

Breathing Life into the

OLD

A Conversation with Thomas Camilleri

ARTICLE BY Lee D'Amato

I sit with Thomas in his living room, she with her camera in hand and me trying to reign in the urge to grab the yellow Maltese typewriter he keeps on his desk and make a run for it. I knew of Thomas as a comedy knight and an accomplished actor, but stepping into his home revealed to me a passion of his that is less known, but equally fascinating.

TC I like the fact that you can do it with your two hands. We're so used to things being done by others because now things are specialised and we don't have enough time. So I think there's something really special in doing something yourself and putting something together that reflects your character. A lot of people feel uncomfortable with designing themselves.

The media perpetrates this a bit, I feel. Nowadays, you order something and it's quite an impersonal process.

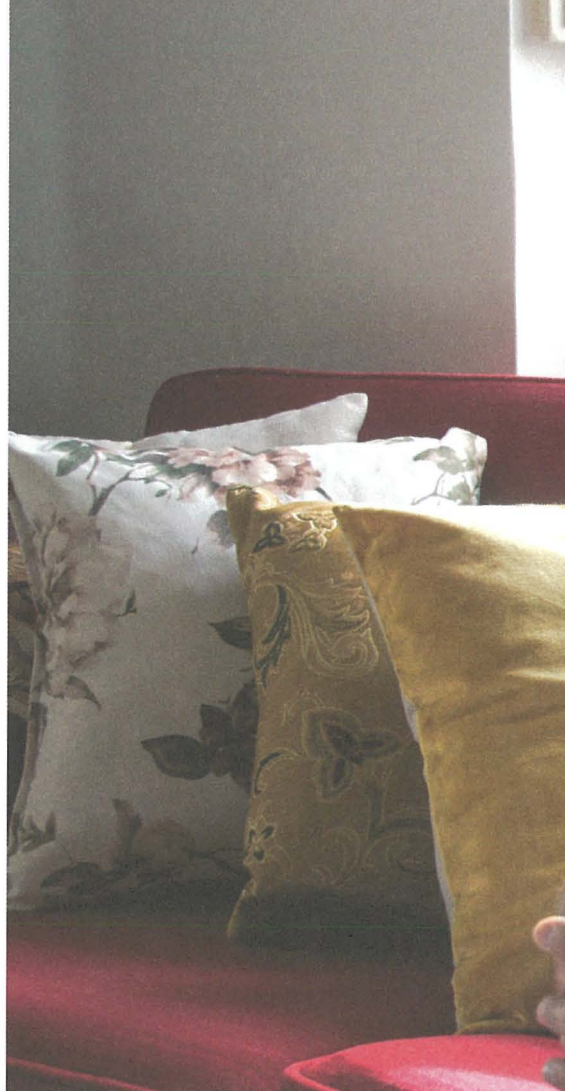
TC Yes, but social media has helped as well. It's so easy to check platforms like Pinterest and Facebook for inspiration. For example, say you have a few pictures that you'd like to frame, but don't know how to put them together; you can look up a gallery wall and get thousands of ideas.

I think it can be quite intimidating. It's hard to take the first step when you're surrounded by ready-made, 'flawless' products.

TC The first point of departure. Everything you're seeing is very cheap. If you are to buy a new art deco lamp at most homeware stores you're looking at hundreds of euros. I found this in a garage – I got it for 50. Also 50 euros was that unit. It was in an old house in Hamrun. Luckily it [50s and 60s G Plan] is a style that works well here but isn't hugely popular right now.

But, as I look around, I can see there's method behind the madness.

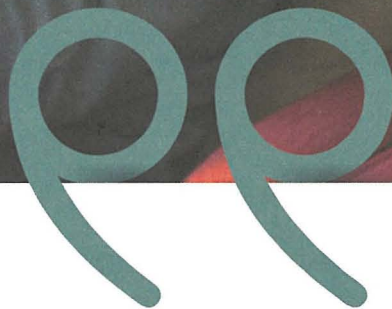
TC Thank you. I feel like that. The floor tiles are so classical. And then I have the ceiling which is concrete. I didn't have any



choice – I had to change the ceiling, but I opted against plastering it and left it as bare concrete. It would have made it lighter, but I liked the pattern of the wood on the concrete.

What about the sofa?

TC This sofa was my grandparents' sofa. The only thing I did was change the legs. Apart from that, this is the original fabric. Even these three sofas you're sitting on. A woman was throwing them out, I took them to a really lovely upholsterer.



They're very classical, but then your kitchen is contemporary. It has neutral colours, it's functional, minimalistic.

TC Balance is important. Since everything is so busy I decided to keep the walls simple. Likewise, I wanted the kitchen to be just white and glass – clean, just because there's so much going on everywhere else. I love items that have history, because they are so much more interesting to me, but at the end of the day, the item must have a function. Yes, some are going to be decorative, but if I'm

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going to have a vintage fan – it works, and I use it regularly.

The fan – it's Italian, correct?

TC It is Zodiaco San Giorgio. They are very rare. There are quite a few in Sicily, but in Italy they know they are valuable, in Malta they don't. In America and the UK they go for thousands. I bought it for 100.

So, when did you start doing this?

TC It started when I used to live in London. I stayed in a very cheap house in a posh area – Chiswick. You'd have these very rich households, and their owners would put out these beautiful chests of drawers on the pavement for anybody to take. It's like bulky refuse. In England, and in Malta, you put something out on the pavement and if it's still half decent, somebody will take it. I remember carrying back home a huge chest of drawers by myself. One man's trash... Now people are becoming a bit more aware of the value of certain items. But fashion comes and goes in waves. In England now this sort of furniture – G Plan, mid-century furniture – is coveted. In Malta it is still cheap.

If you had to pick three items that have special historical and personal meaning to you, what would they be?

TC I really love that clock over there. That used to be my grandfather's, and he had

it made when he used to work as a naval engineer in Sudan. It was always in his kitchen. When he died, I inherited it because nobody else was interested in it. But it's beautiful and it works perfectly. The fan is a favourite, of course. There is a beautiful LP player radio. I got it as a house warming gift from a group of friends. It actually works. I just don't use it often. There was one exactly like it at – not as in good a condition – at the Birgu flea market for 70 euros.

Are those cigarette packets on the wall?

TC When I was taking out the old tiles, I found lots of cigarette packets from when this block was being built.

How old are these?

TC Not very old. They're from the 1960s. They used to be very popular, my father remembers going to the shop and buying them.

Anything you'd like to share with anyone who wants to dip their hands into the world of design?

TC It's so easy to find great deals; you can go to house sales, the market, auctions, and charity shops. All the things one could need are available to us, and that's in part thanks to social media, it is ultimately a matter of dedicating yourself to a project, and keeping an eye open.