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LA CREME DE LA CREME

A palette of rich neutral shades unifies this smart metropolitan flat. Text Sally Griffiths Photographs Brian Harrison

Designer Paolo Moschino was born and brought up in Grosseto just outside Florence in Italy. After school, he read political science at university; three years later he treated himself to a holiday in London. 'Having lived all my life in a very small town, I thought London was heaven,' he recalls. 'I was bowled over by the size and buzz of the place.' Eventually, unable to tear himself away, he took a job working at Joseph's flagship shop in Knightsbridge.

Months later, after a chance meeting with interior decorator Nicholas Haslam, Paolo threw caution – and political science – to the wind, and took on the task of running Haslam's London shop. 'At that time Nicky had a small collection of furniture and fabrics,' he says. 'Since then we have expanded enormously, introducing a wide range of accessories and lighting.' Today the shop belongs to Paolo. 'There came a time when Nicky and I felt it made more sense to split up the business, so I took the shop and he set up a separate decorating company,' he explains.

Two years ago, Paolo decided to buy a flat which he shares with Philip Vergeylen. 'Our initial dilemma was whether to go for a small, one-bedroomed flat in a smart area, or move further out and get something bigger,' he explains. 'We are both passionate collectors and never have enough space to house our acquisitions, so we opted for the latter.' After months of searching, they found a three-bedroom flat with a small back garden in Earl's Court. 'We bought the property, even

OPPOSITE Tobacco-coloured walls, inspired by a visit to a country house in Hampshire, set the comfortable, masculine tone of the study. The chimneypiece is flanked by pedimented bookcases after a design by John Fowler. Leather furniture, a portrait and a reindeer-skin rug complete the club-like atmosphere

though it was on the main road, because the ground-floor rooms had excellent proportions and the rest had scope for improvement.'

In a narrow, late-nineteenth-century house, the flat originally comprised a ground-floor kitchen and sitting room, and three bedrooms and two bathrooms at basement level. 'We decided to convert two of the bedrooms into a dining room and a kitchen, allowing us to have a larger sitting room upstairs,' explains Paolo.

Today the flat is unrecognizable from its beginnings. The ground floor has been transformed into one large reception area, with nineteenth-century French doors dividing the cosy study from the sitting room. A simple, painted staircase leads to the bedroom and the dining room and kitchen. 'When we first acquired the flat, the only way into the garden was via a small door in the hall,' says Paolo. 'By installing French windows in the new dining room we not only have better access to the garden but an abundance of light.'

With a limited budget, Paolo decided to spend the bulk of his funds on such structural alterations as re-siting the kitchen,



architectural detailing and, most important of all, good double glazing to exclude traffic noise. Throughout the flat the plumbing and wiring were upgraded; pipes and radiators were boxed in; and the banisters on the basement staircase were removed to create an illusion of space. The original kitchen units were taken out and the ceilings, covered with layers of thick, grained wallpaper, were stripped and re-plastered. 'Period houses need perfect ceilings, otherwise they look dreadful,' says Paolo with conviction.

When it came to the decoration, Paolo knew exactly what he wanted to do. 'I had planned the flat down to the last millimetre and the result is exactly as I intended,' he says. The new palette is a far cry from the stark white walls and beige carpet he

CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE The study curtains are of Nicholas Haslam glazed linen bordered with brown moleskin. The drawing room opens off the study. The stairs are painted, with a central 'dark-oak' stain. The chic, pale drawing room. **OPPOSITE** On a painted Provençal buffet, the sixteenth-century bust of the Virgin came from a Roman flea market

inherited: now a combination of taupe, brown, beige, grey and cream looks stunning against dark wooden floors.

The inspiration for the study came from a house in Hampshire. 'The study was painted a wonderful shade of tobacco, with old leather chairs, bookcases and lots of gilt frames on the walls,' he recalls. 'It looked fantastic.' The room today suggests a gentlemen's club, with double doors leading into the lighter, brighter sitting room. 'Architecturally, the sitting room is very traditional, but I wanted a more modern approach,' says Paolo. The result is a smart grey-and-beige colour scheme. Against off-white walls, glazed linen curtains frame chic mahogany blinds. However, the lack of a focal point, in the form of a chimney-piece, made the room difficult to arrange. 'After much



deliberation, I placed the sofa against the long back wall, with an old French buffet opposite it. Then the rest fell into place.' In the centre of the room stands a rectangular coffee table from Paolo's new collection. Throughout, antique objects and books combine harmoniously with modern accessories. 'We needed a large modern painting to hang above the sofa but everything we liked cost a fortune,' says Paolo. 'In the end we bought a beautiful frame and painted the picture ourselves.'

The short flight of stairs leading to the basement is painted antique white with a wide brown stripe running down the centre. 'This was a very cramped area,' recalls Paolo. 'By keeping everything off-white, it looks twice the size and appears to enlarge the rooms off it.'

To the right of the hall the dining room, with antique-white walls and painted furniture, is Paolo's *tour de force*. 'It's a lovely room, although it was very dark until we installed the French windows,' says Paolo. On the walls, blocks of unframed eighteenth-century engravings offset the pale, monochrome scheme. 'Too much white can be boring,' explains Paolo.

BELOW, LEFT and RIGHT
A pale colour scheme and French windows on to the garden contribute to the light feel of the dining room, in which seventeenth-century Italian engravings on canvas provide points of interest. **OPPOSITE** Grey flannel curtains from Nicholas Haslam are smart in the bedroom. Tall wenge wardrobes flank the bed

That old adage 'if it's dark make it darker' certainly applies to the bedroom, where dark grey flannel curtains, bed head and valance are ingeniously combined with glossy black cupboards and off-white walls. Piles of antique vellum suitcases are decoratively stacked at the foot of the bed and on top of the cupboards. 'I've collected them for years,' says Paolo. 'They're perfect for storage.'

Outside, the minute garden is a riot of green and blue. 'We bordered the garden with willow fencing and covered the ground with gravel,' says Paolo. A narrow bed around the perimeter of the garden is planted with hydrangeas interspersed with simple twig cones. 'Weather permitting, we eat here every day during the summer,' he adds. 'It's an oasis of calm and you can barely hear the juggernauts thundering past' □

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