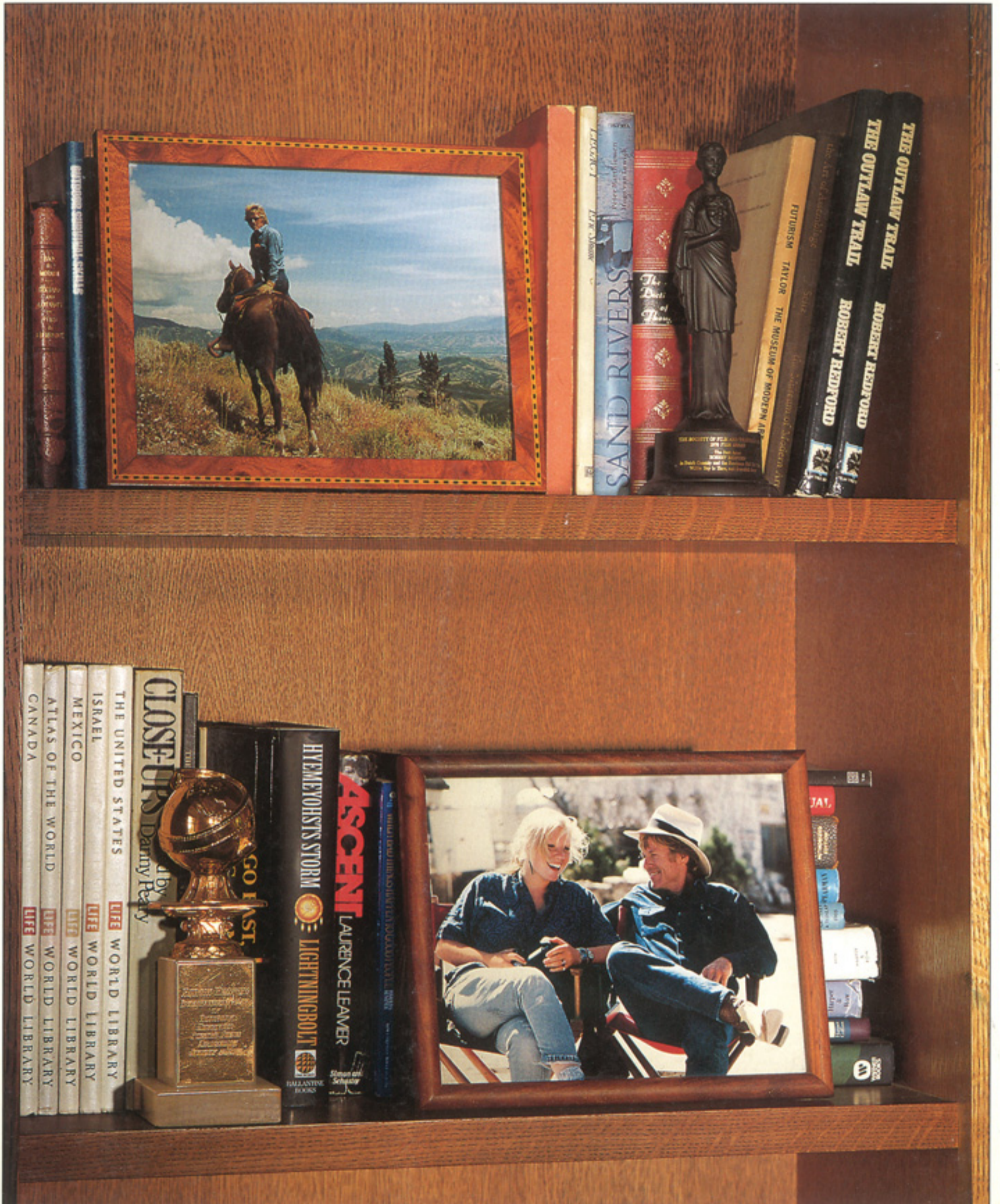


# ARCHITECTURAL DIGEST

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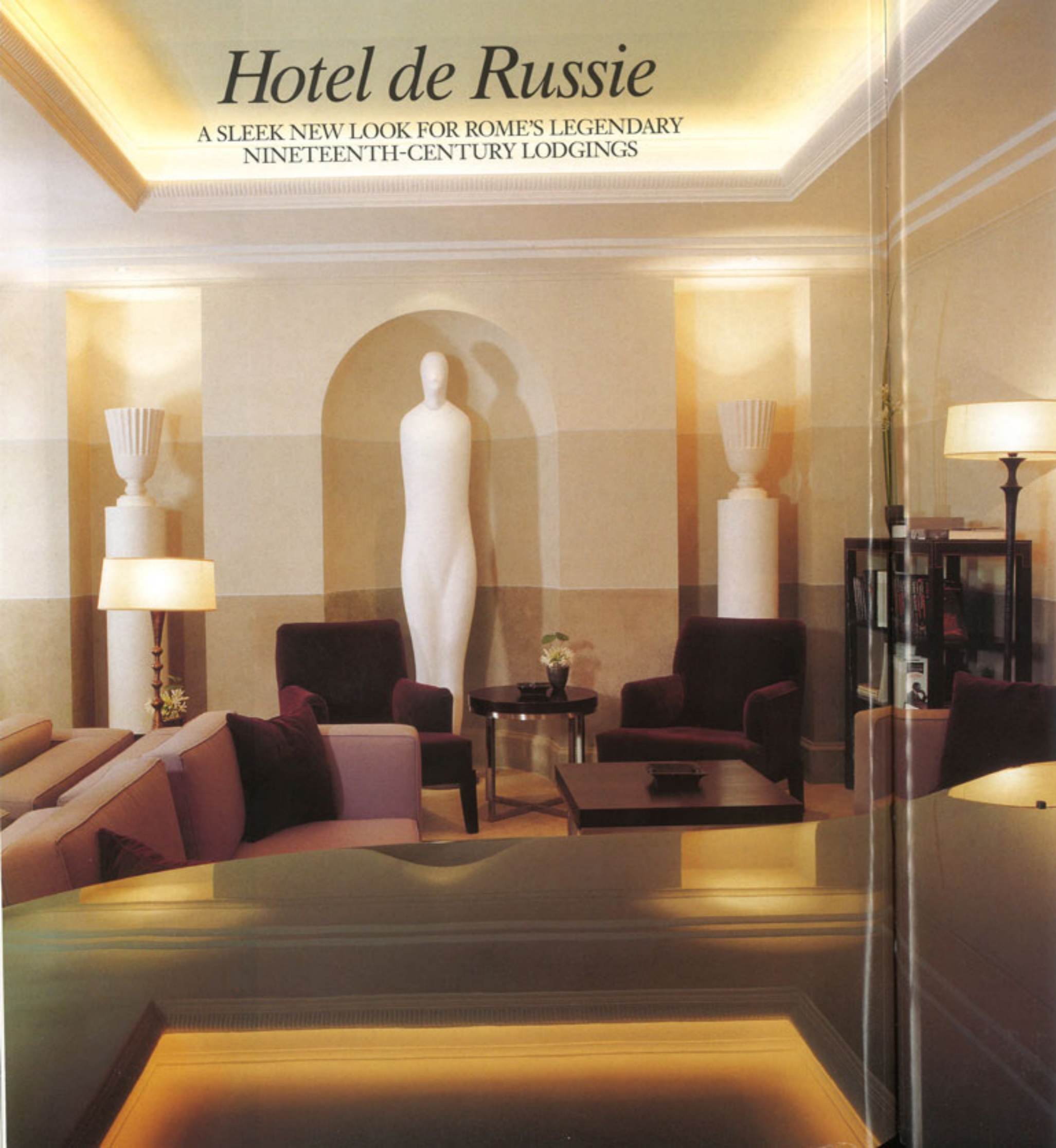
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# Hotel de Russie

A SLEEK NEW LOOK FOR ROME'S LEGENDARY  
NINETEENTH-CENTURY LODGINGS



LEFT: The bar lounge at the 19th-century Hotel de Russie in Rome, renovated by architect and designer Tommaso Ziffer, has elements of 1930s and 1940s design. In the niche is *Man & Woman*, 1999, by Oliviero Rainaldi. The fabrics on the sofas are from Manuel Canovas.

*Interior Architecture and Design by Tommaso Ziffer/Text by Michael Frank  
Photography by Giancarlo Gardin*

Situated a few steps off the Piazza del Popolo, one of Rome's great sun-swept squares, the newly reincarnated Hotel de Russie tips the scales back toward this corner of the Eternal City as one of its premier hotel neighborhoods. Most people associate Rome's more elegant hotels with the Via Veneto and the streets around the Spanish Steps; yet these old lodgings, with their stately names—the Hassler, the Eden, the Excelsior, the Minerva—are well matched in almost every way by the Hotel de Russie.

First established in the early nineteenth century, the Hotel de Russie et des Iles Britanniques, as it was formally known, numbered among its clientele well-to-do Russians, English grand tourists and the sort of Gilded Age American travelers Edith Wharton captured in her Italian stories. Prince Napoléon-Jérôme, nephew of the emperor, died at the hotel in 1891; Diaghilev and Picasso came with the Ballets Russes; and Stravinsky had a favorite suite.

