

On a warm cloudless morning in Kensington Palace Gardens, the pin-drop quiet is only disturbed by a chauffeur hosing down a silver Maybach, and two bullet-proofed policemen keeping a wary eye on passersby. Home to an international elite including Roman Abramovich, William & Kate and the Sultan of Brunei, it's an opulent but deliberately anonymous street in which the indefatigable Italian art patron Valeria Napoleone is a pleasingly irreverent presence – a personality as exuberant as her female-only collection of painting and sculpture. Today, contemporary art is crammed into every nook, archway and wall-space in the Gothic-gabled apartment she shares with her husband and three children: Nicole Eisenman's *Saggy Titties* hangs (or should that be sags?) above the fireplace, Lisa Yuskavage's hyperbolic *True Blonde* looms over the dining table, and as we sit down to chat in her airy living room, one inviting cushion turns out to be the generous pink folds of Julie Verhoeven's *Fanny at Large*.

Twin sisters Valeria Napoleone and Stefania Pramma open up their personal jewellery box, a trove of fabulous items designed together since their teens

# I'LL BE YOUR MIRROR

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Valeria: Natural horn necklace set in yellow gold (2004); Found natural amber skull with yellow gold (2011); Charm bracelet in yellow gold; The Snake ring in pink gold with diamonds and citrine (2007); Skyline ring with diamond baguettes and white gold (2015).

Stefania: Earrings in Russian coral and yellow gold (1984); The Eighties earring in yellow gold, amethyst and red rhodolite (1996); Long earring with yellow gold chain, diamond, ruby and South Sea pearl (1987); Bouquet ring in rose gold with diamonds, pink and blue sapphires and emeralds (2000); Brushed platinum and pink gold ring with rutilated quartz and emeralds (2008); Diamond ring with rubies and yellow gold (1985); Name tag necklace in yellow gold with diamonds and emeralds worn as anklet (1979).

Artwork: *True Blonde* by Lisa Yuskavage (1998).



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Valeria: The Eye necklaces  
in yellow and white gold  
with pearls, topaz pavé  
and lacquer (2004).

Stefania: The Foot  
necklace in black gold  
and yellow hammered  
gold with fire opal and  
black diamonds (2006).

On both: Pins in yellow  
and white gold, diamonds,  
cabochon rubies and pink  
and green tourmalines.

Artwork: *Ocean IX*  
by Anne Imhof (2015).

But we're here to talk about a very different, if no less unique collection. Sipping coffee beside Valeria is her twin sister, Stefania Pramma, and between them is a jewellery box in sea-green malachite, its contents spilling onto the table. Since they were children, the siblings have sporadically got together to design a one-off piece of jewellery as a kind of rarefied hobby and creative sisterly project. The accumulated result is a flamboyant tour through their joint past rendered in gold, diamonds and precious stones, from the splashy boldness of 70s Italy through the heady nightlife of 80s New York, 90s minimalism and into the present day. Rifling through the glittering array of treasures, the pair finish each other's sentences or correct each other's memory in an animated, synergistic stream, brandishing playful pieces that include tiny hairpins embellished with ducks, strawberries and turtles and a Studio 54-worthy eye pendant in gold and diamonds, complete with blinking silver eyelashes and enormous pearl tear, inspired by a piece Stefania once moulded from Play-Doh.

"We're twins, so joining forces is natural," begins Valeria with a laugh, her willowy frame wrapped, like her sister's, in a pale silk dressing gown. "Most of these are done in pairs, one for her and one for me. Sometimes we'll have different coloured stones, so they're similar but not identical."

"Like many things we do!" Stefania adds. "Looking at these pieces is like time-travelling. It takes you back to specific moments in your life."

Daughters of a wealthy Italian industrialist who made his fortune in plastics, the siblings grew up in Busto Arsizio, a town of sumptuous Art Nouveau villas and expansive piazzas north of Milan. Amid the turbulent politics of Italy's Anni di piombo, the town was something of a peaceful haven during the 1970s. "It was an affluent community," remembers Valeria. "In Milan, it was really a very dangerous time, with the terrorism of the Red Brigades – bombs, kidnappings – but we were in this very quiet reality, going around on our bicycles every night till late. It was really so free." There was winter skiing in Switzerland, summer holidays on the Italian Riviera and a home filled with Renaissance paintings and objets d'art collected by their antiques-loving father. "Surrounded by so much beauty, you learn about balance, colour, shape... it becomes part of your DNA," says Valeria. "My mother had an artisan making jewellery, and since we were one or two, we would receive a pearl or a little ring in gold, always gold, with stones for Christmas or our birthday." She points to a gold nail curving around her finger: "This ring we were given at eight years old. So jewellery is part of our memories, it was always the biggest treat for us."

It was their mother who instilled a devotion to craftsmanship, less interested in showy consumption than the singular beauty of objects made by hand. From the tailor who made their bathing suits to the jeweller who crafted the matching name tags picked out in diamonds for their twelfth birthday, or the local cobbler who gamely attempted the sisters' eccentric shoe designs as teenagers, they grew up steeped in the alchemical, mind-bendingly painstaking world of artisans. "With fashion as teenagers we never wanted to belong to the group, never wanted branded things. Individuality was important to us," says Valeria, who is still a welcome splash of colour at London's private views in teetering wedges, sunshine-yellow skirts or polka-dot leggings. "Instead of going to a store, we grew up thinking, why not make it your own?"

The explosion of Italian design during the twins' formative years fuelled their irreverent desire to experiment. In the 1970s, with the likes of Armani blazing the ready-to-wear trail in fashion, jewellers Pomellato – "the blue jeans of high-end jewellery" as designer

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Artwork *Left to right: Slight Dizzy* by Guan Xiao (2014); *Gucci Meloni II (Pink and Gold)* by May Hands (2014).

