

The living-room ceiling, covered with a late 17th-century fresco depicting the arrival of spring, looks down on a scagliola table from the northern town of Carpi and a chaise longue draped in a silk displaying the Ottoman 'çintamani' motif, a favourite of Carolina Vincenti's

ROMANIAN CATHOLIC

Born in Bucharest, but with roots in Beirut, Haifa and northern Tuscany, writer Carolina Vincenti has filled her 17th-century Roman palazzo with flotsam from these harbours of the heart. Into the aesthetics of exile her partner, the food and wine critic Paolo Scotto, has sprinkled home-grown flavours in the form of fine Italian porcelain and Futurist art. But for the lady of the house, domestic life remains 'a work-in-progress scenario in which to rebuild one's identity'. Text: Marella Caracciolo Chia. Photography: Simon Watson

'What they missed most of all was not the country as a whole,' writes Carolina Vincenti in her latest book, *Fantasmî Romeni* (Romanian Ghosts), which consists of ten portraits of extraordinary exiles, 'but a street, a home, a blossoming.'

Born in Bucharest and raised in Beirut, Carolina was a child when she moved to Rome with her mother after the onset of the Lebanese Civil War (1975). They rented a flat in an old palazzo and filled it with rugs, textiles, books and whatever else they'd salvaged from home. 'We didn't have a TV, and I hardly spoke Italian, so I spent my days reading and re-reading the Arab and Romanian children's books I had managed to squeeze into my suitcase.' The descendant of a family

with roots in Beirut, Haifa, Bucharest and northern Tuscany, and the heir to a syncretic religious heritage, art historian Carolina embodies some of the traits that have characterised exiles through time. These include an ability to adapt to new surroundings (she speaks five languages fluently) and a yearning to rekindle her forebears' cultural heritage. 'Every displacement is uniquely traumatic,' she says, 'but the sense of loss is the same.' As is the impulse to preserve the vestiges of lost stories and vanished atmospheres in whatever place one ends up calling home.

For the last couple of years 'home' for Carolina (who has moved half a dozen times since first arriving in Rome roughly 50 years ago) is the lion's share of

a Renaissance palazzo smack in the centre of the city, a stone's throw from the Pantheon. Despite its stellar location, the palace had withered away, abandoned, for decades. By the time Carolina and her longtime partner, the food and wine critic Paolo Scotto, saw the piano nobile, its windows were long gone and myriad birds had roosted in its rooms. But the couple revelled in the interior's ornate details. What ultimately won their hearts, however, was its vastness: 600 square metres spread out over two floors and a terrace. 'Space for us is not an option but a necessity,' says Carolina as she shows me room after room filled with hundreds of furnishings and artefacts that cross continents and a wealth of historic eras. 'Every





Opposite: on one side of the dining room, a piece by Isabella Ducrot forms a brooding cloud above a late 18th-century Roman console with an inlaid marble top. The silver vase it supports is one of a pair designed by Jean Baptiste Gaspard Odiot, Louis XV's master goldsmith. An ancient 'suzani' to which Caroline has added a thick Italian striped linen forms a curtain. Below: surrounded by chairs covered in their original Aubusson fabric, the table is topped with a much-loved antique silk tablecloth (under a protective glass top) torn to shreds by usage. The Baroque painting, right, is a Caravaggesque flagellation scene by Neapolitan artist Fabrizio Santafede



home embodies the history of those who inhabit it,' she adds. 'And if those histories are forged by exile and loss, home will inevitably become a work-in-progress scenario in which to rebuild one's identity.'

Several identities are at play here. Though her paternal ancestry is mostly Italian, this home is imbued with the Romanian culture she inherited from her maternal side, 'one suspended between Eastern and Western traditions'. It took a couple of years to restore the apartment's 17th-century murals and painted doors, to replace the rotten floors with fine Umbrian *cotto* tiles and mount the 36 handmade wooden window frames and glass panes to replace the gaping holes. Once the apartment's delicate shell was

restored, Carolina swept in like a rogue wave with all sorts of stranded treasures from the East. These include a fine collection of icons, an abundance of ancient textiles as well as rugs and furnishings that hark back to Romania's thriving Belle Epoque years.

Sofas abound in this home where every single room has several welcoming sitting areas. 'This is the Lebanese influence,' says Carolina, referring to the convivial atmosphere that traditionally reigns in Middle Eastern homes like the one she grew up in Beirut. Carolina's erudition about, and passion for, Italian art, which she shares with Paolo, have flowered in a collection of old masters that inspired them to cover the walls with a blend of earthy pigments

and fresh limewash typical of Renaissance palaces. And if Paolo's exquisite collection of blue-and-white 18th-century Genoese porcelain pays tribute to his own family history, one rooted in the powerful past of that great port city, there is enough space here for 20th-century artistic accumulations too. These include Paolo's clutch of Futurist paintings and drawings, which he has concentrated in one of the reading rooms, and the omnipresence of artworks by Isabella Ducrot (*WoI* Nov 2022). 'Our friendship was jump-started by our shared passion for textiles,' says Carolina, who in the 1980s helped Isabella archive her own holdings of rare fabrics.

When Carolina married her first husband, in 1989, and moved to her first adult



Above: in the kitchen, handmade 'cotto' tiles from one of the last wood-burning furnaces in Umbria usher the eyes from the china room to a lost-wax bronze copy of a famous Roman representation of Minerva discovered in Arezzo in the 16th century. Opposite: on the hood above a Lacanche stove – the couple are both keen cooks – hangs part of Paolo's collection of Albissola (in the Liguria region) porcelain



Below: old glass 'alambicchi', or distillation flasks, are arrayed above an antique Genoese Carrara-marble sink bought at the Mercante in Fiera, a biannual antique fair in Parma. Opposite: in this small bedroom/studio, a pair of copper appliques cap two 1930s Roman School paintings, while the pomegranates of an Idarica Gazzoni armchair fabric are picked up in a curtain courtesy of GP&J Baker



apartment, where she raised her two children, her grandmother wanted to present her with a gift of something from her own home in Bucharest. Carolina chose a nondescript sofa she used to sleep on as a child and which has been following her around ever since. It is now plonked in the living room beneath a frescoed ceiling depicting the arrival of Spring, in the form of flower-clad young beauties, who chase away the elderly and bearded Winter. An early 20th-century bronze copy of a Roman Minerva, the goddess of reason and

intellectual power (as opposed to brute force), stands next to a window. The scent of cut flowers from the couple's garden in Umbria blends with the sweetness of the fresh verberna oozing from the teapot. A plethora of books and musical instruments underlines the general atmosphere of high culture. Paolo and Carolina love cooking and entertaining. If one gathering revolves around a feast of music and food inspired by Carolina's Romanian ancestry, another may focus on readings of obscure Futurist poems complete with

experimental Modernist piano sonatas on Paolo's Steinway.

'Experience has taught me that individuals are helpless when confronted by the tragedies of history,' says Carolina. This sense of impermanence, she concludes, is what has led her, and many other exiles, to live in the moment. 'To paraphrase Lorenzo the Magnificent: be merry while you can, of tomorrow there's no knowing' © Carolina Vincenti is the author of 'Soul of Rome: A Guide to 30 Exceptional Experiences', published by Jonglez





Above: Paolo Scotto has placed his collection of Futurist drawings and paintings in a corner of one of the reading rooms, enlivened by another Isabella Ducrot work. The striped hanging behind the doorway is an Italian linen. Opposite: in the main bedroom, a collection of ancient Eastern icons with some religious Italian paintings surmounts a headboard upholstered in 'Tribal' by Lewis & Wood