

An exhilarating visual deconstruction of what it means to live a truly bohemian life

Bohemian Living

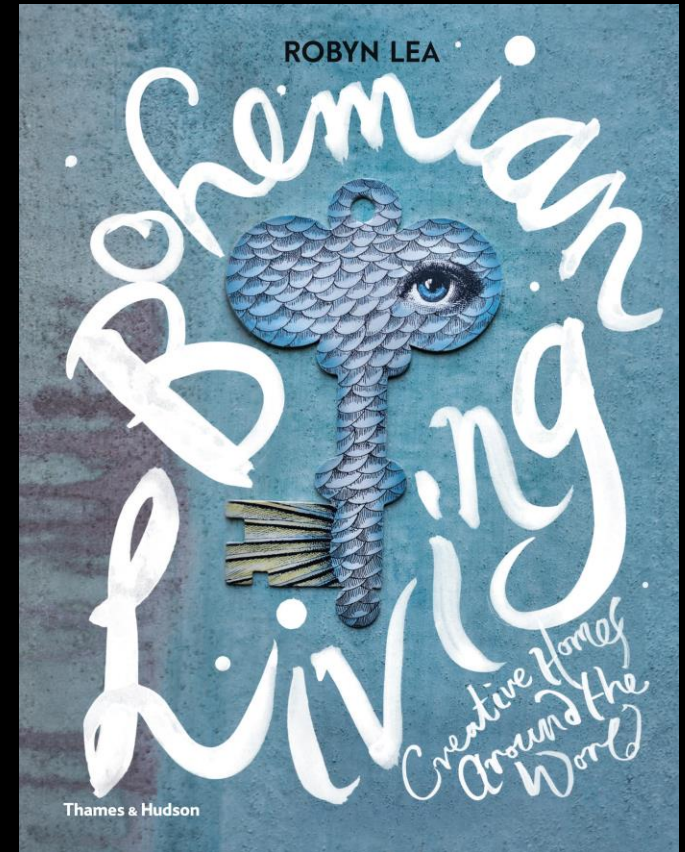
Creative homes around the world

Robyn Lea

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Key Sales Points

- The latest from the acclaimed photographer, writer and director whose works has featured in *Elle Déco*, *The New York Times*, *Vogue Italia*, *Architectural Digest*, *Wall Street Journal* and *The New Yorker*
- *Modern Day Bohemians* sidesteps the world of carefully constructed interior design images, instead diving into the liberated atmosphere of offbeat beauty
- Asks the question: what does it mean to be bohemian in the modern world?
- In each profile, Robyn Lea traces the journey from unusual childhoods to creative, often unorthodox, adult worlds; revealing along the way the twists of fate that have allowed each person to realize their full bohemian potential in the spaces they live and work
- Featured interiors include Barnaba Fornasetti, Bella Meyer, Annabelle

Barnaba Fornasetti was born in his family home in Milan in 1950, the only child of artists Giulia Gelmi and Piero Fornasetti. Almost seventy years later, he still lives at Casa Fornasetti and finds being away from home virtually unbearable. 'I am absolutely addicted to it. My home is a protective oasis in perpetual transformation. It represents my life: my job, my interests and my philosophy – all entwined. All these elements merge into my habitat, which is my dress, my skin, my instrument of communication and sustenance.'

His home is as much a part of Barnaba as his wavy beard and unwavering gaze, but for many years he chose to live elsewhere. After attending Milan's Brera Academy in the 1960s, including a short stint in jail as a result of his participation in left-wing student protests, Barnaba moved away to find his own creative voice. He designed fabrics for fashion designer Ken Scott, restored ancient farmhouses in Tuscany and worked for several years on a music magazine. In 1982, with the fruits of his own creative exploration now ripened, he moved back home to work alongside his father.

Barnaba's parents, Piero and Giulia, were both from deeply traditional Milanese families who were unsupportive of their choices to pursue lives in art and design. They resisted pressure from their families and attended Brera Academy and the Scuola Superiore di Arti Applicate all'Industria. They recognised each other as kindred spirits and later married. Just as they had rejected their families' career expectations, they also rejected the prevailing attitudes and rigid rules of Milanese society, including the elegant sameness and trends in home décor. Emboldened by their union,

they invented a different way of living, centred around boundless creative exploration.

