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NOV/DEC 2016 | DISPLAY UNTIL 01/09/17



ROMAN HOLIDAY

CREATING A STORYBOOK HOME IN CORAL GABLES, HUSBAND-AND-WIFE ARCHITECTS REFRESH THE NOTION OF AN ITALIAN VILLA.

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ARCHITECTURE AND INTERIOR DESIGN / CARLOS GONZALEZ-ABREU AND ANA MARIA ALAS, GONZALEZ-ABREU/ALAS ARCHITECTS



While many homes are handsome, well-crafted or exquisitely furnished, only a rare few can be called enchanting. Such rarities epitomize more than design and craft, more than furniture and fabrics, more than merely opulent materials—they have an almost magical capacity to whisk our imaginations away to a different, more wonderful world. While many of those enthralling homes take us to a land and time of princes and princesses, this richly detailed house in Coral Gables carries us to a subtler place: a villa of the Roman Republic, perhaps—or more simply, the domain of an artistic Renaissance couple.

No surprise there, for the owners—husband Carlos Gonzalez-Abreu and wife Ana Maria Alas—are like Renaissance masters, serving as the architects and interior designers of their home, while also helming the build and designing the landscape. Their favorite style? “We love historic Italian design,” Alas says, noting a special appreciation for Palladian architecture—that is, grand proportions with quieter yet just-as-lovely interior finishes and a refined level of domesticity. And while

Gonzalez-Abreu agrees that their training is classical, he also points to their tendency to reimagine, to combine in a unique way local history and context with a client’s interests and experiences—in this case their own. “We don’t clone,” he says. “We refresh.”

What the pair have recreated is the concept of a Roman home, which presents a public, more formal face to the city and quite another within the privacy of its inner courtyard. “The house is a distilled Roman villa in a tropical context, full of light and air,” Gonzalez-Abreu says. For the street side, the couple sited the house behind a wall and pulled it back from its historic road by the width of a swath of Montgomery palm trees and an elongated driveway. Passersby see an exterior sheathed in custom-mixed stucco troweled onto solid masonry, a triangular Roman-inspired pediment organically rendered in Florida cypress announcing the entry, a central bay window that houses the children’s study carrels, and a roofline accented by deep eaves. “We wanted the house to feel palatial and Roman on the street side,” says Gonzalez-Abreu, “but the eaves respond to its Florida locale, keeping the bleaching sun and the pouring rain off of the walls.” Refreshing indeed.

Architects and owners Carlos Gonzalez-Abreu and Ana Maria Alas wanted to relieve the austere front wall facing the street, so they created a central bay window to add interest. A roofline of Spanish clay tiles from Masterpiece Tile Company outlines the sky.



The dramatic entry hall leads to the public spaces to the left, upstairs to the bedrooms, or straight to the courtyard through custom French doors from CGI Windows & Doors. Furnishings comprise a bench from Amy Perlin Antiques in New York, an 18th-century Florentine mirror from Alhambra Antiques, and a demilune table from Urban Loft. Custom walnut paneling was crafted by Y&Y Wood Design, and oversize travertine flooring is from Keys Granite.



The owners designed custom corner sofas, upholstered by Le Jeune Upholstery, that split the living room into two conversation areas unified by a custom rug from ABC Carpet & Home. On one side, a mirror from Wilson Antiques and a painting by Enrique Campuzano overlook the setting, which includes an Andrew Martin armchair, a West Elm cocktail table and a console from Shabby Slips in New Orleans.

The courtyard side is something else entirely. The only way to describe the home's façade here is to say it's reminiscent of Michelangelo. A short history lesson: In 1523, the great sculptor created a library for Florence's Medici family. The design took simple elements such as curved brackets and columns and exaggerated their size and proportions to create an emotional reaction. In similar fashion, this design duo scaled up a row of simple brackets and topped them with sturdy Tuscan columns. Where most courtyards aim for quiet serenity, this one has a definite wow factor. "We are very private people," Gonzalez-Abreu says. "This is a stage for us and us alone."

