

SET FOR LIFE

Francesco Vezzoli's Milanese Home Transformed Into a Two-Floor Temple of Italian Design

by Sofia Pia Belenky



Welcome to Palazzo Vezzoli, an eclectic collection of notable design pieces mixed with the artist's work. From left to right: Dominating the room is a headless marble statue, a reproduction of Bertel Thorvaldsen's *Hebe* by an anonymous 19th-century sculptor. *The Palm Spring* table (1984) is by Ettore Sottsass, as is the centerpiece (*Yantra 17*, 1969). The *Teatro* chairs are by Aldo Rossi (1994, produced by UNIFOR/MOLTENI), and George Sowden designed the *PL1* portable lights (2020) on the table. In the background, there is an *Eros* sideboard (1971) by Angelo Mangiarotti, supporting three vases by Sottsass, *Gopuram* (2001, left and right) and *Medusa* (1997, center), as well as two blue *Osman* armchairs (1992), also by Sottsass. Watching over the scene is Francesco Vezzoli's *Feminist Portrait Of Jane Fonda* (2013). Photography by Philippe Jarrigeon for PIN-UP.

“I am the master of tears,” laughs **Francesco Vezzoli**, an artist for whom “feminine” lachrymosity, along with that other supposedly female preserve, needlework, have long been main themes in his practice. In an ongoing series of work, the Brescia-born 52-year-old takes reproductions of icon-like images —

photographs of movie stars, opera divas, and supermodels, old-master paintings of saints — and sews streams of tears onto them, elaborate chains of sequins, jewels, and embroidery that pour from the subjects' eyes. A way of “correcting” what our ancestors were too uptight to portray, the series is just one manifestation of Vezzoli's sensibility and connoisseurship with respect to both pop culture and the history of art and design. Another is his apartment, or rather apartments, located just two minutes from Piazza San Babila, one of Milan's busiest squares. Vezzoli has two homes in the same building: one where he actually lives, and another that is a playhouse of sorts, home to his collection of furniture, most of it by icons of 20th-century Italian design such as **Achille Castiglioni** and **Ettore Sottsass**, whom he counted as personal friends, as well as **Gae Aulenti**, **Giovanni Gariboldi**, **Angelo Mangiarotti**, Carlo Scarpa, and **Nanda Vigo**, to name just a few. In what might be described as a Milanese take on **Edward James's Monkton House**, this sophisticated orgy of rare (and rarefied) pieces is spiced up with multiple references to Italian cinema, Renaissance art, and Surrealism (in the kitchen, Sottsass ceramics casually cover the stovetop, reminiscent of how Carrie Bradshaw kept her Manolos in the oven in *Sex and the City*). The final ingredient in this total-environment is Vezzoli's own work, represented by portraits of female figures such as **Barbara Bush**, **Jane Fonda**, **Gloria Steinem**, and **Sophia Loren**, the latter a life-sized polished-bronze statue inspired by **Giorgio de Chirico's** *Disquieting Muses*. On the eve of his new exhibition, *Musei delle Lacrime* (*Museums of Tears*) at Venice's venerable **Museo Correr**, Vezzoli invited Milan-based New Yorker Sofia Pia Belenky for tea to discuss his love for Lombardy, the legacy of Scarpa, and the virtue in weeping.



The entrance to the bedroom is flanked on the left by the 1903 *Hill House 1* chair by Scottish architect Charles Rennie Mackintosh (still in production by CASSINA), and Ettore Sottsass's *Solitaria* console (1992) on the right, one of Vezzoli's recent auction purchases. The *Bamboletto* bed (2022) by Mario Bellini (produced by B&B ITALIA) is covered with *Sweet* duvet cover and pillows by Jonathan Saunders for MAGNIBERG (2023). Next to it is a *Shiva* flower vase (1973) by Sottsass (produced by BD BARCELONA). Hovering above the bed are Michael Anastassiades's 2014 *String Light Cone* suspension lamps (produced by FLOS). Photography by Philippe Jarrigeon for PIN-UP.



Detail of the Sottsass's *Solitaria* console (1992). Photography by Philippe Jarrigeon for PIN-UP.

Sofia Pia Belenky: I can't tell if this is a home or a gallery. Do you consider yourself a collector?

