

petit palais

A Melbourne warehouse space hides a heart beating with Parisian romance

PHOTOGRAPHER: MARCEL AUCAR PRODUCER: HELEN REDMOND





OPPOSITE PAGE: tea and sympathy in Tony Venios' single room Melbourne warehouse apartment. A Louis chair sits in front of 200-year-old solid oak doors from a chateau in Normandy that hide a fold-out bed. **THIS PAGE:** a suite of two Louis XVI-style chairs and a two-seater settee perch in front. They are covered in Venetian silk damask. "Many of the fabrics I use are original patterns from the period," says Venios.



APPROACH THE MELBOURNE warehouse apartment of Tony Venios – part of an industrial conversion on buzzy Chapel Street and it's safe to assume you're heading for the last word in contemporary chic. The apartment will be clean-lined and minimal, possibly cavernous; certainly hard-wired for the latest whiz-bang gadgetry.

All of which makes it a shock when Venios, an antiques broker (and part-time personal trainer), opens his standard-issue metal door not to the anticipated void, but to a bijou Parisian apartment, whose furnishings, fabrics, mouldings and high-ceilinged proportions pay homage to the French period Venios considers the apogee of elegance and design.

It's not just the line-up of furniture from the periods of the Louis XIV, XV and XVI (roughly 1643–1793) that resonate so strongly with him, Venios explains. Rather, it's the grace and assurance that all of this represents. "I get caught up with the history," he says. "I'm a very romantic person and, to me, this is all romance – where this furniture would have been and the people who have used it."

"When you sit here you feel like you're at home; there are no inhibitions, you just chill. My life has always been very hectic, and this is beautiful and is how things must have been. Life's not like this now, it's hurried and harsh."

Certainly, given what he's achieved here, it's incredible to think that the space Venios first encountered four years ago was just that – a space. An unbelievably small 10m x 5m space.

Having first been intrigued by the apartment building, and then attracted by its proximity to Melbourne's design and fashion pulse, Venios had an initial, disquieting look. "I walked in the door and saw the smallest room ever," he recalls. "I asked the owner where the rest of it was and he answered, 'This is the rest of it!'"

In the end, however, Venios was more inspired by the apartment's soaring, five-metre high ceilings than discouraged by its tiny living area.

Having collected antiques for years, he coveted the wall space to finally hang the tall mirrors that he'd had tucked around Melbourne. He wanted that ceiling to accommodate chandeliers. "Plus," he adds, "by the second time I came to look I could already picture it all, how it was going to work."



THIS PAGE, ABOVE: tea is served with a 1920s French tea set featuring silver tray, teapot, sugar bowl and milk jug. Moroccan tea glasses are finished in 24-carat gold leaf. Tony Venios, **ABOVE LEFT**, "lives the moment" in his compact but sumptuous abode. **OPPOSITE PAGE:** one of Venios' favourite pieces, a brass inlaid tortoiseshell boule clock made for Louis XIV in 1710, sits above a Louis XV set of fruitwood drawers with rouge marble top. The French torchere to the right of the drawers, was bought by Venios at Sotheby's and dates from 1850.





THIS PAGE: An intricate Napoleon III-era desk with tortoiseshell inlay holds a 19th-century French candelabra signed by Japy Freres. **OPPOSITE PAGE** The cleverly secreted fold-out bed is of hotel quality.

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'Work' then became the operative word. Keen to master the techniques that would achieve the look he envisaged, Venios first apportioned functional areas within the space. A kitchen was set apart just to the left of the entrance door, a spiral staircase leads to a bathroom and laundry built at one end of the ceiling space, and a fold-down bed was slipped behind massive oak doors re-cycled from a ruined chateau in Normandy.

Practicalities addressed, finishes followed, as Venios skimmed over the original, grey cement walls with layer after layer of plaster, which he coated finally with a warm Porter's Paints French wash in Gypsum – a Georgian colour he gleaned from a book on the period. To achieve the appearance of stone, Venios gingerly chipped away at the plaster in spots. The glued-on timber moulding is available by the metre from hardware stores, while mouldings lower on the walls and as cornicing are cast plaster, which Venios painted chalky white. New Baltic pine floorboards were stained dark, washed back, stained again and then waxed.

All the work, he says, was ultimately easy, but undeniably time consuming. "I learnt as I went. When you get a quote to have this work done, you quickly learn instead!" Gradually, having expanded his love of antiques from the personal to professional, Venios has filled his apartment with pieces he's found in Australia or unearthed on buying trips to Europe. Sacrificing comfort for the joy of a successful hunt, Venios has slept in his rented van in Paris instead of paying for a hotel room he'd only vacate pre-dawn in the race to antique markets. He trawls through Europe in February, "when no one else goes and they're happy to part with things." And before each trip, he brushes up on his rudimentary French, which, he concedes, is really only a backup to enthusiasm. "I'm cheeky enough to get by."

Having also decided to use his apartment as a showroom for both the furniture – which is virtually all for sale to interested parties – and for the restoration methods he can now offer, Venios has created a setting that's the ideal representation of himself. "This," he reflects, "is as I am as a person. This is how I express myself."

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OPPOSITE PAGE: peering in from the front entry, the kitchen (unseen) is to the left. The black spiral staircase leads to the mezzanine-level bathroom which sits above the kitchen. The aluminium stair was cast from a Victorian iron original. Small console tables can be joined together to form a dining table for eight. **THIS PAGE:** the soaring five-metre high ceilings add drama to the small room. Venios had the mirror, at back, cast from a Louis XV original, then gilded it himself. At front, an early 19th-century French three-piece bronze ormolu clock, also signed by Japy Freres, takes pride of place. The mirror to the left of the chairs and over the fireplace is Louis XV, hand-gilded in 22 carat gold-leaf and burnished by Venios. Details, last pages.

