FINANCIAL TIMES

superior. interiors

APRIL 21 2018

how to spend it interiors edition

Achille Salvagni in his Mayfair atelier with several of his designs. From far left: walnut, bronze and 24ct-gold Roma cabinet, £86,400. Velvet and cast metal Papillia armchair, £18,000. Bronze, onyx and 24ct-gold Bubbles wall sconce, £23,400 each. Fibreglass and bronze Emerald side table, £12,850. Bronze and onyx Hercules floor lamp, £28,000. Lacewood and alpaca Apollo coffee table, £32,500. Hand-knotted Tibetan silk and wool rugs, £960 per sq m, plus an additional £2,400 design fee. Back right: Giò Ponti velvet upholstered 1940s sofa, £25,200

achille's appeal

Achille Salvagni's otherworldly aesthetic blends his Roman heritage with his passion for modernity, and is garnering clients from Jeff Koons to millennial tech entrepreneurs. Charlotte Abrahams **reports. Portrait by** Jake Curtis

I'm walking towards 12 Grafton Street in Mayfair to meet Achille Salvagni at his atelier, certain of what to expect from the Italian architect, designer and artist. He's the man who crafted a 24ct-gold, bronze and onyx table lamp for Jeff Koons in 2013, and has since become the go-to name for art-loving sophisticates such as historian Susan Weber and entrepreneur Michael Bloomberg. But on entering his establishment, I find his discreetly glamorous gallery has been transformed into something entirely unexpected: a space shuttle – immaculately furnished, but definitely a spacecraft. There's even a pair of portholes offering a view of the stars (on closer inspection the twinkling galaxy moves subtly, a shimmering cosmic spectacle). "Welcome to *Apollo*," says Salvagni, smiling broadly.

It turns out that Salvagni regards his London outpost (he is also represented by Maison Gerard in New York) as a stage set for exhibitions of his creative flights of fantasy. *Apollo* is the latest: "I admire the visionary atmospheres of 1960s science-fiction movies such as *2001: A Space Odyssey*," he says, "and as commercial space travel takes shape, I wanted to create my own interpretation of a futuristic yet opulent interior."

The items he has chosen to show include several new designs: Papillia, a tufted velvet armchair (£18,000) that sits poised as if preparing for flight on six delicate cast-metal legs; and a textured, asymmetric coffee table (£32,500, both pictured on previous pages) – also named *Apollo* – made from alpaca (a silver-like alloy) and lacewood. There are also some new interpretations of Salvagni classics, such as a white version of his best-known Spider chandelier and two wall-sconce iterations (£23,400, pictured on previous pages) of the Bubbles lamp (£25,200, pictured on final page) he made for Jeff Koons. These are mixed with a 1940s Giò Ponti sofa (£25,200, pictured on previous pages) and a marble head of Roman emperor Albinus, dating to 193-195AD.

Surveying this scene, I realise that *Apollo* is in fact a perfect evocation of Achille Salvagni's aesthetic. Most notable is the way he has blended history and modernity – not simply through the addition of historical objects like the ancient Roman head, but in the very fabric of each piece. The handcarved onyx sconce Brancaleone (£16,200, pictured on final page) takes its shape from the helmet worn by legendary 13th-century Roman governor Brancaleone degli Andalò, and the polished cast-bronze details that give it a jewel-like sparkle were created by artisans renowned for their bronze work at the Vatican City. Papillia's legs are decorated with thin, vertical lines and each one is hammered by hand using a traditional technique favoured by Roman jewellers.

"Achille's genius lies in his ability to fully comprehend the past in totally contemporary creations," says Benoist Drut, gallery principal at Maison Gerard. "The Antinoo cabinet [£86,000, pictured on final page], for example, which is one of his more iconic pieces, is made from bronze and then simply dressed with parchment-covered wood. The materials reference antiquity but the piece is so inventive in its construction. Like all his work, it is rooted in history and yet totally modern." Brian McCarthy, founder of the eponymous US interior design firm, shares Drut's sentiments. "There is a classicism to Achille's work," he says. "You can totally feel the roots of his Roman sensibility but nothing he does is pastiche – his work has a 21st-century uniqueness."

