

THE  TIMES

# L U X X X

MAGAZINE OF THE YEAR



## FASHION'S TIPPING POINT

# House of light

Lighting designers Andrew and Sarah Hills pulled down their home so that they could rebuild it, creating a space that reflects their precisely curated aesthetic. By *Fiona McCarthy*



**T**HE FOUNDERS OF the specialist lighting company Porta Romana have a great talent for clever tricks of the eye. Taking their cues from ordinary, everyday objects – a twig or a seedpod, paper concertinaed in origami folds, a knobby pumpkin – Andrew and Sarah Hills have spent the past three decades transforming simple forms into illuminated objects of sculptural beauty.

So it's no surprise that they've used such tricks on their home, tucked away in a sleepy Hampshire village. They tried and failed with myriad architects to find a way to make the 19th-century former vicarage they had bought work as a family home they could share with their three then-teenage children. Six years ago they pulled it down and rebuilt it to their design using materials they had salvaged, including the stone, used to create a façade similar to the original.

From the outside the six-bedroom house looks as though it has been there for centuries, and is surrounded by nine acres of beautifully landscaped gardens by the designer Jane Brown, with a pond, and meadows that lead to the rolling South Downs. Inside the well-proportioned living spaces are airy and modern, centred around a generous sky-lit front hallway and sculptural staircase. On the ground floor the drawing rooms, study and dining room connect to an open-plan kitchen with French doors that open out on to the garden. "We wanted to create spaces we would all use every day," Andrew says.

Their style owes much to a time in their mid-twenties when they lived in the arts district of Porta Romana in Florence (the inspiration for their company's name). "We met this elderly American lady with a really cool apartment just above the Piazza Santa Croce that really made a big impression on us," Andrew says. "It was very simple, with terracotta floors, beautiful frescoes, cool white sofas and a very choice collection of things."

Items collected over the decades are key to the couple's decorating style, helping to transform

## THE ART OF GOOD LIVING

Left: a Christopher Marvell sculpture and artwork by Douglas Swan. Right: the home's entrance hall





*“A marble-topped table with tapered metal legs jostles with plants, a fossilised hippo skull and an 18th-century tapestry”*



#### GRAND DESIGN

Minotti sofas in the living room. Above left: the garden, designed by Jane Brown; a guest bedroom. Left: Sarah and Andrew Hills in the dining room; a chair made of a tree stump

the house into a home. Against a clean, natural colour palette – intentionally “slightly dirtied, always desaturated,” Sarah says – they have combined the handmade and antique with the modernist and abstract, not worrying about periods or styles. If they like it, Sarah says, “it doesn’t matter if it’s from the 1950s or 1700s”. Hence the rich mix: a burr walnut console alongside a camouflage-print rug found in Paris;

a marble-topped table with tapered metal legs (fashioned by Andrew, in a style inspired by the French beaux arts furniture designer André Arbus) jostling with plants, a fossilised hippo skull and a dramatic 18th-century indigo verdure tapestry.

The pops of pattern were thanks to the interior designer Paolo Moschino – his delicately blousy Aurora on Nivelles Oyster roses print adorns the master bedroom’s walls – and art, from luminous Renaissance paintings and Ivon Hitchens landscapes to gentle drawings by Stanley Spencer and Tracey Emin. The lighting, of course, is all by Porta Romana, from the Giacometti-inspired Man 3 floor lamp and gilded Leaf wall lights to the Gareth Devonald Smith-designed bronze Sputnik chandelier hanging over the kitchen island.

The couple’s eye for detail is crucial to the success of their business, which started in 1988 at the kitchen table with Sarah painstakingly hand-painting turned wooden lamp bases and old bits of furniture that they sold to Liberty. Today they have a team of more than 100, but work with many of the same British master glassblowers, metalworkers, ceramicists and sculptors they started with three decades ago. Each piece is finished by hand at their Farnham workshop.

Like their pieces, the Hills’ home is not just unique and personal, but liveable. As Sarah says, “The sofas are big enough for all of us to pile on to for movie night. We didn’t want smart little sofas which only fit two polite people. The dog needs to be able to come in and shake his fur too.” [portaromana.com](http://portaromana.com)