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HUMOROUS VENICE  
ON RUSSIAN HILL



text: Izabel Spike  
photos: Alaia and Hans Fonk

**Above:** Pamela Babey and Steve Henry, designers and principals of Bamo of San Francisco, the design studio that enjoys international renown in the field of luxury hospitality and residential projects.

**Beside that:** Pamela's living room in her apartment on Russian Hill, one of the highest locations in San Francisco. The daybed and Brno chairs were designed by Mies van der Rohe. Otherwise, the interior can be termed a humorous 'More is More' setting, with decidedly Venetian influences. **Adjoining:** the house where the apartment is located is on a steep street; the exterior reveals nothing of the Italian grandeur of Pamela's interior.

She's an out-and-out modernist, living among antique Venetian mirrors and glassware, Fortuny fabrics and modern classics by Mies van der Rohe. Her love of Italy merges with Mexican influences from her childhood.

Pamela Babey is very much aware of the humour in the apparently opposing styles. She comments, with a laugh, on her apartment at Russian Hill in San Francisco and her work as one of the founders of the design studio, Bamo, in that American city.





Above: the corridor leading from the entrance hall immediately hints at what the interior of the Russian Hill apartment promises to be like. All the walls and much of the floor space are used to display her art, antiques and memorabilia. All are objects with a story and emotion of their own. That is clearly apparent in the still-life in the photo top right that is dominated by an 18th-century St. Francis from Mexico. On the wall there are Mexican 'retablos': paintings on tin which once belonged in the collection of Pamela's parents.

The largest collection of Mexican retablo art is in New Mexico State University in Las Cruces, New Mexico, where Pamela grew up. Also, a drawing by the Mexican artist, Conde, above Venetian paper boxes and a blue/red Venetian vase.

**Overleaf**

Left: the round table stands between the kitchen and the window. Although space is limited, Pamela Babey was not afraid to hang a large, antique Venetian chandelier above the marble-topped table. In the background, the living space.

Right: detail of the kitchen island, the marble work surface of which is strewn with antique Venetian glass. The large peonies add atmosphere and colour to the lavish scene.



She has worked there on several favourite projects, including the Four Seasons Hotel in Milan and Grand Hotel a Villa Feltrinelli beside Lake Garda. The latter project comprises a large villa, built in 1892 by the Feltrinelli family who had built up a vast timber empire. It lies in the village of Gargnano. Mussolini resided there briefly, Sir Winston Churchill painted it and D.H. Lawrence wrote about it. At the end of the 1990s Robert Burns transformed it into a luxurious hotel, with Bamo (the design studio of which Pamela Babey is one of the founders) responsible for the

interiors, including the public areas, wine cellar and terraces. Pamela: "The nice thing about this project was that, when finished, the villa looked as if a family had been living there for centuries." Her own interior may have been fashioned along Italian lines, but it is hard to detect a clear plan there – contrary to her professional work. It seems to be an ongoing addition of things that appeal to her, and memorabilia. "I like the way objects bring ideas into the interior. Although most evoke memories, I don't live in the past. I actually use everything, and just put the antique Venetian glasses in the dishwasher. If something can't be used, I'm not interested. But I don't like throwing things away. I have the feeling that, visually, there's never enough. I recently held a dinner party here for forty guests. My mother had an antique shop in New Mex-

ico and I've probably inherited the passion for collecting from her." The apartment begins with a long, narrow corridor filled with paintings, antique furniture and a low bookcase, immediately revealing her love of books. At the end of the corridor there is a living room-cum-kitchen, including a kitchen island. The dining area, with a round marble table is in the corner beside the window. A daybed, designed by Mies van der Rohe, occupies a central place in the living room. The large mirrors along one of the walls suggest the whole space is larger than it actually is. In the entrance hall a staircase leads down to the master bedroom, part of which serves as office space. If ever you were looking for the definition of a personal interior, this one would fit the bill.

Pamela takes a structured approach with her work for Bamo. She set up the design studio in 1991 with David Moulton, Gerry Jue and Michael Booth, colleagues from the Pfister Partnership. They were joined later on by Steve Henry and Dorothy Greene as principals. The studio concentrates on luxury assignments like hotels, projects and residential styling, from traditional to modern. Not that they pursue a specific style, as confirmed by Pamela's elaboration of their design approach: "For us, it is more important to have style than to be in a style. It's about ambience. Even if a project is absolutely minimal, we'll always give it a warm, individual atmosphere. I like clients who challenge you to find what's special. No, it doesn't have to be my taste, as long as it isn't trendy. The key words in our work are quality, timelessness, individuality and location-specificity." These guidelines apply for her and her colleagues, and they pursue them world wide, whether at Shell headquarters in The Hague, the Netherlands, a Hong Kong residence or a deluxe resort on Bora Bora. "It's essential that the architectural proportions are right before you start on the interior design. Rooms must be well- and functionally organised, with light as the binding factor", as Pamela Babey put it.







These pages feature two undertakings by Bamo Inc. of San Francisco.

Above: Grand Hotel a Villa Feltrinelli in the village of Gargnano on the shores of Lake Garda. Sir Winston Churchill painted it and D.H. Lawrence wrote about it. The hotel is in an imposing small castle built in 1892 by the Feltrinelli family who had built up a vast timber empire. The complex was recently transformed by the architect Robert Burns into a world-class hotel. Bamo designed the entire interior.

Below and right: photos of the Four Seasons Hotel on Bora Bora. The interior was designed by Bamo; the architects were Didier Lefort and Pierre-Jean Piccart.

Photos: Grand Hotel a Villa Feltrinelli: Oberto Gill, Simone Reggiori and Davide Sommariva, Ottavio Tomasini. Four Seasons Resort Bora Bora: Barbara Kraft and Peter Vitale.

