

DESIGNER DIGS

# CASA ELEGANTE

A mix of old- and new-world refinement distinguishes the work of Casa Muñoz, a design duo whose gifts for layered experimentation shaped their Madrid home.

BY SARAH MEDFORD PHOTOGRAPHY BY GONZALO MACHADO



**PALE FIRE** In the master bedroom, a Vienna Secession desk, a Joe Colombo lounge chair re-covered in shearling and a pair of shelves, designed by Mafalda Muñoz's father, flank a polished-iron mantel.

**F**OR YOUNG apartment hunters, central Madrid exists in a state of perpetual drought. Good luck finding a place.

For Mafalda Muñoz and Gonzalo Machado, partners in the design firm Casa Muñoz, luck eventually arrived in 2017 in the form of an option to buy in the increasingly shiny Justicia district of the Spanish capital, just off the museum corridor of Paseo de Recoletos. Their persistence yielded an apartment spanning the second floor of a lofty four-story neoclassical building, with street-facing balconies and a view into a rear courtyard from a glassed-in *galería*. The historical touches charmed them; the place was a rare find. They repeated that to themselves ad nauseam as what was supposed to be a three-month ironing-out of the flat's title stretched on for a year and a half, right up to the morning their option expired. They signed a contract with two hours to spare.

This sort of waiting game would be tough on anyone, but for these two it was agony: In the 13 years they've lived together, they've moved 10 times.

"That's my fault," acknowledges Machado, 40, whose weakness for hopscotching across their hometown of Madrid and other European cities in search of opportunity has caused him a lot of grief, he says. His overview of 2019 sums up the situation: Following the birth of their second child, the couple took on a new residential project in Mallorca, got the Justicia renovation underway, organized two exhibitions, designed a restaurant for the Beyeler Foundation outside Basel, Switzerland, moved to Gstaad for four months to open a second office and returned to Madrid just in time for lockdown.

"[That year] was probably...if we didn't die, we are OK," says Muñoz, 37. She's happy that the new apartment is only a few blocks from the couple's office, so they can squeeze in lunch with Paco and Máxima, 5 and 3, between meetings.

Their home has already become a calling card with clients, a place to demonstrate their interests in refined surfaces, ceremonial moods and balanced arrangements of furnishings that run the gamut from flaking 17th-century marquetry to leather swivel chairs and ankle-grazing steel drinks tables. The selections are often made by Muñoz, who studied interior design in Madrid and decorative arts in London and apprenticed in Paris with Cyril Vergniol—one of the four designers behind the recent remake of Hôtel de Crillon, in a neoclassical former palace on the Place de la Concorde—before setting up shop with her husband in 2014, a year after they married.

Machado's academic focus was industrial >

**GEOMETRY LESSON**

Under a Philippe Anthonioz chandelier, a dining table from the '70s by Luigi Saccardo. The chairs were designed by Paco Muñoz, Mafalda's father, for his furniture company Darro.

want to see. It helps me a lot. I'm more into the sense of space, the feeling."

Tantalizing views from one soberly elegant cream-colored room to the next distinguish the apartment they designed six years ago for their friend Eugenia Silva, the Spanish-born model. Though her contemporary art collection is the focus, the setting has a quiet integrity grounded in the furniture they crafted: overscaled geometric shapes in hardwoods or figured marble that evoke the modernist past. It was one of the couple's first big jobs in Madrid.

Their own apartment, on the other hand, is a place for experimenting with colorful, highly personal choices, an approach Muñoz says many of their private clients admire but aren't prepared to commit to. She blames their apprehension on social media. "Too many Pinterest pictures around," she says. "Our goal is not to show to the client what the results will be."

"Today, designers are really trained to make images that are neat and easy to read," Machado observes. "But objects make houses. Objects require time to find and require the hand to touch.... [They] are the ultimate luxury. Because it's easy to make a house that looks good in a picture."

He's sitting with his wife at their dining table, a surfboard-shaped design from the '70s by Luigi Saccardo that they've spiced up with a new parchment top. "The original top was black painted glass," Machado says. "It was very cold."

Lining the room are mahogany bookshelves they designed—very warm—that borrow elements from the Renaissance monastery of El Escorial in Madrid, the contemporary architecture of Ricardo Bofill and the constructions of Catalan artist Xavier Corberó. Muñoz and Machado take pride in the achievements of fellow Spaniards, honoring that identity in their own work even as they look beyond its influences.

