

As part of the renovation of the Villa Medici, architect India Mahdavi has reimagined interiors in vibrant colours that make the rooms sing.

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DESIGN — EXPERTS — Rome

FRESH PALETTE

How do you breathe new life into a legend? In the salons of the Villa Medici in Rome, where Galileo pondered the stars and his charge of heresy, and where Debussy composed his unorthodox orchestral works on a grand piano, architect India Mahdavi has recast dwellings heavy with history by interweaving her lyrically colour-soaked approach with the antique interiors.

“Do you like it?” she asks as we enter the Galileo room, the astronomer’s former bedroom. Mahdavi is an eminent force in today’s design world, celebrated for her unexpected and unflinching way with colour and its collateral joy, yet even she quivered at the prospect of intervening in a place of such cultural significance. “It’s intimidating because you know that your work will be part of the history of the villa,” says Mahdavi. “But being nervous felt good. It triggered a different way of thinking that I’d forgotten after so much time in this profession. And when the Villa Medici calls, you don’t say no.”

Built in the 16th century, the villa was unfinished when the Medici family bought it in 1576. They inlaid its entire façade with bas-reliefs from antiquity and filled it with their art collections, passing down the property until it was sold in 1803 to Napoleon and converted into the new headquarters of the French Academy. Today the site functions as a museum while carrying on the academy’s mission to host French artists, musicians and creatives awarded a residency – as Claude Debussy once was. “It’s magical to know who was here before us,” says Mahdavi.

Mahdavi’s revamp of six rooms is part of a larger project: “Re-enchanting the Villa” has already seen a set of ground-floor rooms updated by Silvia Fendi, with more rooms to be redecorated by young craftspeople chosen through an open competition.

In a jade-green scarf and Celine high-tops, Mahdavi reclines on a Christian Liaigre couch in the Galileo room – a large and linear sofa that she had reupholstered in thick woven linen of rose pink, tinted with natural dye for a muted tone as if already timeworn. She included an antique desk and Renaissance-era chest of drawers, adding an ancient bust of the goddess Diana from the villa’s vast art store. At the centre of the room below a fresco of cherubs, a four-poster bed that Mahdavi designed herself commands attention, sitting raised on a platform for a better view of the Eternal City and the stars



above. Inspired by imposing Renaissance beds at a palazzo in Florence, her own design renders the monumental structure lighthearted and modern. A geometric pattern from an original floor in the Villa Medici covers the frame, with a palette of yellow, pink and burgundy in complex marquetry. “The colour and the patterns make it modern, like pop Renaissance,” says Mahdavi. The frame was crafted by the woodworkers of Maison Craman-Lagarde, one of many artisans collaborating on the project.

In the Debussy room next door, the bed’s marquetry is a medley of fuchsia, tangerine, and grass greens: what Mahdavi calls “acidic spring colours”. “They vibrate in a very fresh way, like his music and his romanticism.” The composer apparently hated his two years at the Villa Medici, resenting the then conservatism of the institution. “But now I’m sure that he would love it because it’s colourful,” says Mahdavi. Notably, she eschewed the pastels of the Impressionists commonly coupled with Debussy – she’s not one for heavy-handed references.

Her approach is a sort of synaesthesia, channelling the spirit of a room or a concept into the language of colours, and giving shape and volume to them: the Sketch Gallery in London that made a splash in pink and has been remade in dandelion yellow; her candy-toned dreamscape cafés for Ladurée in Tokyo and Los Angeles. “Everything I do has a cartoonish element; it’s a distorted reality, transformed and stylised like a drawing,” she says. “I would define myself as a poet of colours. What I try to do is to create a harmony, to make a room sing.”

Mahdavi was born in Tehran to Iranian and Egyptian parents. The family moved around, to Massachusetts, New York, Heidelberg and the south of France. Settling in Paris in 2000, Mahdavi founded her namesake studio and has colonised an entire block of the Rue las Cases with her workspace and home. Her peripatetic upbringing merges with influences in her work. In the villa, Mahdavi revisited Cardinal Medici’s original apartments, leaving two rooms largely historical but radically altering a third with a carpet of geometric greens and pinks, mirroring the Renaissance-style garden outside. “In Persian tradition, a rug can be a reflection of a garden.”

Director Sam Stourdzé invited Mahdavi to conceive her own chapter of the renovation. “Mahdavi has the

talent, vision and experience with artisans that we needed for a project like this,” says Stourdzé, standing in the vestibule that, in Mahdavi’s reimagining, holds Debussy’s piano and seating for watching impromptu concerts. Above hang portraits of resident composers: Debussy, of course, as well as Georges Bizet, Hector Berlioz, Yvonne Desportes and Lili Boulanger who, centuries after the French Academy’s foundation, was the first woman composer admitted in 1913 and who the music room is named after. Works by Louise Bourgeois and Sonia Delaunay are featured in the villa as well. “We’re keen to highlight women, not because they are women but because they are fantastic,” says Stourdzé. And Mahdavi is waving the flag for fantastic. In a field long dominated by men, she has triumphed with a vision of design that’s personal and unapologetic, curvilinear, fanciful and inviting – and it’s becoming part of our history. — κ

1. The new look of Cardinal Medici’s old room
2. India Mahdavi’s marquetry bed for the Galileo room
3. The Lili Boulanger music lounge
4. Old and new mix on the antique coffered ceiling, where Claudio Parmiggiani painted butterflies after a fire damaged the old frescos
5. Mahdavi in the Debussy room

