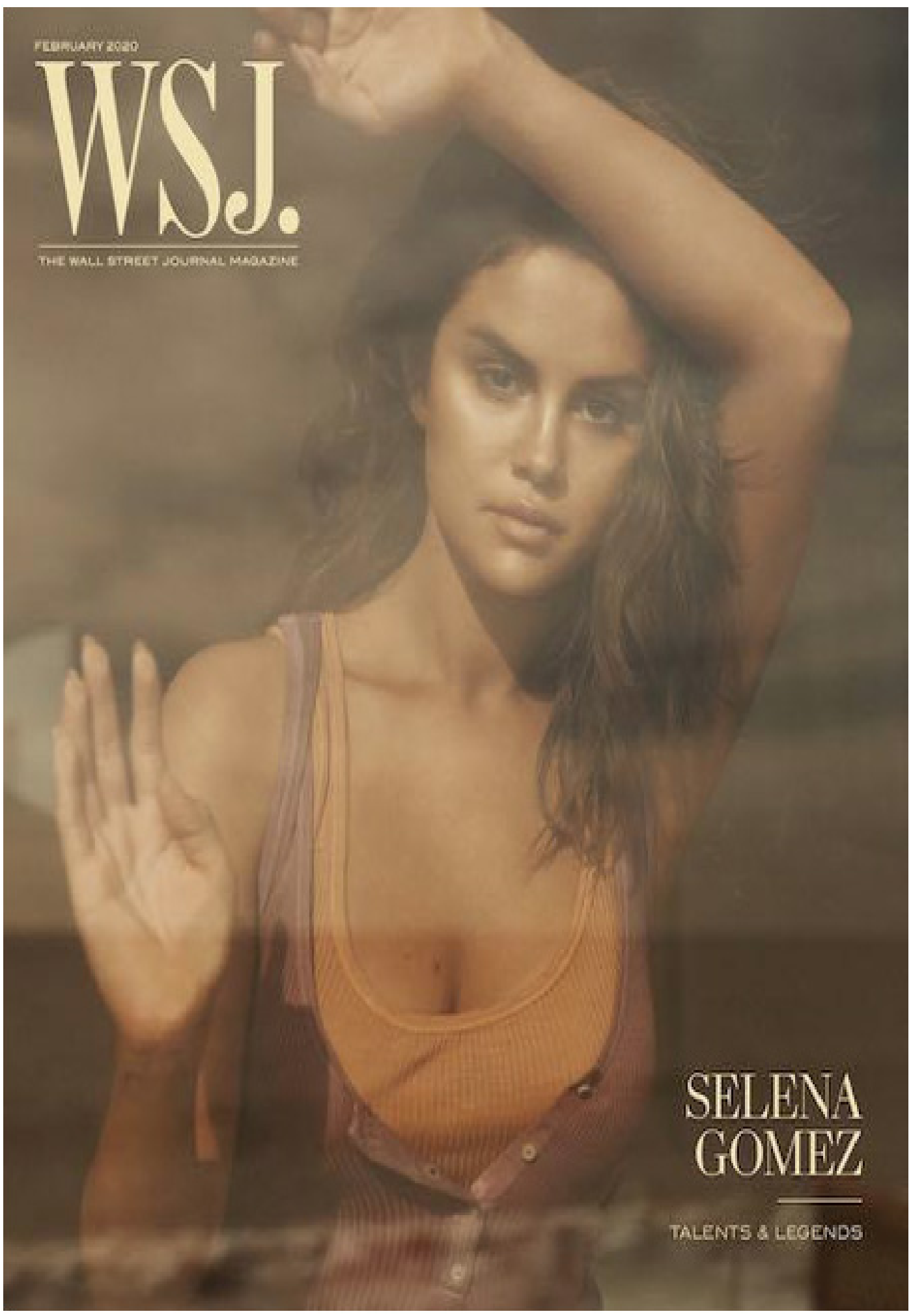


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SELENA GOMEZ

TALENTS & LEGENDS

DESIGNER DIGS

COMPOSITION CLASS

Design dealer Alexandre Biaggi put together his Paris apartment one piece at a time, using layers of objects and textures to create shifting moods while always holding to his singular point of view.

BY SARAH MEDFORD PHOTOGRAPHY BY FRANÇOIS COQUEREL



LIVE LIGHTLY
 ▲ Nuage table by Guy de Rougemont brightens the living room, painted a chalky white from Little Greene.
 ▲ T.E. Robsjohn-Gibbings armchair rests on cream-colored cowhides.

OF COURSE, THE CHAIR is ruined, but I love it this way. It's kind of a memento mori," jokes Alexandre Biaggi, stepping around a satin boudoir chair shedding its upholstery in the foyer of his Paris apartment. Biaggi, a 63-year-old design dealer, bought the piece in 1989 for his tiny first shop on the rue Jacob, and he remembers reading a book in it for the better part of his opening day. "Two women came by on the sidewalk and one said to the other one, 'Poor boy. Everything is ugly in that shop.' I didn't know if I was going to cry or to laugh! Then I thought, This one I'm never going to sell."