The most significant role model of all has been Mafalda's father, Paco Muñoz. The co-founder of two businesses that defined Spanish decorating in the second half of the 20th century—Casa & Jardin, a carriage-trade firm that grew to 300 employees, and Darro, a kind of Iberian IKEA—Muñoz was known for mixing heavily varnished heirlooms with brightly patterned fabrics by David Hicks and Manuel Canovas, the midcentury princes of prints. The effect of this pairing on 1960s Spanish living rooms was

design, but he soon veered into photography out of boredom. Trailing the Peruvian-born fashion photographer Mario Testino around Europe for a year turned out to be an entertaining detour. Testino, known for the settings he often uses as mood-building backdrops for his images, embraces decoration the same way he does witty updos and geode-size jewelry. "He is a crazy collector," Machado marvels. "He has amazing

taste and an amazing way of mixing colors."

Before long, Machado was shooting his own portraits and interiors for magazines across Europe, a gig he's since retired from (though he did take the photographs for this article). But Muñoz thinks her husband's camera-carrying chapter has enriched their shared aesthetic. "Gonzalo has this photographic vision of a project," she says, "which, in the end, is what clients



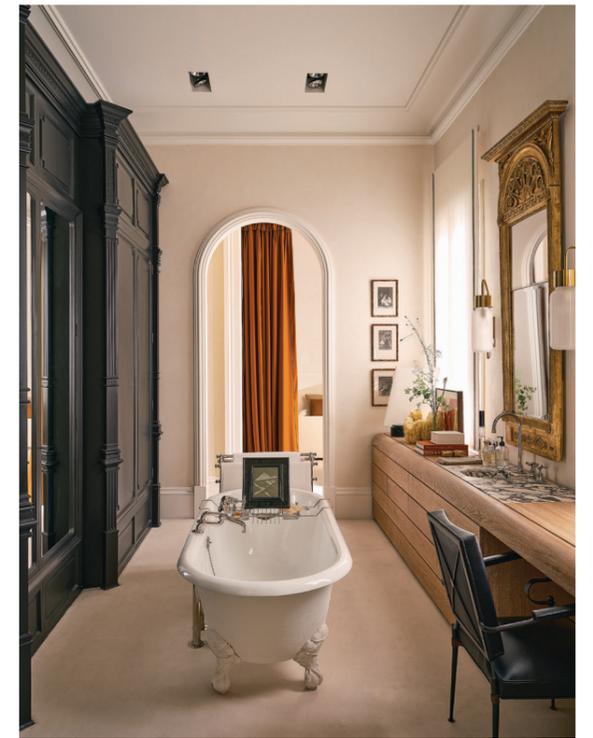
like aiming a strobe light into Franco's postwar gloom. Sanctions had long curbed the country's imports, and Casa & Jardin celebrated homegrown talent. Mafalda, who worked there around the time of her father's death in 2009 (the business closed within a few years), still turns to many of the same artisans, and a few of the firm's projects are third-generation Muñoz-family clients.

To oversee a recent stream of jobs in Switzerland, Casa Muñoz has opened Casa Gstaad, a studio and salesroom for its furniture designs in a half-timbered chalet they converted in that village. With the onset of the pandemic, Hauser & Wirth was invited to use the gallery for exhibitions—"Our furniture and Hauser art," Muñoz says, smiling.

The venture wasn't their first foray into the gallery world. From 2015 to 2020, the pair ran Machado-Muñoz, a Madrid space hosting well-respected shows of international design. Among them was one stupendous win: Their collaboration with the estate of Catalan textile artist Aurèlia Muñoz (1926–2011, no relation) helped put her back on the map at a time when interest in fiber art was building internationally. A

year later, New York's Museum of Modern Art acquired three pieces from the estate.

"It was a five-star moment," says Muñoz, who encountered the artist through a catalog she found while cleaning out her father's desk. She'd never gotten around to buying a piece. She and Machado now have three—one of which sails from the ceiling of their living room, in place of a chandelier. ●

**PLATO MIXTO**

Clockwise from left: A hanging textile by Aurèlia Muñoz above a pair of Javier Carvajal chairs in the living room; custom-ebonized cabinetry (left) by Casa Muñoz in the master bathroom; a vintage Jean Besnard lamp and a contemporary mirror by Jorge Penadés; Machado and Muñoz at a Vienna Secession–period desk in the bedroom.