Salvagni puts this rare ability down to the 18 months he spent in Scandinavia in his 20s, first studying for a masters in architecture at KTH Royal Institute of Technology in Stockholm, and then on a month-long road trip through Finland, Norway and Sweden in search of every example of Alvar Aalto architecture he could find. "It's really hard to grow up in a city like Rome and not be influenced by its history," he says. "Moving to Sweden was about trying to surround myself with something cleaner and calmer. Experiencing Aalto's architecture first-hand was like breathing modernity and when I came home, I tried to find a way to mix that with my Roman heritage."

Salvagni started out a decade ago creating "entire" interiors – designing

Top and above right: the living and dining rooms of a Parisian apartment designed by Salvagni showcases his modern Roman sensibilities. Right: rosewood, bronze and 24ct-gold Giò bar cabinet, £90,600

From top: **handcarved onyx and bronze Divo floor lamp, £30,000; and parchment-covered wood, bronze and 24ct-gold Circeo screen, £65,000. Furniture and lighting for Salvagni's Pompeii exhibition inspired by the ancient Roman city**

everything from the physical layout of the property to the furniture and hinges on the doors, following the model of architects such as Aalto and the Italian master Giò Ponti. "I am not an interior decorator," he states firmly. "I could never just decorate a wall. I need to start from the very beginning and consider the flow of the rooms and the shape of the spaces. It's a structural process."

His approach is also psychological in many ways. Salvagni likes to work directly with his clients, meeting them several times before work begins, so he can not only understand the practicalities of their lives – do they cook, do they have children, etc – but also how they would like to live. "Creating a home is like making a bespoke tailored suit," he says. "It must be functional, but it must also allow its owners to dream. Part of my role as a designer is to create an escape from the ordinary."

Hedgefund manager Massimo Bochicchio and his wife Arianna, a former model, commissioned Salvagni to design their apartment in London's Holland Park five years ago, having visited a property he transformed in Rome. "We consider ourselves very lucky to live in a home designed by Achille Salvagni," Bochicchio says. "He has given us a unique space filled with bespoke furniture such as a parchment-lined walnut cabinet and a bronze-framed club chair, which are so original and timeless we know we will never feel the need to change anything."

Until 2013, Salvagni only made furniture for his interior projects but this changed when Drut saw his work. "It was immediately apparent that he was an incredibly talented and poetic designer," Drut recalls. "His creations possessed a classical quality and were truly innovative in their use of materials. I knew his furniture would be relevant in the US so I asked him to show me his portfolio. Usually I remain silent when reviewing the work of an artist, but after the fifth page I started asking questions and by the time I had reached the end, I had committed him to show with the gallery at the Collective Design Fair!" One of the pieces Salvagni produced for the fair was the Spider chandelier. Made from a combination of 24ct-gold-plated, antique-finished cast bronze, burnished and protected bronze, and backlit onyx, this six-armed centrepiece stole the show. Maison Gerard sold all 20 editions within six months.

The obvious thing would have been to make a second edition, but Salvagni is not interested in "following the market or creating the same things just because they're popular." Instead, he decided to produce variations of the Spider. He released a larger version called Spider Jewel (£87,000, pictured overleaf) in 2015, followed by the Spider White in 2017 (which now takes centre stage at *Apollo*) – a nod to artists such as Giacometti who experimented with sculptural forms in white plaster. He has taken a similar approach with other popular pieces such as Bubbles and the Giò bar cabinet (£90,600, pictured on previous page), an exquisite

"He's a talented and poetic designer. His creations possess a classical quality and are truly innovative"

Near right: bronze, onyx and 24ct-gold Bubbles table lamp with black Zimbabwe granite base, £25,200

Above: bronze, onyx and 24ct-gold-plated Spider Jewel chandelier, £87,000.
Below: walnut, parchment, bronze, marble and 24ct-gold Antinoo cabinet, £86,000

"There is something about the way he uses curves to pull back the masculine strength of his materials"

tribute to Giò Ponti, originally conceived in lacewood, gold and bronze and subsequently re-edited as a four-door cabinet in white parchment. It is a good solution to the challenges of satisfying a market that demands both rarity and the comfort of familiarity.