It's clear that the couple are as comfortable with interiors as with architecture. Still, they gave the personal project its due time. "We've been designing this house for many years," says Alas. One might sketch out an idea while the other considered and commented on it. Then, the thought might get put aside for six months while the pair carried on raising kids and designing for others. In the meantime, they were buying pieces for themselves as they traveled the world shopping for clients. In Egypt they purchased the large clay pots now located at the end of the pool, and from Marrakesh they returned with an intricate tile mosaic representing, what else, a Roman citizen. "The house isn't so much furnished as it is curated," Gonzalez-Abreu says. "We wanted the interiors to feel rooted in history, but also fresh. All of our artifacts and vintage pieces are juxtaposed against very contemporary lighting, stainless-steel accents, and other modern elements."

The double-height entryway opens off the front drive and expands into the upper story, setting the tone for the enchanting aura felt throughout. The lower portion of the entry is paneled in walnut with a contemporary vertical



The public rooms on the main level are connected *enfilade*—a French term denoting rooms opening into each other along one edge with a long view. Haisa tile flooring with a leather finish, from Marble Systems, connects these spaces.



Below, left: Purchased from Baker and made in Italy, the reproduction Ligurian vase, found perched within a niche in the main corridor, is finished in an opaque white glaze. It rests beneath a diminutive oil titled *Chastity*, painted by Benjamin Dominguez and acquired through The Americas Collection in 1996.



Below, right: In the powder room, a quartz countertop from Keys Granite supports the hand-carved antique Carrara marble sink sourced through Authentic Provence; the Sigma faucet is from Farrey's Lighting & Bath. The wall tile is a horizontally applied Azul Bateig stone imported from Spain through Keys Granite, and the gold-trimmed mirror was designed by Gonzalez-Abreu and Alas.

A table from Michael Taylor Designs is surrounded with antique chairs by Héliène Aumont Collection through Profiles in New York. Meredith Martin's contemporary painting, a classical bust and the chandelier from Christa's South Seashells lend to the room's collected feel.



pattern embracing a decidedly 21st-century steel-and-wood-railed stairway. It's the first in a long processional row of high-ceilinged rooms opening onto each other and out to the courtyard through individual pairs of French doors. Each room can be closed off from one another with interior doors that feature operable transoms, allowing breezes to sail through the house. Every space has its own character, yet they are all unified with a color-integrated, hand-troweled paint-and-plaster finish exuding a light, dusty blush tone. Gonzalez-Abreu and Alas worked with local craftsmen to achieve just the right effect by using several iterations of a lime-based paint applied with natural-hair brushes. Further, the walls were plastered with rounded corners to give the rooms the heft of Mediterranean masonry walls. Also connecting the main spaces is leather-finished flooring that stretches from the living room to the family room. "The living room is more

like a lounge," Alas says, with its pair of linen-upholstered corner sofas forming two conversation areas that mirror each other. Neoclassical demilune tables anchor each sofa's end. Their paint finish contains hints of the teal-silver tones picked out in the hand-knotted rug—a freshening of a traditional South Florida color selection.

The lime-hued fabric upholstery the adjacent dining room's chairs brings the brightest, most on-trend color into the house. "It's like a palate cleanser between two meal courses," laughs Alas. To each side rises an oversize cabinet faced by 19th-century casement windows from Wilson Antiques, complete with original cremone-bolt hardware, that were salvaged from a house in France, stripped of their lead-based paint and meticulously fitted into their new home by woodworkers from Y&Y Wood Design. In the corners live the busts of two Roman generals acquired in Marrakesh.

On a sourcing trip to Marrakesh for a client, the owners purchased the mosaic of a rather disheveled Roman citizen. They stored it for years until they could create just the right place for it—in their breezeway near the pool.



Left: The high-relief, hand-carved, 100-year-old Baroque-style doors in the guesthouse were purchased by the couple in Amman, Jordan.

