtain rods, shrouding the space in near darkness and blocking the chill from the windows in this mid-19th-century apartment, which lacks heating in several rooms. “Carpets on carpets on carpets,” says Janson. “That’s what this place is.”

Insulated by the walls of books and layers of rugs, the warren of rooms teems with collections of superannuated beauties—Ancient Roman statuary, West African Nok sculptures from over 2,000 years ago, a 19th-century Alpine armoire encrusted with neat lines of woody pinecone scales. But Janson, a 62-year-old French fashion designer and couturier of bright frocks that defy trends, insists that all of this enchantment has nothing to do with him.

“I would live in a monk’s cell if I could choose,” he says, reclining on a velvet jacquard fauteuil against rows of books hung with small paintings on each shelf. “At 18, I painted my first apartment all white, and lived very happily in that kind of bare environment, until this place.” This place—with its fading frescoed patterns on the walls and ceilings—is the work of Umberto Pasti, the man Janson has called his “consort” for the last 38 years, whom he met on a trip to Italy through a pair of twins. (In a meet-cute worthy of Shakespeare, Pasti had a fling with one of the brothers, and Janson with the other, yet the twins both realized their lovers were destined for each other and introduced them.)

Pasti is a writer, a garden designer and a fervent and encyclopedically informed antiquarian. (“Umberto,” Janson confides, “comes from the kind of family where he’s never really needed to work to support himself.”) He began turning the five rooms of this apartment into his personal museum when the couple moved in 35 years ago, and continues to add treasures as he finds them, but he no longer lives here. The couple owns a property in the Moroccan countryside south of Tangier, where they replanted multitudes of bulbs uprooted by Tangier’s urban development.



Janson worked with Diane von Furstenberg for several years, including on her New York boutique Diane. In her memoir she refers to him as a “talented young Frenchman” who she brought over from Italy.







Pasti's garden passions, previously limited to a shady patch outside of Janson's Milan atelier, became as absorbing as his love for antiques, and 20 years ago, he relocated to their seaside Tangier home to oversee the estate full-time. He has since become an international garden designer, and just published a book with Rizzoli, *Eden Revisited: A Garden in Northern Morocco*, that details the splendors of the Tangier project, beginning with a photo of the waist-high native iris species that now cover their house's hill in deep blues all the way down to the cobalt sea.

"I told him to move there," says Janson of the long distance. "It keeps the desire alive." So now Janson, a slender and boyish man with salt-and-pepper hair set off by heavy-framed dark glasses, lives surrounded by relics that are mostly not his own. "I don't like the idea of collecting at all," he says, relocating to a table covered by a threadbare 17th-century Turkish rug of faded turquoise and vermillion. "Umberto is a scholar, and I'm happy he's obsessed. I really enjoy it too, but I never would have chosen it."

A few of Janson's own possessions do dot the home's collections: scarabs in a narrow pair of vitrine boxes; a bronze lamp with a coiling snake gripping the lampshade, which was originally a gift from the poet Gabriele D'Annunzio to the actress Eleonora Duse; a portrait painted by Christian Bérard of the journalist Marie-Louise Bousquet, who introduced Pierre Bergé to Yves Saint Laurent—a present from his mother when he was 18, and already long-obsessed with the designer whose work inspired him to pursue "this fairy tale of couture," he says.

The painting was a talisman for his coming career, with stints alongside titans of the fashion industry, as he apprenticed with Kenzo, seconded Diane von Furstenberg, relaunched Emilio Pucci's fashion collections and reimagined womenswear for Loro Piana. But his own line,

inaugurated 30 years ago and full of prints and color, remains resolutely small, almost private. He sells from his custom atelier and at just a couple dozen stores, eschewing online retail and shifting fads to make pieces that get bequeathed from grandmothers to mothers to daughters—much like Pasti's cache that surrounds him at home.

"'Sustainable' they call it now—but to me it's always just been about making things whose quality was worth its price. There are not so many modern things of quality out there today," he says, noting the lack of modern styles in his home as well. Enduring quality; beauty that lasts: The apartment's collections may not inspire Janson's own, as he says, but there is an evident affinity.

In his personal room, which he left bare until five years ago, the decorative collections have moved in: Behind an 18th-century iron-framed canopy bed, there are black-and-white photos from Mama Casset's Senegal photo studio clustered on one wall, and the endless shelves of books on another; a stack of Pasti's books sit on a side table. A yard-long framed photo by Yto Barrada, its subject a young boy in a wig of yellow flowers, lies propped against the floor. "We've run out of wall space here," Janson laments.

Many of the couple's relics are souvenirs brought home from voyages around the world. "In the old days, you could get on a plane with the craziest stuff," Janson says, dragging on his cigarette and pointing to a 5-foot-tall Chinese-inspired bookshelf in black lacquer that Pasti carried under his arm on a flight from London. "You could smoke. You could travel with furniture. It was a great time." He indicates a wall of the apartment hung with brocades from Morocco, Uzbekistan, Portugal and Mexico. "Traveling lads," he sighs, caressing the embroidery. "Everything has a story, and only Umberto knows the story."

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Janson and Umberto Pasti's other home in Tangier is host to a similarly vast collection of antiques—supplemented by a garden brimming with endangered native botanical species.



Janson estimates that his Milan apartment is also home to some 20,000 books.