The hotel had stopped functioning as such around World War II and for many decades housed the RAI (Radiotelevisione Italiana), whose offices occupied the building until 1993. Recently, Sir Rocco Forte's new hotel group leased the palazzo, but restoring it wasn't merely a matter of turning back the clock. "Many people in Rome expected a turn-of-the-century ambience," explains architect and designer

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TOP RIGHT: The hotel overlooks the Piazza del Popolo. ABOVE RIGHT: *Angel Gabriel*, 1938, by Pietro Monti hangs in the lobby. George Smith leather chairs. RIGHT: "An eclectic guest room imparts an at-home feeling," says Ziffer. The photos, circa 1980, are by Robert Mapplethorpe.





The hotel has a courtyard that serves as an extension of the bar and an upper terraced garden for dining, at the rear. The gardens were famous in the early 20th century and were noted in the 1909 *Baedeker*. They have been restored by landscape architect Antonella Daroda.





## HOTEL DE RUSSIE

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Tommaso Ziffer, who was responsible for the rehabilitation. "The gazebo, gas-light chandeliers and eight-piece orchestras serenading under the moonlight. But this was no longer what the hotel was, and it's no longer what Rome is either." Instead Ziffer, who worked closely on the project with Olga Polizzi, Forte's sister and herself an interior designer, decided to set the clock forward, to that point just before midcentury, when the classical and the modern came together in a particularly lively dialogue. "I conceived of the hotel as a connection among three points of view," Ziffer says. "It's as though today's open-minded sensibility were to look back on the 1940s, which in turn looked back on the 1890s."

Ziffer focused more on Paris than on Rome for inspiration, since Rome in the 1940s was a poor city with meager materials at its disposal. Influences included Gio Ponti, Jean-Michel Frank and Billy Baldwin. Ziffer and Polizzi agreed that the de Russie should feel as un-hotel-like as possible. Throughout the public rooms—and in many of the bedrooms and suites as well—Ziffer laid in a subtle but palpable geometry, most often in the form of horizontal stripes, which serve as a kind of visual embodiment of the time line that links the present hotel to its past and, ideally, its future. "Hotels," says Ziffer, "are fundamentally about movement. Movement across geography, movement through the day, movement in time. And besides, I like to play visual games whenever I can—you should never take design too seriously."

Among the rooms the RAI fortunately left intact were the paired lobbies that flank the entrance hall, which opens directly onto the hotel's spectacular garden and was left deliberately spare. To the right, the classic hotel lobby features the first of Ziffer's stripes (in the carpet), high-back sofas to complement the room's tall ceilings, a 1920 decorative steel panel by Raymond Subes and wrought iron chandeliers in the spirit of Diego Giacometti. In its sleekness and elegance, the room is altogether unlike any other hotel lobby in Rome.

The bar and lounge required reworking in both design and architecture, as the space formerly consisted of three offices. Ziffer reconfigured the area and

in this case used stripes—painted in different hues on the walls—to emphasize a defect: "Both rooms have low ceilings," he notes. "I like to play up problems—sometimes it turns them into a motif." In the lounge, paintings and sculptures, by contemporary Roman artists and sometimes with Roman subject matter, help connect the space to the city.

Upstairs, in the dining room, Ziffer resurrected the arched windows and colonnade and produced a room that most strongly recalls the old Hotel de Russie. He conceived it, he says, as a "playful pavilion," a sort of interior version of the old gazebo. Suffused with sunshine during the day and a vivid atmosphere at night, the dining room has some of the best views of the hotel's famed garden, where pine trees, cypresses, magnolias and citrus thrive among the graveled paths and stone staircases that climb up from the foot of the Pincio.

When it came to the guest rooms and suites, Ziffer had very strong ideas about what he wanted to avoid: "Any interior that's all Louis XVI style," he says. "Anything matching. We didn't want those machines that press your trousers. No little webbed benches for your suitcases. You don't find such objects at home—why are they so ubiquitous in hotel rooms?"

In Ziffer's they aren't. His rooms and suites mask their hotel-like nature with two different designs. There is the approach he calls *Moderne*, with celery-green walls, striped draperies, a tall, upholstered headboard, a 1940s desk and a Regency armchair. There is the version he calls *classical*, with a mauve palette, a headboard topped with a silvered rococo carving, brightly upholstered French armchairs and a lighthearted pale blue desk with gilt detailing. Both schemes have eclectic touches.

Although Tommaso Ziffer has designed the atelier for Valentino and many of his shops in Europe, the Hotel de Russie was his first commercial project of its kind. "After years of designing houses and apartments," he says, "working on a hotel was pure joy. To a certain degree you get to make the whole thing up: the present, the past, the architecture, the decoration. Even the client—the traveler—lives mainly in your head." □