

March 21, 2023

An Italian Villa That Houses 30,000 Beetles and a Flock of Porcelain Birds

Giorgio Taroni's home overlooking Lake Como has become a cabinet of curiosities, filled with collections of oil paintings, books, ancient coins and vintage postcards.

Article by Nancy Hass / Photographs by Henry Bourne



In the main salon of Giorgio Taroni's home on Italy's Lake Como, part of his collection of 19th-century paintings, chairs and a sofa upholstered in a fabric designed by Taroni Disegni in the 1970s and a 17th-century scagliola table.

FOR MANY PEOPLE, the mention of Lake Como, an hour's drive north of Milan at the foot of the Alps, conjures sun-bleached summer vacations and hotels with striped canvas umbrellas. The palatial villas that stand on the shore, perfect in their icy elegance and glimpsed, perhaps, on a boat tour of the area's towns, can seem like part of a stage set erected to enhance a visitor's experience.



In Taroni's son, Guido's, bedroom, an early 19th-century hand-painted wallpaper panel hangs above a faux bamboo bed with sheets by Taroni Disegni and Chinese cabinets bought by his mother, Anna Gastel, in Indonesia in the 1960s. Framed by the window is Villa Olmo, which belonged to Guido's great-grandfather Giuseppe Visconti di Modrone in the late 19th century.



In the dining room, 18th-century English candelabras, a series of "Album Vilmorin" prints and a collection of 19th-century gouaches of the villages of Lake Como.

But while some of the great houses, among them the 17th-century Villa Carlotta, have been turned into public attractions, others remain idiosyncratic full-time dwellings. When the tourists leave in early fall, the owners — many of them descended from the textile magnates who helped establish the area as Italy's silk capital beginning in the 15th century — emerge onto their stone terraces to stare out at the glassy water and the mountains beyond.



In the main salon, a chestnut staircase curves above an Empire table and a library containing over 10,000 books.

Among them is Giorgio Taroni, 77, a collector and the chatelain of a rambling 9,000-square-foot lakeside villa built in the early 1900s by his grandfather Ettore Taroni, a silk industrialist, in the region's main city of Como. Designed on a vertical axis to take advantage of the views, with a buff-colored brick exterior and a roof of gray stone tiles, the eight-bedroom, three-story house is bordered with a half-acre of gardens that meander up the hillside behind it, in shades of fuchsia and yellow in spring. Inside, the home is a teeming, vividly hued, minutely organized private museum of Giorgio Taroni's magpie enthusiasms: entomology, textile design, illustration, rationalist art, ancient coins and the history of the lake itself.

"IT WAS BOTH wonderful and strange growing up here," says Taroni's son, Guido, 35, a photographer who now lives and works in a loft in Milan's bohemian Navigli neighborhood. He attended local schools, learning beside the children of hotel employees, gardeners and heirs to ancient riches. "It was a small-town existence," he says. "You would ride your bicycle everywhere, and the shopkeepers would let your parents know what you were up to."



In the entryway, a carved mirror hangs over a console table that displays a collection of porcelain parrots.

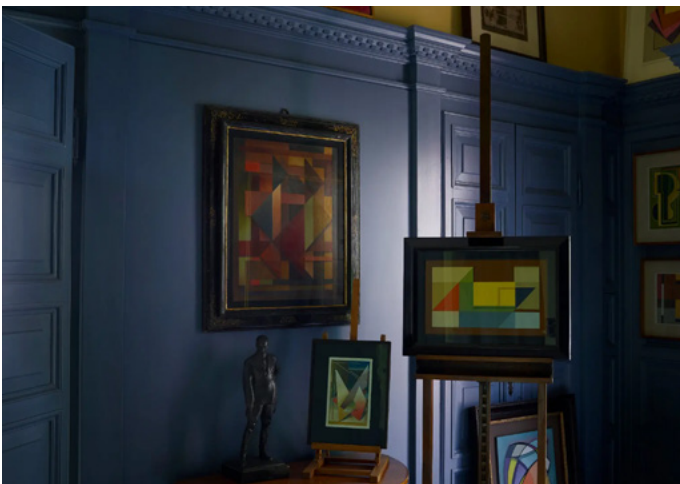
Guido's parents divorced when he was 11 and, although his home remained Villa Taroni, his mother, Anna Gastel, 70, was often in residence just across the lake. A scion of one of Italy's oldest families, the Visconti di Modrone, and one of its richest, the Erba pharmaceutical clan, she spent the week in Milan, but on the weekends and in the summer she moved to the converted 12th-century Benedictine convent where she still lives. Arranged around a huge gravel courtyard made for coaches, the 40-room yellow stucco villa features Empire-style trompe l'oeil frescoes installed by Gastel's forebears in the late 19th century. Until 1930, one wing was reserved for a dwindling community of nuns who ran an embroidery school and sewed patterns for the Italian architect and designer Gio Ponti.



