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HOUSE & GARDEN

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EDITOR'S CHOICE
THE MOST BEAUTIFUL
HOUSE IN THE WORLD

THE 20 MOST EXCITING
ROOMS OF THE CENTURY

12 DESIGNERS ON
"THE HOUSE I GREW UP IN"

PLUS

LITERARY STARS
ON DOGS, COCKTAILS & BAD TASTE

WRITTEN BY MARELLA CARACCILO
PHOTOGRAPHED BY FRANCOIS HALARD
PRODUCED BY CYNTHIA FRANK

WITH ITS PURE
PALLADIAN
ARCHITECTURE,
WARM FRESCOES,
AND RICH, SIMPLE
FURNISHINGS, THIS
16TH-CENTURY
VILLA NEAR
VENICE MAY BE

THE MOST BEAUTIFUL HOUSE IN THE WORLD

The Apollonian meets the Dionysian as the classical lines of the villa La Malcontenta rise up among the willows on the lush banks of the river Brenta in the Veneto area of Italy. The facade, which is plastered in powdered marble called *marmorino*, is famed for its Ionic *pronaos*, or pillared portico.



In Palladio's rational design for the villa, the central room, left, with its high, vaulted ceilings, serves as the axis of the cross-shaped house plan. The floor is a type of Venetian terrazzo. ■ Palladio may not have liked the frescoes that cover the building's interior. For example, his doorways are spare, simple, but the fresco in the central room, opposite page, creates a trompe l'oeil of a grand and imposing door frame. The globe is 19th century. Del Vicario plans to reproduce the low banquettes as part of a new furniture line.

AS A YOUNG BOY growing up outside Venice during the Second World War, Antonio Foscari would wait for the blasts from air raids to end and then, with his father, rush along the banks of the river Brenta on his bicycle to a villa known as La Malcontenta. The house, formally called Villa Foscari, was built around 1560 by Andrea Palladio, for brothers Nicolo and Alvise Foscari. By the 1940s, the house no longer belonged to the Foscari, who had sold it after the downfall of the Venetian Republic in 1797. But young Antonio and his father still had a familial pride in the place that sent them hurrying to see if the villa had

survived any attack. Today, architect and historian Antonio Foscari betrays some emotion as he recalls his relief when, from his bike, he saw the chimney tops rise above the poplars. Then the solid mass of the building appeared, still standing like an ancient temple against the flat landscape. Such strong feelings eventually led Foscari and his wife, architect Barbara Del Vicario, to reacquire the ancestral home in 1973. The two began restoration the following year, and in the intervening time, the Foscari have developed a uniquely creative relationship with their home. This is its story.


La Malcontenta means "the unhappy woman." The name most likely has its origins in the term *mal contenuta*,





The large, lofty rooms in the villa are balanced by more intimate spaces, such as this small room, or *camerino*, in a rear corner of the piano nobile. The chairs were made by a local craftsman. ■ The room's ceiling is decorated with a representation of Fame, opposite page, announcing herself with two trumpets—one made of gold, the other of silver.





Fire is the theme in the spacious living room in La Malcontenta's east wing. The ceiling is covered by a fresco of Prometheus stealing fire from the gods. The fireplace surround is made of marble from Verona. The sofa and white chairs are upholstered in fabric from Tessoria Asolana, in Asolo, Italy. The straw mats throughout the house are squares preassembled according to the size of each room.

meaning "badly contained"—a reference to the river's former tendency to flood its banks at the site of the villa. But the more interesting explanation behind the villa's name is the legend that the wife of one of the original owners was banished to the house for living too loosely in Venice. If she was sad, Palladio was joyous. The villa was his first major commission from a family of the city. In the early 1550s, Palladio had gained celebrity in nearby Vicenza. But the Venetians were deeply suspicious of anything endorsed by papal Rome, Foscari says, and Palladio's architecture, rooted in the same classical language that was resurfacing in the new buildings of Renaissance Rome and Florence, was seen by many as a threat to Venetian individuality and integrity. The Foscari offered Palladio a unique opportunity to show off his talent on a piece of land by the Brenta, the main travel route between Venice and Padua. "Boats were passing by constantly," Foscari explains. "Because of the bend in the river at this spot, people could observe the building from all angles."

