It is perhaps unsurprising that Maria Sebregondi, the woman who elevated the humble notebook to must-have status, would have sought the satisfaction of an at-home library. The Moleskine founder puts other home bibliophiles in the shade, having turned her entire Milan apartment into a high temple devoted to the written word.

When Sebregondi, an author and consultant to design and architecture firms, moved to the post-modernist palazzo in the city's hipster canals district earlier this year, she asked an architect to put up six walls of floor to (four-metre-high) ceiling bookshelves, to break up a voluminous space into a study and two separate sitting rooms. "It's a book shop," she smiles.

Yet Sebregondi, 68, is no retiring librarian. Today she is wearing diva-ish leather trousers, black platform boots and an Issey Miyake silk roll-neck — and sporting a polished, silvery bob.

Originally from Rome, Sebregondi, commuted to Milan for many years to visit her clients. In 1997, after her children had left home, she decided to move north full-time. She now lives with her partner, who works in tech.
Full-length windows look beyond her terrace, and its winter roses, to treetops and grass over the archaeological park, which contains the ruined columns of a first-century amphitheatre that once hosted gladiator contests in front of 20,000 spectators. “A mini-Colosseum”, says Sebregondi. “Being Roman, I couldn’t resist.”

We discuss the paradox of Moleskine notebooks’ enduring popularity in the digital age, as Sebregondi makes moka espresso in a white kitchen with blue tiles, the only book-free zone in the house.

Over the past 20 years Moleskine notebooks have achieved a cult appeal. “There are collectors, addicts even,” Sebregondi says. And while the digital revolution continues to threaten paper industries, Moleskine has successfully bucked the trend. Since 2011, the company has made hardware devices in partnership with Evernote, which enable notes and sketches to be uploaded and shared, and iPad covers in the characteristic low-key Moleskine style; but those same e-devices show no sign of killing off the brand’s core business.
Moleskine had a turnover of €145.2m in 2016 and employs 500 people between its Milan headquarters and 80 shops around the world.

We return to the “library” where lighting is well-adapted and a reader can settle down in magnificent cream leather and wood 1960s chairs that recall a Riva speedboat or a Gio Ponti-style red armchair.
The books on her shelves have magical names like *Alphabet of Dreams* and *Atlas of Emotion*. William Blake’s illustrations of Dante’s *Divine Comedy* sits alongside the *Codex Seraphinianus*, an encyclopedia to an alternative universe, a collectors’ item that sells for thousands. The author, artist Luigi Serafini, illustrated Sebregondi’s first book, *Etimologiario*, a satirical etymological dictionary in the vein of Ambrose Bierce’s *Devil’s Dictionary*.

“Our ideas are more tangible and real when we can see them physically,” Sebregondi continues. “A pile of notebooks recalls the sense of thought, concentration, memory of a project. Everything you don’t see in a digital device. A laptop can contain a million ideas but you can’t see them.”
The appeal of Moleskins is perhaps their claim to authenticity. But that authenticity is somewhat second-hand. In 1994 Sebregondi was asked by design company Modo & Modo to create a range of products for a new tribe emerging in the post-Cold War period — “the global nomads, a new creative class who constantly travel. People who are one day here, one there, here for a meeting, interview, there to see a show.”

The company owner favoured T-shirts printed with quotes by literary figures, but Sebregondi wanted to create something of substance. Sailing off Tunisia in 1995 she read *The Songlines* by Bruce Chatwin, in which the writer despaired at discovering that the simple oilcloth notebooks, known as carnets moleskins, which he habitually bought in Paris’s Rue de l’Ancienne Comédie, were no longer available.
It struck a chord with Sebregondi, who in Paris in the early 1980s had bought similar notebooks. She recalls: “They were different to the rest — simple, with a mysterious air. They had this essential aesthetic that immediately recalled the past. I imagined them in the hands of Rimbaud at the Paris Commune, writing poetry that came from the streets.”

Matisse, Picasso and Hemingway had all used similar notebooks, she discovered, but the last manufacturer in Tours had shut up shop. The distinctive quirks were an elastic band, ribbon bookmark and an expandable pocket inside the back cover. “I said, ‘Let’s remake them, beautifully . . . and we’ll hide in the pocket the story behind them to inspire all those who work using their talent.’”
The decision to sell them in bookshops rather than stationers, not as a mere notepad, but a book as yet unwritten, set them apart. At first booksellers were reluctant but there was “an air of change” in the world of book retail. Barnes & Noble in the US had opened its first café and bookshops everywhere were becoming “less dusty, less academic, less intimidating and more accessible”, she says.

The first stock, which was placed in Feltrinelli on Milan’s Corso Buenos Aires in 1998, disappeared “within days”. They chose to work with local distributors, “with the same spirit as us”. Today’s roll-call of customers is impressive: architects Renzo Piano, Michael Graves, Odile Decq, Kengo Kuma; designers Ron Arad and Ross Lovegrove; and writer Javier Marías. Some of these notebooks have winged their way home. Moleskine now has a collection of 3,000 donated by high-profile clients, the source for exhibitions.
In 2013 Moleskine was listed on the Milan stock exchange. Then in February this year all the shares were bought by Belgian car importer, D'Ieteren in a deal that valued the company at €510m. Sebregondi is no longer a director but runs the company’s new Moleskine Foundation, which focuses on “quality education”, fostering critical thinking particularly in African countries.

The foundation also supports Wiki-Africa training, enabling Wikipedia contributors from African communities. The goal is to redress the balance: much existing material about Africa has been written “by those in the global north. Real local stories about emerging movements and accounts of the past, told by those who actually lived it, have very little visibility”.

Wherever you are in the world, the appeal of a $20 notebook that is no more functional than a $2 one remains a puzzling conundrum. According to David Sax, author of The Revenge of Analog: Real Things and Why They Matter, Moleskines carry an aspirational quality. Like the Apple Mac, these notebooks allow an asset manager to play the architect, to signal in shorthand that they belong to Sebregondi’s tribe of new creatives.

The flipside of this is that for some Moleskines are the embodiment of liberal smugness. Sebregondi would not deny that what she is selling is a lifestyle. “We began 20 years ago saying ‘These are the legendary notebooks of Picasso, Hemingway, Chatwin’, and within a few years we could say ‘These are the notebooks used by the architects, designers, writers of today’.”

Would-be Hemingways and Chatwins are likely unaware of the company’s new ownership, apparently the byproduct of near-saturation in the Belgian car market. Might Moleskine itself be in danger of reaching saturation point? Selling the idea of belonging to a creative elite becomes harder when your accountant brings a Moleskine to his Monday meeting. Some top designers are turning to more obscure brands.

“There is always the risk of losing the spirit,” Sebregondi says. “But I believe the secret is to offer always new things or a new approach, or to grow with your story.” Her successors in the business may be wise to heed her advice; as Moleskines become ever more ubiquitous, observers may learn not to judge a book by its cover.
Sebregondi, a poet as much as a businesswoman, chooses a collection of 10 French sonnets, by Raymond Queneau. Titled *One Hundred Thousand Billion Sonnets*, the lines of each sonnet are cut out to enable mix-and-match by the reader, evoking a literary fridge magnet collection. There are 14 lines and 140 verses with which to create 100,000bn poems. “It’s a simple object. But with 100 words we can compose hugely complex thoughts. It gives me this sense of extraordinary possibility that is born from small things.”

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