Barnaba remembers that, when he was growing up, the home's work and personal spaces were kept separate. 'My father adapted the building to the needs of his artistic activity. The house was divided into two wings: one being my parents' private quarters, and the other the atelier, which included the offices and the studio, where the entire production cycle would take place.'

Casa Fornasetti was originally built in the late 19th century by Barnaba's grandfather, Pietro Fornasetti. He lived there with his wife, Martha Munch, a German woman known for her passionate, Sicilian-like character. Barnaba's father, Piero, was the eldest of their four children. At that time, the property was in the rural outskirts of Milan, in an area known as Città degli Studi. Now, more than a century later, the area has been swallowed by the anonymous and uninspiring suburban streetscapes characteristic of much of the postwar development in the city.

Like many well-to-do Milanese families, they spent their summers at Lake Como, where Pietro built the two-storey Villa Fornasetti. As a teenager, Piero did not pass his days in a languid rotation of swimming, boating, eating gelati and chasing fireflies, but instead used the time to experiment with paint, pencil and pastel, interpreting the scenes around him. Perhaps believing that his son's talent could be contained as a hobby rather than a career, Pietro gave Piero an area on the ground floor of their home in Milan to do his artwork. He even submitted, along with other family members, for portraits such as *Ritratto di Profile del Padre (Profile Portrait of the Artist's Father, 1927)*.

A photograph of fourteen-year-old Piero in 1927 shows him standing near a display of twenty-seven of his paintings. He is dressed in a suit and tie with his arms behind his back and has an intense, unsmiling gaze. Even at that young age, Piero worked with seriousness and absolute determination. Later, he used this same approach to defy his authoritarian father, who was determined that his firstborn child should become

an accountant and work in the family business, importing typewriters from Germany.

By the time Barnaba was born, Piero was almost forty years old and on his way to becoming one of Italy's most influential designers. His career as an interior decorator, industrial designer, fashion designer, painter, sculptor and engraver ultimately spanned five decades and resulted in the production of approximately 13,000 objects and a fruitful collaboration with architect Gio Ponti.

As a child, Barnaba's sense of 'normal' was very different from that of other Milanese children. 'At first, I did not notice the incredible reality, or better, *surreality* in which I was born. But when I began to compare my surroundings with the others that I happened to visit, I realised how unconventional and unusual the world was that my father created around him, and around me as well.'

Barnaba inherited his father's creative outlook as well as his belief in the benefits of hard work. Piero once said, 'True artists follow a healthy principle: they begin working in the morning and work all day until evening, and they do not wait passively for inspiration to come. They wait for it on the "battlefield", since inspiration comes from working, at a moment that no one can predict.'

Since Piero's death in 1988, Barnaba has designed tableware, rugs, clothing, furniture, CD covers, sets for opera and experimental music performances, guitars, bikes and motorbikes. He also manages the extensive archives left by his father.

After inheriting Casa Fornasetti, Barnaba, like his father before him, changed the interiors to suit his own needs. He reconfigured the layout, and changed the colours and decorative elements. He merged the work and personal spaces into a maze of rooms and corridors that flow over three levels. 'Now the different areas are more integrated: the archive, the creative

and communication offices, the meeting room, the library, the music room, my private accommodation and the guest rooms.'

Each room has been anchored with a different colour that gives it a distinctive character and emotional atmosphere. The emerald-green sitting room is dominated by a large feature wall containing twenty-two mirrors, arranged salon-style, every one with a different shape and frame. The play of light created by the mirrors is accentuated by an arched window that Piero installed to display a rainbow array of 19th-century cut-glass Biedermeier goblets on transparent shelves. Many of the mirrors have a story, including the ten-lobed convex mirror designed by Piero in the early 1960s, which was inspired by a mirror in the 1434 painting *Ritratto dei coniugi Arnolfini (Portrait of Giovanni Arnolfini and his*

Wife) by Flemish artist Jan van Eyck. Another of Piero's mirrors was made with black lacquered wood decorated with seashells, a technique he used to embellish everything from bathrooms to busts.