*Opposite* White and yellow gold ring with South Sea pearl, princess-cut diamond and square-cut emerald.

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Narciso Rodriguez labelled the brand – were blowing the cobwebs off fine jewellery with their informal gold bangles, chunky chains, kaleidoscopic mixes of semiprecious stones and audacious campaigns by Helmut Newton. “We grew up with Pomellato!” exclaims Valeria. “We would receive a beautiful Pomellato bracelet or charm every year.” “A lot of our inspiration comes from the 70s,” agrees Stefania, picking up an outsized hammered gold pendant in the shape of a foot with a fire opal at its toe – a replica they made of a piece their mother wore at the time. “It was a big moment of sporty, everyday jewellery. The jewellery my mother was wearing was not pretentious, high jewellery – it was a lot of gold, cool, bold pieces.”

When the time came for the twins to leave home aged 18 – Valeria to study journalism at NYU, Stefania fashion illustration at FIT – the occasion was characteristically marked by a piece of jewellery. Their mother took her favourite Pederzani necklace (the Italian brand beloved of the European jetset) to the family jeweller to craft a good-luck keepsake: “It was a long necklace with lacquered ladybug charms,” remembers Stefania. “She bought two bracelets, dismantled these ladybugs and gave six to each of us, to start a charm bracelet. And through the years, we added all the charms and presents we’ve received from friends or family.” A cornucopia now jostle for space on Valeria’s bracelet, each link evoking an anecdote or flashback from their past: there’s a tiny mother-of-pearl mask from the 1981 Venice carnival, a Chinese coral ball from the elegant seaside resort of Santa Margherita Ligure where they spent childhood holidays, a miniature golden key (“for happiness”) from her mother, a little heart from her grandmother, and an initialled airplane propeller to mark the sisters’ leap across the Atlantic. The preciousness of the heirloom was underscored when Stefania’s bracelet was stolen a few years ago from a Milan hotel, just as she was depositing it into a safe; it may have been less valuable than the other jewels taken that day, but it’s the piece she mourns above all: “You collect these memories through the years,” she sighs. “That, you can’t remake. It’s irreplaceable.”

Like the charm bracelet, the sisters’ jewellery collection is a diary in miniature of the adventures they’ve shared. An architectural ring



Valeria's charm bracelet.

recalls the jagged skyline of New York; mismatched dangling earrings of their plunge into Manhattan's nightlife. "In the 80s, we were going out every night partying and we used to pile all these bracelets along our arms, wear lots of gold, big earrings," remembers Stefania. "We lived everywhere: uptown, downtown, the Village, the Upper East Side... It was really a magical time," says Valeria, who credits the city with planting the seeds of her art obsession. They arrived in 1985, the year Nan Goldin's gritty, unflinching *Ballad of Sexual Dependency* was first exhibited at the Whitney, Jenny Holzer's provocative LED messages flashed huge across the Spectacolor board in Times Square and feminist collective Guerrilla Girls began fly-posting SoHo in protest at gender bias in the art world. In the ensuing years, Valeria sought out artist's studios in Manhattan and Williamsburg, holding convivial dinners and immersing herself in the scene. In the early 90s, she bought the first work – an abstract photograph of soap bubbles by Carol Shadfield – of a collection that now numbers over 200. (Artists continue to regularly gather around her Kensington table, too, for lively conversation and her famous tiramisu.) Stefania meanwhile, has made her home in New York. After designing accessory ranges for an array of luxury brands, she launched Pramma in 2014, her sculptural line of handbags and clutches (exquisitely handcrafted in Italy, naturally) with clasps made of precious and semi-precious stones, an eloquent nod to her longstanding history of jewellery design.

Separated by continents and branching along different career paths, these days creating a one-off treasure for their collection has become a welcome pretext to reunite: "Usually it starts on summer holiday," explains Stefania. "We'll be on the beach getting a tan, brainstorming ideas and drawing on napkins. It's just pure creativity between the two of us – no restrictions, no commerciality." It can take anywhere from six months to a year to craft a new piece, which is where another prized relationship comes in: they continue to return to the same artisan they first commissioned over 25 years ago, housed in the same Milan street. "It was just him and his wife at the time," remembers Stefania. "Now he has children, and grandchildren all working with him..."

"... Now it is like going home," laughs Valeria. "They share our passion. Collaborating on something so small, when every millimetre counts, is not easy. People need to get it, and after so many years they know what we like. We can come up with crazy stuff and they really go with it!"

At heart, it's that social and creative process they're really attached to, over and above the jewellery itself: an evolving story about their relationship to each other and a family of artisans, as well as a reconnection to their Italian roots. "I loved growing up in our town, but I knew my future was somewhere else," says Valeria. "But now I really love to be back in Italy, visiting our jeweller again." Their decades-long loyalty is also a gesture of support for the kind of rarefied skills that feel precariously endangered in today's Italy. In the face of a globalised marketplace, and the dwindling enthusiasm of new generations to learn the secrets of the trade, many of the country's small, family-run artisans are closing up shop, taking with them techniques dating back to the Renaissance. As the twins recognise, it's a rich culture even more precious than their own extraordinary heirlooms. "The little artisans, little labs are so few now. It's such a shame..." says Stefania.

"... Because it's such a privilege and joy to appreciate the magic of work made by hand," says Valeria. "It's not just their beautiful appearance. Jewellery is forever..."

"... And the best things don't have an expiry date," nods Stefania.

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Opposite Found ivory skull and yellow gold chain.