Opposite: Contemporary built-in walnut cabinetry and shelving, crafted by Y&Y Wood Design, lines a wall in the family room, which connects the traditional-styled dining room with the more playful kitchen. A red table by Baker separates two chairs the owners purchased in the 1980s.



Opposite: The breakfast area's table, circa 1850, was purchased at Neal Auction Company in New Orleans, while the chairs were scored at The Original Miami Antique Show. A Gregorius Pineo chandelier from Jerry Pair lights the voluminous alcove. Windows here and throughout are from CGI Windows & Doors.

Below: In the kitchen, cabinetry by Y&Y Wood Design houses La Cornue, KitchenAid, Sharp and Sub-Zero appliances from Ferguson. Countertops are a quartzite from Keys Granite. RH barstools pull up to a stainless-steel-topped moveable island beneath Thomas O'Brien pendants for Circa Lighting. Encaustic floor tiles from Walker Zanger were installed by Creative Stone Surfaces.



Next comes the cozy family room with its cypress ceiling detail and contemporary built-ins, and at the end—as a kind of exclamation point—is the kitchen. “This is our Italian modern trattoria,” says Gonzalez-Abreu. The cabinets are walnut wood finished two different ways—darkened or bleached—with some doors trimmed in aluminum and others a mix of both aluminum and milky glass. “It’s like something you’d see in a scientific lab,” he continues. The idea was to break out of the serene repose of the other rooms with an exuberant display of materials and textures. “The kitchen is more about the rich tapestry of Venice than the cerebral theories of Rome,” Gonzalez-Abreu says. The master suite upstairs also has a sense of variety, as if valued pieces gathered from around the world

and through the decades have come together. A gilded iron chandelier lights the space with its rugged wood headboard, neoclassical sofa and casual side tables.

Creating enchantment takes time. “This design was a decades-long process,” says Gonzalez-Abreu. The pair met in college, studied in Europe (him in Paris, her in Rome), married, started their own firm, traveled extensively, and raised a family while living in a small house built in 1936 situated on the rear of this lot. All the while, they were sketching ideas and setting aside wonderful pieces. What they finally created with all that knowledge and all those artifacts is a magical world where Rome meets Florida meets Michelangelo. Says Gonzalez-Abreu: “This house is a diary of our lives.”



Above: Tucked into an outdoor stairway niche, the floor tile from Walker Zanger shows up again on the serving station in the courtyard. The stairway was added to the family's original home, which was re-coated with stucco and remodeled into a guesthouse. The stairs lead to a sun deck and access to the master bedroom of the main house.

Right: Scalamandré draperies frame the opening from the breezeway out to the courtyard. Facing lounge chairs allow for conversation as the drama of the courtyard's design beyond reveals itself like a Renaissance painting, with the main house to the right and the guesthouse to the left. A beam helps to support a custom trellis.





The courtyard conveys a Pompeian feeling, framed with exaggerated curved brackets and columns, and is grounded with a pool built by Tuttle's Pool Company. The pool features a lagoon-like, custom-colored Pebble Tec finish. The Mediterranean-inspired landscape was installed by Artistic Lawn Service.



Above: In one corner of the master bedroom, a Noir Ferret writing desk from Lars Bolander cuddles up to drapery fashioned from a Great Plains spun silk from Holly Hunt; the chair is by Michael Taylor Designs. The Lindsay Simons artwork, titled *Ingres Lace*, was made using oil and mixed media on canvas. It was purchased in Park City, Utah.

Left: The curved ceiling in the master bedroom is lofty and sheltering at the same time. A contemporary headboard designed by the owners contrasts the traditional lines of a Minton-Spidell settee. A rug from ABC Carpet & Home gently rests on DuChâteau wood flooring installed by Domino Floor Company. The bedside lamps are by Vaughan, and the antique chandelier is by Emporio San Firenze. A frieze artwork by Claudia Brito Sousa hangs above the bed.