Francesco Vezzoli: I don't consider myself a collector, but I was friends with designers like Ettore Sottsass and Achille Castiglioni. Do you remember the *New York Times* architecture critic **Herbert Muschamp**? He was my mentor. We had this unbelievable friendship. He showed me around and taught me about New York City, a place where real estate plays a big part, way more than museums and institutions. I would organize trips for Herbert to see all the Carlo Scarpa architecture here, and in return he would take me to see **Frank Gehry** in Los Angeles or spend Passover with **Richard Meier**. It was a dream. But the biggest dream was to see New York through his eyes, because he knew architecture and all the real-estate tricks. I've been to so many beautiful homes — places belonging to famous collectors, Gehry's first house. If you have that sensibility, you know it's not about money but about how exceptional what you're seeing is. For many years I lived in the **Flos** offices downstairs, which were fitted out by **Castiglioni**, so it was like living in a landmark. I never really wanted a place for myself. But eventually I

decided to move up here so that I could provide a home for my little babies (points at design collection). Everything started with Covid — I had to get a place for myself because I couldn't function otherwise.

Milan was a Covid hotspot at the start of the pandemic.

Exactly. Before, I just stayed in the office downstairs. Then I got this apartment, and I couldn't leave because the city was in lockdown. While I was shut up here alone, I learned about the Milanese sculptor and painter Giovanni Gariboldi and started buying all these vases.

Gariboldi worked with **Gio Ponti right?**

Yes, he was his right hand. Ponti was producing expensive centerpieces for the porcelain firm **Richard Ginori**, which had a factory in Doccia. Richard Ginori also owned the San Cristoforo laboratory, where they made the color-block vases for the upper and middle bourgeoisie. They're extremely beautiful. We all know how busy Ponti was — he was building houses and office blocks, and he was the editor of *Domus*, so when it came to designing the vases, Gariboldi gradually took over. Sometimes you find similar shapes in Ponti, but the colors are all Gariboldi. Today, it's impossible to collect Ponti unless you make a major investment. I think Gariboldi deserves better recognition.

Who are your other design crushes?

I have always loved **Shiro Kuramata**, the Japanese designer who Sottsass invited to take part in **Memphis**. I always had the impression he was gay, but it was never brought up in the Memphis group because it wasn't something that was talked about then. And not only in Italy: **le Nouveau réalisme** in France, the **Abstract Expressionists** in America, **Arte Povera**, they were all straight. Even among the Memphis Group, which was so colorful, gay, flamboyant, and even campy at times, everyone was straight. Kuramata was totally underappreciated. He worked for **Issey Miyake** and Comme des Garçons — he was part of that whole Japanese wave in the 1970s and 80s. He was a poet, a genius. I'd love to collect his work — for instance the *How High the Moon* sofa in metal mesh. But that's worth 200,000 euros. There's not much in the middle. So in the end, if you're Italian, you should probably collect Italian designers. You can have a more sophisticated and precise eye with respect to their production and find more first-hand information.

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In his work, Vezzoli has repeatedly made reference to Mae West, and so it's no surprise to find the *Bocca* sofa in his home. The lip-shaped lounge (produced by GUFRAM) was designed in 1970 by Studio 65 and was inspired by Salvador Dalí's 1937 sofa rendition of the actress's pout. On the left of it: a *Mae West* floor lamp (2011) by Studio Job (made by VENINI). Above the sofa hangs a 2019 Vezzoli painting called *Sophia Loren & Giancarlo Pajetta: Pallido bacio, estasi luminosa (Pale kiss, luminous ecstasy)*, from a series depicting celebrities pictured with Italian politicians. On the right Charles Rennie Mackintosh's *Willow 1* armchair from 1904 (and still in production by CASSINA) and the *Coordinates* floor lamp (2020) by Michael Anastassiades and produced by FLOS. Vezzoli is a fan of the architect Angelo Mangiarotti's *Eros* collection of black marble tables (1971), two of which can be seen situated along the sofa. On the far left, a collection of red Giovanni Gariboldi vases are placed on a marble *Loico* bookshelf (1987), also by Mangiarotti. Photography by Philippe Jarrigeon for PIN-UP.



