

Time for Turin



In the summer room on the top floor, Green Berry Tree wallpaper from Liberty references the view of the valley below. The sofa is from the French supplier Berengere Leroy

Below The bedroom is painted in Gelato with window frames in Sole, from Watson-Smyth's paint collection with Graphenstone. **Bottom** Watson-Smyth believes in decorating like you dress



When the interiors writer — and empty-nester — Kate Watson-Smyth decided to leave London for Italy, she didn't imagine she'd end up renovating a 24-room villa

Words **Katrina Burroughs**

“Decorate like you dress.” That's Kate Watson-Smyth's tip for people who panic when faced with bare walls. If in doubt, the secret to a successful home makeover lies inside your wardrobe. “Everyone gets dressed in the morning. You know what you like to wear and more than likely what makes you happy is what suits you. So when you decorate, start by thinking about your favourite clothes.” Taking her own advice, the writer behind the interiors blog Mad About the House is clad in burgundy and butter colours, posing against a backdrop of shutters in a wine red and walls in a rich creamy shade in her living room in Piedmont, northwest Italy.

Watson-Smyth, 57, the author of five books on interior design, has surfaced from an 18-month makeover marathon, downsizing from the property in Crouch End where she raised her sons, doing up a north London house and tackling what she describes as her dream home, this 300-year-old, 24-room *villa d'epoca* with a view of the Alps. Her London homes will be familiar to her followers, as she mines every detail of her projects for advice and shopping tips for her blog. The Italian job has been under wraps — until now.



Photographs **Racheal Smith**

What you need to know, before we embark on this story of Piedmontese property porn, is that Watson-Smyth and her husband, Adam, also 57, were aspiring empty-nesters. “We had always dreamt of having a place in Italy,” she says. “We knew one day the boys would move out and we would downsize. We were approached by a friend of the architect who had done our loft conversion. He had friends that wanted to live in our road and they had heard we were thinking of moving to Italy.” Her student sons, now aged 23 and 20, were unfledged, still very much based at home, and Watson-Smyth had fully intended to wait until they departed to move house. “But do your children ever really leave?” she asked herself, before seizing the opportunity to begin pursuing her Italian second act.

“We’d fallen in love with the area around Turin years ago. We started house-hunting and we did that Phil and Kirsty thing where we’d go for the weekend and look at three properties: the farmhouse, the small central flat, the villa. We felt one of the key things we wanted was to be able to walk and buy a cup of coffee.” Their first impression of their home, impeccably located near a village café, was “far too big”. They visited on a rainy Friday in May 2022 to rule it out. “I walked in one direction, my husband in the other. When we came back, we both had tears running down our cheeks.” Months passed as they tried to find something more sensible. They acquired the keys in April 2023.

“It had been a much-loved home,” Watson-Smyth says, “lived in for 60 years by the same family, who had bought it for one million lire in 1964 and raised five children there.” The kitchen had old laminate units that were



‘We had always dreamt of a place in Italy’



her own home, unearthing stored furniture left by the previous owners. “We found three vintage Ikea wardrobes in the loft — plywood with wire-mesh doors. We managed to get them down, involving a moment when I got so wedged between a wardrobe and the wall I thought I’d have to stay there until I’d dieted like Winnie-the-Pooh,” she remembers. Her husband freed her by taking the furniture apart, and now the bonus closets have pride of place in the couple’s dressing room, a source of interiors inspiration every time Watson-Smyth opens the wardrobe door. ■

The Italian Collection by Kate Watson-Smyth is available from July 1, from £27.50 for one litre of Grafclean Matt, a washable, water-based matt emulsion for interior and exterior use, [graphenstone-ecopaints.store](https://www.graphenstone-ecopaints.store)

The ground-floor tavernetta, with the pizza oven, has original cotto floor tiles and a vaulted ceiling. **Right** The fresco in the main living room was painted in the 1800s. Artworks include a framed Grayson Perry scarf



falling off the wall. The house needed replumbing and the bathrooms needed replacing, completely rewiring, replastering and redecorating. Work started in May 2023 and what followed was a minor miracle: the Watson-Smyths were in their new home in time for Christmas. This autumn, with the inside of the property finally furnished, they plan to start hosting interior design retreats. She puts the efficiency down to her architect, Sarah Fronduti. “To give you an idea of what can happen, there’s a house in the village where scaffolding went up at the same time as ours and nothing has happened yet.”

The three-storey, six-bedroom, four-bathroom property came with some unique features. There is a pizza oven in the tavernetta, the oldest part of the building dating from 1700, and a couple of the interiors have ceilings with fresco paintings from the 1800s. In her colour choices Watson-Smyth wanted to remain true to the original interiors, and so partnered with the eco-paintmaker Graphenstone to devise a palette based on the colours she found in the house (the Italian Collection, with delicious names such as Gelato and Oliva, is available from July 1).

To furnish the 24 empty rooms, she began frequenting reclamation yards and the markets in Nizza Monferrato and Asti and the Gran Balon Torino, said to be the largest flea market in Europe. “You can buy a vintage Alessi kettle, a set of Gio Ponti plates and we’ve bought lots of paintings — this house has a lot of wall to cover.” Finally she shopped

Wisteria picture: Carole Poirot



Top The wisteria is a hundred years old. **Above** A wall between kitchen and dining room was removed, flooding the interior with light. The furniture was left by the old owners. **Left** In the bathroom Maitland & Poate tiles tone with a pink Burlington sink