THE VILLA, a monolithic structure with a central portico crowned by a triangular pediment, is a perfect example of Palladio's rigorous vision. The monumental exterior—testimony to Palladio's preference for simple materials like brick and stucco, as opposed to stone—is deceptive. Like a puzzle box, the building conceals a surprisingly articulate sequence of interior spaces, centered around a cross-shaped hall with a vaulted ceiling. "The beauty of this building," says Foscari, "reflects the rigorous theories on which it was planned and built." The sequence of rooms is broken by small doors so simple and essential in form that they look as though they were cut out of the walls with scissors. The same can be said of the unadorned windows that help control the harmony of light and



Custom Columns

Architect Barbara Del Vicario, top left, on a sofa in a custom fabric that copies a design in the fresco. Clockwise from top right: The dining chairs by Del Vicario are based on a Roman model. She also designed the candle holders on the table; columns from her Ottagono line are on either side of the doorway. The chandelier of 60 Murano glass bowls is made for candles. The hand-blown glasses and personal decanters are part of a set by Del Vicario. The washstand column with hinged top is by Del Vicario. The kitchen features an Ottagono cabinet (here with clothes), which can be used for anything from china to CDs.

shadow. "The frescoes, based on Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and painted by Battista Franco and Battista Zelotti, were added later," says Foscari. Given the architect's preference for unadorned walls, Foscari adds, "it's possible Palladio saw the frescoes as a breach of the purity of his vision."

AWALK THROUGH the light, airy rooms of La Malcontenta with Del Vicario is an exquisite experience. Her gentle approach is matched by an architect's understanding of the building's needs. "A great amount of work was required," she says. The riverbank was shored up; power lines were buried. And that was nothing compared with the restoration inside the house. "The frescoes cover some four thousand square yards," Del Vicario says, "and Antonio oversaw a rigorous conservation of architectural elements, such as returning Palladio's red terrazzo floor"—made of compressed brick powder and lime—"to its original patina."

Passing through a frescoed bedroom or bathroom, or one of the many dining areas, is part of an artistic itinerary. "Each room," says Foscari, "is related to the others like the notes in a symphony." Though spacious and grand, La Malcontenta retains an informal air. Fireplaces heat the rooms; electricity—with a few necessary exceptions—is out of the question. As in the sixteenth century, the main source of light in the evening is candles.

A less tangible aspect makes the restoration of the villa unique: the present inhabitants' respect for traces left by previous owners who also devoted part of their lives to the villa. They include Lord Phillimore, from whom Foscari and Del Vicario bought the house, and the third most recent owner, Albert Landsberg, the cosmopolitan *saloniste* who rescued the villa from decay in 1925. Between the

The ground-floor *bagno dei cavalieri*—men's bath—features an antique tub of Verona stone with an 18th-century faucet. The bust is a plaster copy of a Roman work in the Vatican collection. The windows were made by a technique, developed in Venice in the 15th century, in which a drop of molten glass is twirled at the end of a rod into a small disk-shaped pane. The panes are then welded together with lead.



World Wars, a visit to La Malcontenta became an artistic pilgrimage. Stravinsky, Diaghilev, and Le Corbusier came here; so did Coco Chanel. The Foscari have continued this suave, free-spirited hospitality. Andy Warhol, Cy Twombly, Frank Gehry, and Joseph Brodsky have been among their guests. Says Antonio Foscari: "There is a bond among those who have loved this house."

The years at La Malcontenta have inspired Del Vicario to create lines of furniture and

handmade glassware that, like the house, are rooted in classicism. Her designs include chairs that reinterpret ancient Roman seating, and an octagonal "column" that opens into a cabinet. Her pieces have a purity of form and a craftsmanship that make them, like Palladian architecture, successful in any context. "One never gets used to beauty—one keeps being surprised and inspired by it," Del Vicario says. "I think that's the lesson of this house."

Frescoes in a garden motif cover the master bedroom, this page. The bed is set on a platform that holds blankets and linens. ■ The headboard, opposite page, is covered in strips of 16th-century fabric. Sources and further information on Barbara Del Vicario's designs, see back of book.

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