A Vezzoli painting hangs above Ettore Sottsass's 1992 *Montenegro* sideboard (and an assortment of vases). *Robert De Montesquiou sous le Regard de Francesco Vezzoli* (After Joris-Karl Huysmans & Giovanni Boldini) was made for a 2019 exhibition at the Musée d'Orsay in Paris, titled *Joris-Karl Huysmans Art Critic: From Degas to Grünewald, in the Eye of Francesco Vezzoli*. The *Glo Ball* floor lights (1998) are by Jasper Morrison and produced by FLOS. Photography by Philippe Jarrigeon for PIN-UP.



The flower-shaped *Getsuen* armchair (1990) by Japanese designer Masanori Umeda, who a few years earlier created the iconic *Tawaraya* boxing ring for Memphis. The *Getsuen* is produced by EDRA. On the right: The lower half of the *Hebe* statue, a 19th-century reproduction depicting the Greek goddess of eternal youth. Photography by Philippe Jarrigeon for PIN-UP.

What about Milan? Are you glad to be here now?

I feel Milan is like Florence was in the Renaissance, which is something nobody ever says. The money in this city isn't the same as the cash washing about in New York, London, Düsseldorf, or Paris. Of course, Paris is full of fashion shows and art exhibitions, but it's a big city with industrialists, financiers, and Belgian bankers. Milan is a city where the wealth comes from creativity — fashion and furniture. That makes for a very different landscape. In this town, the creative people are the rich people. For example, [Stefano Boeri](#), one of the most important contemporary architects in Italy, is the president of the [Triennale](#), one of Milan's most important museums. That's fantastic, and is something that would never happen in New York.

I could never move back to New York after living here. Would you?

I used to love New York so much, but America has changed. We'll not dwell on that in this interview, though. But I could never move back there. When I talk about Milan,

I always explain that, for example, my exhibition designer and assistant live five minutes from here. In New York, in the same hierarchical professional structure, they would live in Brooklyn. Every morning, by the time they got to SoHo or wherever, they would already have spent an hour and a half traveling, and would be swearing at me because working for me would imply that kind of annoying experience. That is why Milan, to me, is the Florence of the new millennium.

But Milan hasn't, and hopefully won't, become a cannibalized image of itself like Florence or Rome.

No. Those cities are like snow globes. They're beautiful, and the most important masterpieces in art history are there, but they're frozen in time and not sustainable in a contemporary way. We may not have those things here in Milan, but we get to choose the contemporary new talent. We have the playground and the audience; now, we must make choices. At some point, be it in art or design, people in the know have to get together and decide who to support. We have to make choices because Milan must remain a home for interesting figures.

Are you from Milan?

No, I was born in Brescia, and my whole family comes from there. It's also where Flos is from. Let me make a case for Brescia. There is a beautiful Roman temple, from 72 CE, perhaps the most beautiful in northern Italy. Later, in the ninth century, Brescia became the capital of the Holy Roman Empire. There are amazing medieval relics in Brescia. The train there from Milan takes 35 minutes, but Brescia and Milan are different universes. Different libraries, different histories, different monuments. Some people find Milan too hectic or expensive, but what is 35 minutes on the train for someone used to living in Los Angeles or New York? It's nothing. And you could buy a beautifully frescoed palazzo in Brescia for the same amount you pay for an apartment in Milano. That's the beauty of Italy.

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A sophisticated orgy of rare and rarefied pieces (from left to right): Angelo Mangiarotti, *Eros* side table, 1971; Charles Rennie Mackintosh, *Willow 1* armchair, 1904 (CASSINA); *A Tiger In The Orangerie* textile, 2024 (DEDAR); Michael Anastassiades, *Coordinates* floor lamp, 2020 (FLOS); Germans Ermičs, *Chroma Radiate* rug, 2021 (CC-TAPIS); Ettore Sottsass, *Park Lane* table, 1983; Ettore Sottsass, *Gopuram* vase, 2001; Angelo Mangiarotti, *Eros* side board, 1971; Alessandro Mendini, Proust chair, 1978; Roberto Matta, *MAGriTTA* chair, 1970. Artworks on the wall include (from left to right): Francesco Vezzoli, *Feminist Portrait Of Gloria Steinem*, 2013; Anonymous, *Marble statue of Saint Sebastian (after Pierre Puget)*, late 17th or early 18th century; Francesco Vezzoli, *Pandora (Mae West wearing a Schiaparelli hat)*, 2022. Photography by Philippe Jarrigeon for PIN-UP.



