Achille Salvagni at his 
Mayfair atelier with several
of his designs. From left:
wood and bronze and 24kt-gold
Roma cabinet, £64,400.
Velvet and cast metal Papilla
armchair, £11,600. Bronze,
onyx and 24kt-gold bubbles
wall screen, £2,500 each.
Fiberglass and bronze
Femorced side table, £19,400.
Bronze and onyx Hercules
floor lamp, £6,200.
Lacquered and alpaca
Apella coffee table,
£23,500. Hand-knotted
Tibetan silk and wool rugs,
£940 per sq m, plus c.
additional £2,400 design
fee. Back right: £1,895
Prada velvet upholstered
Vivaldi chairs, £1,800.
achille's appeal

Achille Salvagni's otherworldly aesthetic blends his Roman heritage with his passion for modernity, and is garnering clients from Jeff Koons to millennial tech entrepreneurs. Charlotte Abrahams reports. Portrait by Jake Curtis
In walking towards 12 Grafton Street in Mayfair to meet Achille Salvagni at his atelier, certain of what to expect from the Italian architect, designer and artist. He’s the man who crafted a 24ct gold, bronze and onyx table lamp for Jeff Koons in 2013, and has since become the go-to name for art-loving sophisticates such as historian Susan Weber and entrepreneur Michael Bloomberg. But on entering his establishment, I find his discreetly glamorous gallery has been transformed into something entirely unexpected: a space tunnel – immaculately furnished, but definitely a spacecraft. There’s even a pair of particles offering a view of the stars (on closer inspection the twinkling galaxy moves subtly, a shimmering cosmic spectacle). “Welcome to Apollo,” says Salvagni, smiling broadly.

It turns out that Salvagni regards his London outpost (he is also represented by Maison Gerard in New York) as a stage set for exhibitions of his creative flights of fancy. Apollo is the latest: “I admire the visionary atmospheres of 1960s science-fiction movies such as 2001: A Space Odyssey,” he says, “and as commercial space travel takes shape, I wanted to create my own interpretation of a futuristic yet opulent interior.”

The items he has chosen to show include several new designs: Papilla, a tufted velvet armchair (£18,000) that sits poised as if preparing for flight on six delicate cast-metal legs; and a textured, asymmetric coffee table (£32,500, both pictured on previous pages) – also named Apollo – made from alpaca (a silver-like alloy) and lacewood. There are also some new interpretations of Salvagni classics, such as a white version of his best-known Spider chandelier and two wall-science iterations (£23,400, pictured on previous pages) of the Bubbles lamp (£25,200, pictured on final page) he made for Jeff Koons. These are mixed with a 1940s Giò Ponti sofa (£25,200, pictured on previous pages) and a marble bowl of Roman emperor Augustus, dating to 193-195AD.

Surveying this scene, I realise that Apollo is in fact a perfect evocation of Achille Salvagni’s aesthetic. Most notable is the way he has blended history and modernity – not simply through the addition of historical objects like the ancient Roman head, but in the very fabric of each piece. The handcarved onyx sconce Brancalone (£16,300, pictured on final page) takes its shape from the helmet worn by legendary 13th-century Roman governor Brancalone degli Asdali, and the polished cast-bronze details that give it a jewel-like sparkle were created by artisans renowned for their bronze work at the Vatican City. Papilla’s legs are decorated with thin, vertical lines and each one is hammered by hand using a traditional technique favoured by Roman jewelers. “Achille’s genius lies in his ability to fully comprehend the past in totally contemporary creations,” says Benoist Drut, gallery principal at Maison Gerard. “The Antinous cabinet (£86,000, pictured on final page), for example, which is one of his more iconic pieces, is made from bronze and then simply dressed with parchment-covered wood. The materials reference antiquity but the piece is so inventive in its construction. Like all his work, it is rooted in history and yet totally modern.”

Briaco McCarthy, founder of the eponymous US interior design firm, shares Drut’s sentiments. “There is a classicism to Achille’s work,” he says. “You can totally feel the roots of his Roman sensibility but nothing he does is pastiche – his work has a 21st-century uniqueness.”

Salvagni puts this rare ability down to the 18 months he spent in Scandinavia in his 20s, first studying for a masters in architecture at KTH Royal Institute of Technology in Stockholm, and then on a month-long road trip through Finland, Norway and Sweden in search of every example of Alvar Aalto architecture he could find. “It’s really hard to grow up in a city like Rome and not be influenced by its history,” he says. “Moving to Sweden was about trying to surround myself with something cleaner and calmer. Experiencing Aalto’s architecture first-hand was like breathing modernity and when I came home, I tried to find a way to mix that with my Roman heritage.”

Salvagni started out a decade ago creating “entire” interiors – designing, creating...
everything from the physical layout of the property to the furniture and hinges on the doors, following the model of architects such as Aalto and the Italian master Giò Ponti. "I am not an interior decorator," he states firmly. "I could never just decorate a wall. I need to start from the very beginning and consider the flow of the rooms and the shape of the spaces. It's a structural process."

His approach is also psychological in many ways. Salvagni likes to work directly with his clients, meeting them several times before work begins, so he can not only understand the practicalities of their lives – do they cook, do they have children, etc. – but also how they would like to live. "Creating a home is like making a bespoke tailored suit," he says. "It must be functional, but it must also allow its owners to dream. Part of my role as a designer is to create an escape from the ordinary."

Hedgefund manager Massimo Bocchicchio and his wife Arianna, a former model, commissioned Salvagni to design their apartment in London's Holland Park five years ago, having visited a property he transformed in Rome. "We consider ourselves very lucky to live in a home designed by Achille Salvagni," Bocchicchio says. "He has given us a unique space filled with bespoke furniture such as a parchment-lined walnut cabinet and a bronze-framed club chair, which are so original and timeless we know we will never feel the need to change anything."

Until 2013, Salvagni only made furniture for his interior projects but this changed when Drut saw his work. "It was immediately apparent that he was an incredibly talented and poetic designer," Drut recalls. "His creations possessed a classical quality and were truly innovative in their use of materials. I knew his furniture would be relevant in the US so I asked him to show me his portfolio. Usually I remain silent when reviewing the work of an artist, but after the fifth page I started asking questions and by the time I had reached the end, I had committed him to show with the gallery at the Collective Design Fair!" One of the pieces Salvagni produced for the fair was the Spider chandelier. Made from a combination of 24-karat gold-plated, antique-finished cast bronze, burnished and protected bronze, and backlit opal, this six-armed centerpiece stole the show. Maison Gerard sold all 20 editions within six months.

The obvious thing would have been to make a second edition, but Salvagni is not interested in "following the market or creating the same things just because they're popular." Instead, he decided to produce variations of the Spider. He released a larger version called Spider Jewel (£87,000, pictured opposite) in 2015, followed by the Spider White in 2017 (which now takes centre stage at Apollo) – a nod to artists such as Giacometti who experimented with sculptural forms in white plaster. He has taken a similar approach with other popular pieces such as Bubble and the Giò bar cabinet (£90,600, pictured on previous page), an exquisite choice of materials and measurements that add up to a design with a classical quality and a poetic edge.

"He's a talented and poetic designer. His creations possess a classical quality and are truly innovative"
"There is something about the way he uses curves to pull back the masculine strength of his materials"