Oil paintings, mostly of the surrounding landscape, hang on the walls of the main salon.

Guido says his childhood, spent shuttling among his parents' homes, was idyllic. By his teens, the ferry captains allowed him to steer before they dropped him off on either shore, often with his sister and a pack of cousins in tow. "We would be over at my mother's, where there were so many places to play and hide," he says. "At my father's, the garden was perfection — no dry leaves."

Giorgio, his son says, was "intense in every sense, very present." Until he retired in the 1980s, the older man was the chief designer of Taroni Disegni, a 40-person firm mostly housed in a large building on his villa's grounds that made extravagantly patterned silks for the Italian fashion brands Versace and Valentino (his catalog was acquired in 2014 by the New York- and London-based Design Library). As his personal collections grew over the years, nearly every square inch of the house — its walls, its cabinets, its surfaces — became overtaken by his possessions. "I have always been somewhat serious about my things," he says.



A bronze of the novelist and poet Gabriele d'Annunzio and a collection of paintings by 20th-century artists, including Manlio Rho, Carla Badiali, Mario Radice and Heindrich Maria Davringhausen.

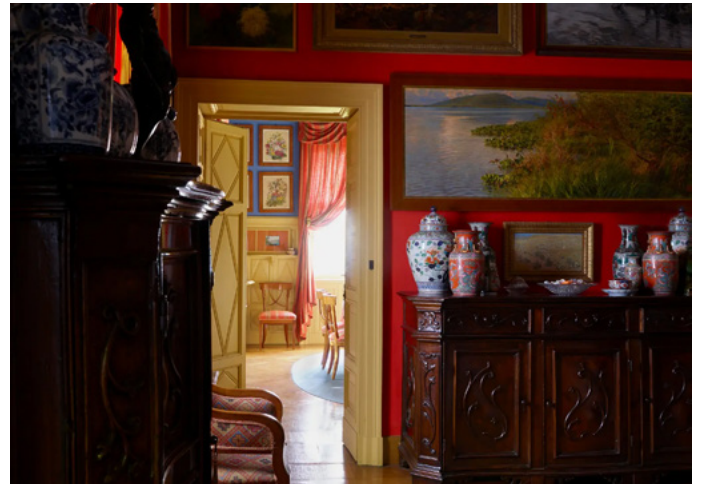


A meticulously arranged collection of more than 30,000 stag beetles is housed in custom cabinets.

Even the entry hall suggests this is an understatement: Clustered on a wooden side table beneath a giant Baroque mirror are a dozen or so brilliantly colored porcelain parrots; on the floor below are a ceramic goose, turtle and pair of ducks. To the left is a two-story salon whose walls are painted flat Ferrari red with saffron trim — during Guido’s childhood, his father had a habit of repainting them yearly in shocking hues — and decorated, gallery style, with more than 300 oil paintings, mostly of the Como environs, in gilded frames. The furniture is upholstered in fabrics from Giorgio Taroni’s company’s textile archives: oversize florals in tangerine and scarlet, Op Art spirals in sapphire and marigold. The floor is a polished mosaic of multihued cotto lombardo shards. “When I took over this place from my father in the ’70s,” Giorgio says, “it was gloomy, very ‘Addams Family.’ I needed it to come alive.”

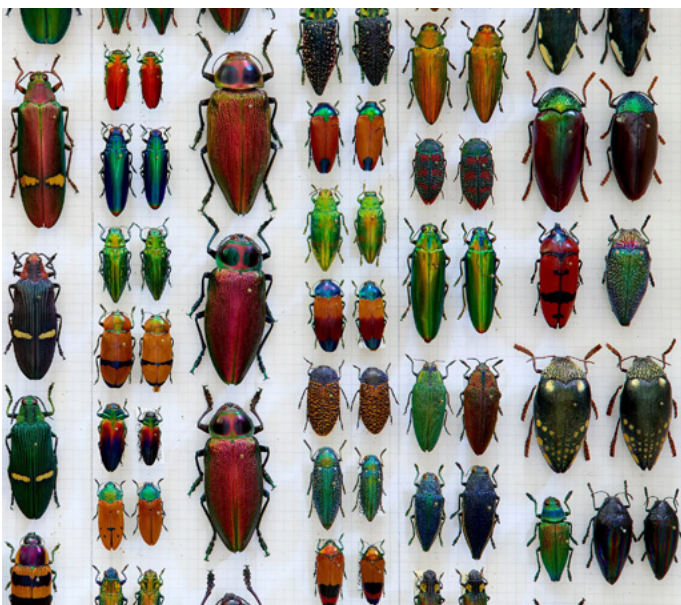


The children’s room, where Guido and his sister grew up, including a collection of flower paintings by Guido’s great grandmother on the wall.