Placed on Nanda Vigo's *Storet* cabinet (1994/2020, produced by ACERBIS) is a hand-blown *Argonauta* glass by the artist Valentina Cameranesi Sgroi (available through Jacqueline Sullivan Gallery, New York). The silk satin fabric is called *Mademoiselle* and produced by DEDAR. Photography by Philippe Jarrigeon for PIN-UP.



During the pandemic Vezzoli developed a passion for collecting vases by Giovanni Gariboldi, an apprentice of Gio Ponti and the head of Ponti's ceramic studio. Pictured here is a collection of vases in various shades of teal. In the background: Charles Rennie Mackintosh's *Argyle* chair (1897) and *Olga Forever* (*Olga Picasso*, c. 1935 I), a painting by Francesco Vezzoli from 2012. Photography by Philippe Jarrigeon for PIN-UP.



Vezzoli's 2011 bronze sculpture *Portrait of Sophia Loren as the Muse of Antiquity (After Giorgio De Chirico)* centers the artist's upstairs living room. Surrounding it (from left to right): *Capitello* side table by Rajiv Saini (2009, MOROSO); *Bon Jour Versailles* lamp by Philippe Starck (2017, FLOS); *Cornaro* sofa by Carlo Scarpa (1970); *Captain Flint* light by Michael Anastassiades (2015, FLOS); *Nikko* cabinet by Shiro Kuramata (1982); 3 *Fauteil Grand Confort* chair by Le Corbusier, Pierre Jeanneret, and Charlotte Perriand (1928, CASSINA); *Hyatt* side table by Ettore Sottsass (1984); *Giova* lamp by Gao Aulenti (1964, FONTANAARTE); *Traccia* table by Meret Oppenheim (1939, CASSINA); and *Uovo* light by Ben Swildens (1972, FONTANAARTE). Other artworks on the wall include (from left to right): *Portrait of my Mother as Countess De Rasty Seated in an Armchair (After Giovanni Boldini)*, 2012; *Selfie Sebastian (Self-Portrait as St. Sebastian by Andrea Mantegna)*, 2009–14; and *Surrealist Portrait of Mae West (Spellbound by the Eyes of Anita Ekberg)*, 2007, all by Francesco Vezzoli. Photography by Philippe Jarrigeon for PIN-UP.

You have many pieces by friends. Were any of them gifts? For example, did Sottsass ever give you anything?

No. But he took a portrait of me. When I put on my first show at the end of the 90s, the late **Richard Buckley**, Tom Ford's boyfriend, was the editor of a magazine called *Vogue Hommes International*. He said to me, "We'll do a story on you, but you must organize a great photographer." I was young — still in my 20s — and I didn't know any famous photographers. But I knew Ettore, and I thought the coolest thing would be to have a portrait by him. So he took a picture of me doing needlework. It's really special. I'd love to hang it here with all my ladies. Did you notice that they are all old ladies? Gloria Steinem, Jane Fonda, Barbara Bush ...

Why all women?

Gay men of a certain generation feel an enormous fascination for women who have had the guts — not the balls — to build a universe. Except Barbara Bush, obviously! (Laughs.) There are so many gay men who, in a very conscious way, gave voice to women who were not being heard. Take **Pedro Almodóvar**, for example, who remains one of the most significant European thinkers and image makers. It's a generational thing, this fascination with the female universe. If there is a topic that I have no doubt about, it is gender equality. The fact that women have mostly achieved it makes me extremely happy.

The couch I'm sitting on is by Carlo Scarpa. Tell me about your show, *Museums of Tears*, at the Museo Correr in Venice, a 17th-century building that was partly fitted out by Scarpa in the 1950s.

