Clockwise from far left: Federico Squatriti at work in the Restauri Artistici Squatriti; broken heads of antique dolls line the hospital's shelves; Gelsomina works on the leg of an antique porcelain doll; porcelain figurines, long forgotten by their owners; a sign in the shop window.

DESTINATION

Toy story

For more than 60 years, one family has been nursing broken antique dolls back to health in Rome's little shop of horrors. Words and pictures by **Gary Jones**.

Behind the window's dust-dulled glass, unblinking eyes stare from decapitated heads. Severed arms, legs, hands and feet hang in bunches from rusty nails. The little shop of horrors, known locally as the Ospedale delle Bambole, or Rome's "Hospital of the Dolls", was established by the Squatriti family more than six decades ago.

Cracked paint peels from the weathered window frame of the "hospital". Inside, Federico Squatriti, 52, and his 82-year-old mother, Gelsomina, continue a family tradition of nursing broken antique dolls back to health, and paint-spattered walls, cobwebbed shelves and busy workbenches are cluttered with fractured figurines, wounded toy soldiers and mangled puppets.

"It has always been owned by our family, so we haven't changed anything," says Squatriti of his cramped and fascinating atelier, which has become a macabre and offbeat, if largely missed, tourist attraction in recent years.

The ramshackle workshop – a halfway house for refugees from the most sinister of fairy tales – sits just a stroll from the sparkly Gucci, Versace and Dolce & Gabbana boutiques on the Italian capital's swanky Via dei Condotti.

"It looks like an old-fashioned shop because it is an old-fashioned shop," he says. "It's looked the same since the beginning."

Squatriti points to a fading black-and-white photograph, taken in the 1970s, on a nearby shelf.

"This picture is 30 or so years old," he says. "This is my father, when he was still alive, and my mother. Look how many things there were, all scattered everywhere. This is how we work every day, with so many beautiful objects all around us."

Hailing from Naples, Federico's grandfather, Vincenzo Squatriti, was an actor with the respected La Scarpetta theatre company in the 50s. Under the stage name Enzo Petito he later worked alongside silver-screen legends Gina Lollobrigida and Marcello Mastroianni, and even had a minor role as a gun-store owner in Sergio Leone's 1966 spaghetti western *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*.

Before that, in the wretched years following the second world war, Vincenzo's wife, Concetta, had decided that acting was too unstable a profession for her family's future.

"My grandmother urged her children to learn a craft because acting didn't make much money after the war," Federico says.

In 1953, Concetta opened Restauri Artistici Squatriti ("artistic restorations Squatriti") in Rome with her two sons: Federico's father, Mario, and his uncle, Renato.

"Since then all my family has worked here," Federico says of their cramped workplace, which covers about 150 square feet. The still air is acrid with enamel, glue and solvents. "My grandmother, my father, my uncle, my aunt, my cousins, my mother and myself."

Squatriti cannot remember when he joined the family business.

"We lived in an apartment upstairs and, when I was young and returned from school, I would drop by to say hi to my dad, my grandma and my uncle," he says. "I don't recall exactly when one of them first said, 'Federico, please help with this.' I started out by returning restored items to customers, then I would be sent off to buy materials, and little by little I ended up working here, too."

The Squatriti business initially survived by restoring ceramic, tortoiseshell, metal, ivory, wooden and mosaic heirlooms damaged during the war for Rome's aristocracy – the only people who could afford such a luxury at the time. Dolls came later.

The earliest dolls date back to ancient Egypt, Greece and, indeed, Rome (Roman rag dolls made in about 300BC have been discovered). Their heyday arrived in the 19th century, and the bodies of European dolls at that time were roughly hewn from leather, wood or papier-mâché, and hidden under fanciful costumes of lace, silk and taffeta. Their heads, however, were increasingly made from delicate porcelain and starting to look creepily real, with detailed eyelashes, beauty spots, even wrinkles.

They were no longer children's playthings but collectors' items for the moneyed elite. Squatriti lifts one such doll's head from a shelf, cups it in a hand and brushes away generations of dust.

"It's more than 100 years old," he says of the antique, which bears the inscription "1902". Many items in the shop are unclaimed toys of children long grown old or passed away, he adds. Some have been here for decades, and will probably never be reclaimed. "We started to restore dolls' heads because they required the same methods as other porcelain items."

Today, up to 1,000 period pieces – plates, vases, statuettes and more, as well as many dolls – are looked after every year at the workshop, and Squatriti, like any dedicated family doctor, feels a profound responsibility for his clients' well-being. Though struggling with the rising cost of materials and crippling rent in one of Rome's once working class but now gentrified and touristy neighbourhoods, he is reluctant to turn away new patients.

"If I wanted to work only seven or eight hours a day, I would need to charge more, but then fewer people could afford to restore their dolls and their antiques," Squatriti says.

Dozens of cold, creepily human-looking eyes appear to watch as he speaks.

"The best solution is to work well and work long enough. It's something you do for your customers, not just for money. It's satisfying for me, at the end of the day, to say to myself, 'I've worked for 11 hours, the result came out beautifully, and I managed to do it for a reasonable price.' The people are happy and I am happy.

"It's all beautiful!"