A view from a small salon onto the dining room.

Today, a smaller ground-floor salon, painted peacock blue, is adorned with canvases by Manlio Rho, the early 20th-century Como-based abstractionist who joined Wassily Kandinsky and the Futurists; the dining room walls are covered in a collection of drawings of vintage French seed packets. The garden house where the textile design team once worked has been transformed into a climate-controlled library, its windows blackened to protect the thousands of first-edition design books and silk-screens Taroni stores there, along with the original paintings he made for each of his thousands of fabrics. In a portfolio tied with a silk ribbon is a series of 18th-century watercolors used as tapestry patterns by the renowned weavers of Aubusson, France; the only other set the Taronis know of is in London’s Victoria and Albert Museum.



Part of Taroni’s vast entomological collection.



The view from the kitchen onto the entrance hall.

But it's on the second floor of the house that Taroni's collecting reaches its apex. Up a staircase that sweeps past giant potted palms in stained-glass niches and walls hung with portraits by the 19th-century Milanese painter Guido Tallone, one enters a room he calls "my prison." First, there are the stag beetles, more than 30,000 of them, stored in narrow drawers in a 20-foot-long custom-made wooden flat file. Europe's largest terrestrial insects and increasingly rare, they range from thimble size to as big as a fist; the males have giant pincers, and both sexes have iridescent carapaces in colors ranging from chartreuse and cobalt to silver and hot pink. Mostly captured by Taroni on trips across the continent, Africa and Southeast Asia over the decades, they are meticulously mounted, each hand-labeled in tiny script. On the other side of the room are his pre-Napoleonic coins, and his various collections of ephemera, contained within row after row of binders on shelves: advertising from the 19th and early 20th centuries, vintage postcards and nearly 20,000 paper cigar bands.



An exterior view of the house, which was designed by the architect Piero Ponci for Giorgio Taroni's grandfather Ettore

Taroni, a silk industrialist, and completed in the early 1900s.

WHILE SOME OFFSPRING might find such obsessions stifling, for his son, Taroni is an inspiration. In the younger man's 1,400-square-foot open-plan Milan apartment, carved from a converted gas meter factory, his own collections dominate: Dozens of vintage ceramic jars by the 20th-century Italian artist and designer Piero Fornasetti stand in rows on mirrored shelves; two triangular burlwood armoires are filled with stacks of ceramic dishware designed by Ponti; and 14 framed photographs of couture gowns from the late 19th and early 20th centuries, which Guido found in a trunk belonging to his maternal great-grandmother Carla Erba Visconti di Modrone, hang on a wall behind the metal staircase to the mezzanine where he sleeps.



A view from the smaller ground-floor salon onto the main salon. The floor is Palladiana terrazzo.



"It was both wonderful and strange growing up here," says Guido, pictured above.

Two years ago, he took on an ambitious project that similarly reflects his lineage: the revival of Gi.Vi.Emme, a once-famed, long-shuttered fragrance brand started in the early 1900s as part of the Erba family chemical empire and named — by the aristocratic novelist and poet Gabriele d’Annunzio, a family friend — for the initials of Guido’s great-grandfather Giuseppe Visconti di Modrone. Guido hopes to relaunch it in 2024 in partnership with Elia Bonacina, the C.E.O. of the legacy wicker-furniture maker Bonacina 1889. But as might be expected, given his embrace of the setting in which he was raised, his first move was to trawl auctions and the internet, collecting every vintage perfume bottle, gilded gift box and advertisement for the line, many of them designed by the era’s most distinguished illustrators. The blown-glass flacons and containers are now displayed in a pair of eight-foot-tall vitrines. Each wisp of ephemera is pressed neatly between album covers. “My father came to visit,” recalls Guido, “and said, ‘Oh my God, you’re becoming just like me.’ I’m not sure if that made him happy, but I was filled with joy.”