It might be my most beautiful exhibition ever, and I say that not because of my art but because of the space I was given: 19 rooms entirely redone by Scarpa. It's a masterpiece of sophistication and freedom. What is the most eccentric museum you can think of in America? Maybe the **Guggenheim**. But even the Guggenheim has interiors that feel like a white cube — well, a white circle. Imagine if **Frank Lloyd Wright** had also been assigned to install works by **Pollock** or any of his Abstract Expressionist peers. That's the kind of tension you get at Museo Correr. Scarpa placed 15th-century paintings on raw marble slabs; a 17th-century Madonna seems to be hovering 7 meters up in space; he did the carpets and curtains. And everything is drenched in this fluid Venetian light coming through the

window. I call it narrative architecture. Scarpa is such a relevant figure because he was a Modernist who gained his place in history through things that were not considered Modernist. In the 1970s, he designed the **Tomba Brion**, a family mausoleum, which is the kind of architecture people would have asked **Canova** or **Bernini** to make two or three centuries earlier. Scarpa was a Renaissance man in the true sense of the word. He could do architecture and furniture. He could do exhibition design and curation. He could work with marble. His works in glass are the most poetic pieces ever made in the medium's history. He could design a funerary monument. He transformed the commission for the **Olivetti** store in Venice — a store for typewriters! — into architectural poetry. He was asked to work in a lot of historic contexts that, as someone with Modernist sensibilities, he might not necessarily have sought out. But they were perfect for him. It's in this tension that his genius emerges. And to me, the Correr is his masterpiece. It was a wonderful moment when I discussed the exhibition with the guardians of Scarpa's memory at the museum. They could sense that I was afraid of entering into dialogue with him because I had so much respect for the work. They said to me, "How do you think Scarpa felt when he was given this palazzo to deal with? His solution was to be super radical." So they told me I should be at ease with my own radical ideas and take the challenge.

Tell me about the theme of tears in your work.

If you think about it, in all our museums, there are no tears. You go to the Louvre or the Met, you rarely see tears. At the MoMA even less so. There is blood and everything, but you never see a tear represented there. You see **Mary Magdalene** at the bottom of the cross, but she's never in tears.

So you add the tears?

Yes. I'm the master of tears. (Laughs.) I'm creating on top of the history of art. I am bringing more drama and more emotions to it. We cannot deny that tears have been unfairly defined as something exclusively feminine and weak. Luckily, psychoanalysts and anthropologists have confirmed that this is not the case. I have tears for everyone!



A collection of Ettore Sottsass vases and jugs decorate the stove in Francesco Vezzoli's makeshift kitchen. Photography by Philippe Jarrigeon for PIN-UP.



Visitors to Vezzoli's home are greeted by an altar of sorts, featuring the marble bust *A veiled woman*, attributed to Pietro Francavilla (c. 1575), and a sea of red anthurium presented in marble planters from the 1970s designed by Angelo Mangiarotti. At the center: the *Nina* stool, 2015, designed by David Lopez Quincoces and produced by LIVING DIVANI. Photography by Philippe Jarrigeon for PIN-UP.

In your work, the history of art appears to be malleable rather than fixed.

For Italians this is very natural. If they studied the history of art, they know that the Romans repaired sculpture with found pieces and that Renaissance antiquarians made new arms or legs or penises for broken Roman sculpture.

Of course, the Romans also painted their sculptures. In your 2014 MoMA PS1 show *Teatro Romano*, you repainted five antique busts, which is far more historically accurate than a white marble surface.

Exactly. But I'm not looking for approval from archeologists. I don't have that arrogance. I just want them to know I study as much as they do, but differently. I recently bought five Renaissance wooden sculptures and will do something with them. The truth is that most of these sculptures are less expensive than a **Bottega Veneta** handbag. I'm reclaiming them and putting them back at the center of some sort of debate. And, since there are so many, I'll paint a tear on them or do another type of intervention. We will always have more artifacts than museums where we can show them. There is a funny story about **Michelangelo**, who, when he arrived in Rome, surprised everyone with a sculpture he made that he said was Roman.