Shell decorating was a family affair. Barnaba used thousands of shells sent from Venice to adorn the walls of Villa

Fornasetti's dining room, a project he completed over two summers. His mother created a shell chandelier to match the walls, which hung above a paduk timber table designed by Piero in 1954.

In an olive-leaf coloured music room on the second floor, the passions of three generations of Fornasetti men are united. Piero was a keen amateur opera and bel canto singer and he shared his enthusiasm for music with his children. Piero's love of music extended to theatre and performance, and he relished the opportunity to design the sets and costumes for a 1954 production of Gian Carlo Menotti's *Amelia Goes to the Ball* at Milan's famous La Scala theatre.

But the music room is not a museum of the Fornasetti family. It is a playful, party-ready space, with echoes of Barnaba's childhood

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stained-glass window. Almost a century ago, this was the window used as a receiving area for goods delivered by water from the canal below for Singer's perfume and liqueur business. A light-filled sunroom is painted in a soft fern-green, furnished with a small, round wrought-iron table and chairs, and decorated with Fornasetti trays and plates that climb up the walls and cover the ceiling. Next to the vast formal dining room is a small, cosy sitting room with green striped wallpaper, followed by another living area with deep ocean-green walls and objects and furniture that are awash in a sea of magenta.

Rare and quirky objects feature throughout the house, including a handcrafted porcelain dinnerware set designed by Gio Ponti in the 1920s, when he was the director of the historic ceramic company Richard Ginori. The individual plates are mounted on the wall in a small lavender-coloured dining room, positioned in a symmetrical fan pattern above antique furniture. The same room also features two ornate French bronze candelabras and an antique clock Marco purchased at auction in 2007. The pieces once decorated the Via Buonarroti apartment where Maria Callas lived in the 1950s. Marco's enduring love for the design of Fornasetti is evident in a number of rooms, with furniture by both Barnaba and Piero Fornasetti and Fornasetti vases, ashtrays and wallpaper at every turn.

Marco curates artworks, salon-style, throughout the house. Paintings by his mother and grandmother, sketchbook drawings in flea-market frames, and images by German photographer Candida Höfer mix with historic paintings, works by local artist friends and the occasional modern masterpiece. Photographic works feature prominently, including some by Massimo Vitali, Luigi Ontani and Vittorio Pescatori. The images are complemented by carefully positioned ceramic works by sculptor Giuseppe Ducrot, Rome-based artist Giosetta Fioroni, and writer and sculptor Fausto Melotti.

The villa's large rear verandah can be accessed from many of the rooms through large wrought-iron framed glass doors. Concrete balustrades support the pergola, which is covered with a wispy tide of wisteria. When preparing the house for one of the many events and parties, Marco can invariably be found here, carefully pruning the deep pink climbing roses or cutting flowers from the garden at a large outdoor table and arranging them in vases around the house.

Marco finds great meaning in his restoration of his great-grandmother's garden design. He commissioned Tommaso Scacchi to build a white lacquered gazebo based on the original drawings, and he also installed rare 19th-century iron chairs, statues and vases. 'Following the vision of my great-grandparents, I have also tried to plant the garden in such a way that there is always something in flower.'

In January, when the garden is still dormant in the foggy greyness of the Milan winter, small yellow Japanese allspice flowers appear like tiny signs of the colour to come. Bulbs and peonies are next, followed by hydrangeas and a chorus of rose varieties that continue to blossom until November.

Stepping inside the villa, it feels like time has stood still. Just as it was before the war, the house is infused with colour, art and atmosphere

Stepping inside the villa, it feels as if time has stood still. Just as it was before the war, the house is infused with colour, art and atmosphere, and filled with a constant stream of guests. Arturo would have been pleased to know that his great-grandson loves the villa as much as he did, and that once again it has become a meeting place for artists. In 1944, it was probably impossible to imagine the scars of the bombing would ever heal. Yet, in a quiet triumph over that dark day in the history of Gorla, children are again celebrated at Villa Singer. 'With the help of my family, the home has again become the centre of our affections. In the garden, we have planted new fruit trees for every grandchild that has arrived.' ♦



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