Salvagni's pieces are flawlessly handcrafted from the finest materials – bronze, gold, marble, onyx, parchment and mahogany are particular favourites – and command prices that can give even his super-wealthy clients pause. Sometimes, they need the reassurance that buying a tried-and-tested piece can offer. "Achille is always one of the first people I think of when I start a new project. There is something about the way he uses curves to pull back the masculine strength of his materials that means his furniture mixes with anything," says Brian McCarthy. "My clients respond to that immediately, but they also want to know whether the piece they are buying is a good investment. I tell them that, while I can't guarantee anything, I definitely believe that their money is safe."

McCarthy's faith is backed up by recent auction results. Last year, a parchment Antinoo cabinet sold at Sotheby's Hong Kong for HK$1.125m (about £101,000), against an estimate of HK$350,000-HK$550,000, while in 2016 at the London saleroom, a prototype Gió cabinet realised £112,500.

Design curator Janice Blackburn first came across Salvagni several years ago through the decorative arts fair PAD London. She was immediately drawn both to his creativity and the exquisite craftsmanship of each piece. "His work is extraordinary," she says. "Everything is beautifully handmade and shines out as truly original." What she did not expect, however, was that she would ever commission one of his pieces for herself. "I have fairly radical taste so I wouldn't describe myself as a typical Achille client," she says, "but I am now interested in commissioning a wool and silk rug from him. I saw a moss-green one at the Mayfair atelier last year that was so soft and beautiful I just wanted to lie on it. I'm renovating a house at the moment that's going to be full of bold design statements and I'm hoping the soft, warm, serene colour palette of an Achille rug will add some calmness."

Left from top: handcarved onyx and bronze Brancaleone sconce, £16,200. Upholstered and hand-engraved bronze Gae armchair, £20,400

Very few designers manage to create work that is both instantly recognisable but also has such broad appeal that they are commissioned by both a millennial billionaire looking to furnish his superyacht and art collector Clarissa Bronfman – as Salvagni has been recently. As I stand in his space capsule-cum-atelier listening to the story behind his Roma cabinet (£86,400, pictured on opening pages), I suddenly understand how he does it. His pieces are not only beautiful – so impeccably made from such exquisite materials that no one, whatever their personal taste, could fail to be seduced – they also reward long and repeated study.

Roma is a case in point: at first sight it's an appealingly curvaceous two-door cabinet so highly polished it begs to be touched. But look again and there is more to see – the piece sits on two pairs of gold-plated elliptical legs and boasts impressive, sword-like hinges. "The cabinet is inspired by Rome," Salvagni says. "It is an ellipse because Rome is an elliptical city, the hinges are a reference to past battles and the legs echo the papal tiara. I have put one set facing forwards and one backwards because we have two Popes living at the same time. If you look closely, you'll see there is a small gap at the top of the door where the handle melts away – it's a reference to the fact that Rome is a place of secrets." I nod, intrigued by the narrative, and the layers of detail in this one piece. "If you want something to last, you need to engage the viewer," he says. "Otherwise it's all just pop." ✦

Apollo runs until September 7 at Achille Salvagni Atelier, 12 Grafton Street, London W1 (020-7409 0026; achillesalvagni.com). Maison Gerard, 43 East 10th Street, New York, NY 10003 (+1212-674 7611; maisongerard.com).

PAOLO PETRIGNANI (2)