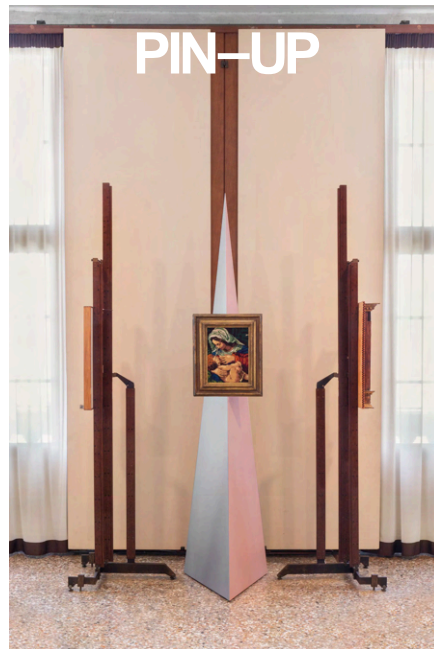
That tells you everything: the biggest genius of the Renaissance tricked everyone by pretending that something he sculpted was 15 centuries older.

Why do we place such value on something being old? And when does something become historic?

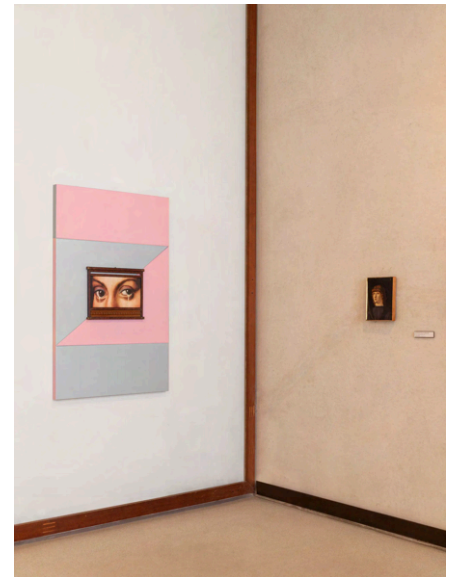
For me, it's not a matter of age, it's a matter of quality. There are lots of marble and plaster works from the Canova period. Of course, the pieces produced inside the Canova studio should be respected in a way, but all the rest are up for grabs. We have to stand by the standards of history and art. We have to preserve the biggest geniuses and, when we discover new or overlooked ones, find people who can financially support that discovery. You need spaces to exhibit their work. The Italian state can't deal with all that. There are so many great artists like **Cosmè Tura** (1430–95), so many great designers from the 60s, not to mention all the many women artists who should be rediscovered. But where do we put all the things that we've created? Should I begin with fashion? Do we have a fashion museum in Milan? No. But, if we had one, there'd be a line from here to Porta Venezia. We have more archives of things to show than places to show them. They are finding something new in Pompeii every month — the Pompeii we know now is different from the Pompeii our parents saw. That's fantastic! Everyone should go back there, again and again. But where will they put everything they find in Pompeii? The archeological museum in Naples is already full. I hope they call me!



Francesco Vezzoli, *KIM KARDASHIAN AS L'ANNUNCIATA (AFTER ANTONELLO DA MESSINA)*, 2024, inkjet print on canvas, metallic embroidery, custom jewelry, artist's frame, 49 x 38 cm, installation view, *Musei delle Lacrime*, 2024, Museo Correr, Venice, Italy. Courtesy the Artist and APALAZZOGALLERY. Photo credit: Melania Dalle Grave_DSL Studio.



Francesco Vezzoli, *FLUID (AFTER ANDREA SOLARIO)*, 2024, Cotton embroidery on canvas, metallic embroidery, artist's frame, 54 x 45 cm, installation view, *Musei delle Lacrime*, 2024, Museo Correr, Venice, Italy. Courtesy the Artist and APALAZZOGALLERY. Photo credit: Melania Dalle Grave_DSL Studio.



Francesco Vezzoli, *PEEP SHOW (AFTER GIOVAN FRANCESCO CAROTO)*, 2024, inkjet print on canvas, metallic embroidery, artist's frame, 32.5 x 41.5 cm, installation view, *Musei delle Lacrime*, 2024, Museo Correr, Venice, Italy. Courtesy the Artist and APALAZZOGALLERY. Photo credit: Melania Dalle Grave_DSL Studio.



Francesco Vezzoli, installation view, *Musei delle Lacrime*, 2024, Museo Correr, Venice, Italy. Photo credit: Melania Dalle Grave_DSL Studio.

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