Although the chair is Victorian, a period slightly outside his lane, he's kept his word. Biaggi is one of Europe's foremost dealers in furniture and objects of the 20th and 21st centuries. In Paris, he's the one to see for a Jean-Michel Frank leather armchair in original condition, one of Claude Lalanne's fanciful apple sculptures or a Karl Springer parchment-covered console table. Before entering the field, Biaggi had studied to become an auctioneer, graduating at the top of his class, administered by France's National Chamber of Auctioneers. During that time he fell hard for the '30s and '40s through the work of Frank, whose gift for turning commonplace materials like plaster, straw or white oak into uncommon luxury objects shaped Biaggi's design philosophy. The progressive decades between the wars are still his specialty.

For all the daily horse-trading dealers engage in, they can be oddly allergic to change. Biaggi spent almost 20 years living above his current shop, on the rue de Seine, until the distance between his work and private life had been whittled down to nothing. The interior designer Jacques Grange, a good friend, tipped him off to the availability of his new apartment about five years ago, and one of the firm's architects, Roméo Bucciaccchio, helped with the renovation.

Biaggi's place is a 30-minute walk across the Pont des Arts from his Left Bank gallery and two minutes from the hotel Bristol, one of his neighborhood haunts. The airy one-bedroom is on the third floor of an *hôtel particulier* that dates to 1795, though a prior renovation had erased its character; Biaggi and Bucciaccchio worked for almost a year restoring floors and moldings, modernizing the kitchen and adding a guest bath before the dealer moved in. To invite the serenity he longs for after spending the day with a wild-card assortment of objects, Biaggi painted the flat in shades of cool white, hung limestone-colored curtains, laid down pale French cowhides over the herringbone floors and covered his living room >

sofa in snowy cotton. In front of it, a cloud-shaped Nuage table by Guy de Rougement in polished chrome beckons like a silver dessert spoon plunged into the center of an *île flottante*.

Grange, a regular guest, admires Biaggi's eye. "His personal taste is not the taste of everybody," the decorator says, seated in his office at a table lacquered in foot-long whorls of turquoise and orange. "It's a whole universe. Refined, poetic, too, and modern. But sometimes not—I remember when he showed a certain sofa with long fringe. I said, 'Mae West, darling; it's too late for that!' But he has conviction and a point of view."

Biaggi wears his erudition lightly. In Corsica, where he grew up, he trained as a classical vocalist, and the stories he tells in his singsong voice about pieces in his shop—a crystal obelisk or a table lamp shaped like a roosting bird—can be mesmerizing.

In 2001, as the art and design markets took a dive following 9/11, Biaggi wondered whether trading in old things was over, or at least too restrictive. He considered offering contemporary work, torturing himself over the decision. Finally he sought some advice. "Pierre Bergé was a client, but he was also a good businessman," Biaggi says of the co-founder of the Yves Saint Laurent fashion empire. "I remember we had lunch at Brasserie Lipp. I asked him, 'Do you think it's wrong?' He said, 'Not at all! It's perfect! You have to do it.'" He started with a few pieces from his friend Hervé Van der Straeten, who's since become an international star (on March 26 a show of his new pieces opens in the gallery). Biaggi also represents the work of 10 other living designers, some of which is scattered around the flat. Collaborating on color and material choices gives him a charge. "I was with Pierre Saalburg today checking a prototype for a table," he says. "You can't do that with Jean-Michel Frank."

The apartment's meandering layout has given Biaggi a chance to change up the mood from room to room, sometimes starkly. In the bedroom, a bookshelf by Jacques Adnet displays African sculpture and contemporary glass. The kitchen, which overlooks a stone courtyard, evokes the Bauhaus with a Marcel Breuer table and chairs of tubular steel on a black-and-white tiled floor. Down a hallway drenched in surrealist clouds is the dining room; Biaggi had the narrow space painted with a trellis motif in a nod to the winter-garden salons popularized in the 1950s by Madeleine Castaing, the decorating siren of the Left Bank. He added a set of loop-backed plywood chairs and a Jansen table to play off the eye-bending pattern. "Apart from the charm of Castaing, which I venerate, it gives a true sensation of space by adding depth to the walls," he says of the effect.

If the bottom were to drop out of his business tomorrow, Biaggi would make a natural decorator. He loves the formal calculations of color, shape and texture that come into play when composing a room. "I can rearrange the entire shop just because I sold one piece, because it doesn't work anymore," he admits. "It's true. This is my real pleasure."

But he's learned to think differently about his own home. "At a certain point, you find equilibrium," he says. "And if you want to change something, you have to change the house." ●



MIXED MEDIA
Clockwise from top: In the bedroom, a Jacques Adnet bookcase and Pierre Chareau stool complement the dealer's nascent collection of African sculpture; a 19th-century bust and a slipper chair in the bath; a view of the entry hall, where a boudoir chair joins an Alberto Giacometti lamp with a shade by Christian Bérard.

PIERRE LEROUX, COURTESY OF BO GALLERY



"HIS PERSONAL TASTE IS NOT THE TASTE OF EVERYBODY. BUT HE HAS CONVICTION AND A POINT OF VIEW."

—JACQUES GRANGE

COOL HEAT

Clockwise from above: Biaggi; a Jansen table anchors the dining room; IKEA bookshelves line a living room wall beneath a 1970s painting by Pierre Lesieur.

