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DESIGN & INTERIORS | FOOD | TRAVEL | FASHION & BEAUTY | ENTERTAINMENT | ART | VIDEO



Anu Kumar

FOOD MATTERS

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22h ago • By LIGAYA MISHAN and ANU KUMAR

An Italian Maximalist Moves Into a Muted Turin Villa



The tentmaker Guido Toschi brings color and pattern to a 12th-century citadel once occupied by his five great-aunts.

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25m ago



An Italian Maximalist Moves Into a Muted Turin Villa

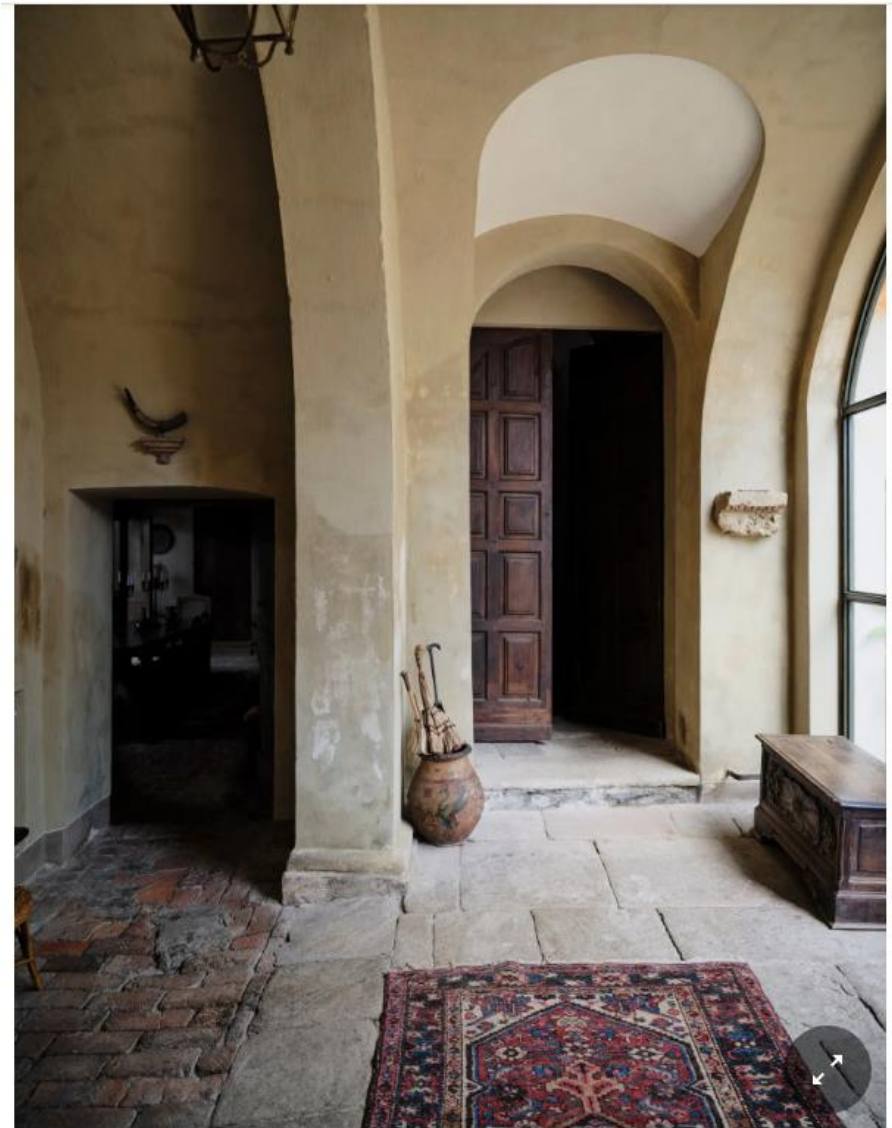
The tentmaker Guido Toschi brings color and pattern to a 12th-century citadel once occupied by his five great-aunts.

On the second-floor landing of Guido Toschi and Massimo Rausa's home outside of Turin, Italy, the original coffered ceiling and stone checkerboard floor, a suite of Charles X dining chairs and settee and a Savoy family tree ending in the 1730s with Vittorio Amedeo II di Savoia. [Simon Watson](#)

By Nancy Hass Photographs by Simon Watson
Sept. 29, 2022

IN AN ATELIER in a restored warehouse district of Turin, Italy, Guido Toschi has spent three decades developing a business so niche that it has little competition elsewhere in Europe: He creates extravagant site-specific [canvas garden tents](#). From a scarlet Orientalist pagoda for a Cotswolds estate to an Arthurian pavilion in shades of persimmon and amber beside a villa in St.-Tropez, the room-size enclosures can take weeks to make in his 14-person studio. With bold stripes and saturated colors (“I find white too aggressive,” he says), they evoke the swagged salons of the iconic designer [Renzo Mongiardino](#) and the sun-bleached colonial-era idylls conjured by the British novelist E.M. Forster. Despite their minimalist materials — canvas, rope, iron and bamboo — the designs suggest maximalist eras of the past; Toschi, 60, calls them “an invitation to dream.”

His professional dedication to such whimsy is merely one of his life’s anachronisms: Like his tents, the castlelike 12th-century home he shares with his partner in life and business of nearly 30 years, Massimo Rausa, 58, vividly conjures a mythical past. Set on a hillside in the small town of Avigliana, about 15 miles west of Turin, and built on walls dating to the early Middle Ages, the 9,000-square-foot 15-room villa has been part of his life for as long as he can remember. While he was growing up, it was owned by his five older unmarried maternal great-aunts — Angela, Vittoria, Pierina, Giovanna and Clara, a widow — and on Sundays he and his parents would often drive from their country house a few miles away to a formal luncheon at the citadel. The menu was routine: an underseasoned tomato risotto and chicken in aspic. “My mother dreaded every moment,” he says. “She didn’t care for the aunts at all.”



Toschi glazed this entrance — originally an open-air loggia connecting the front garden to the interior rooms of the house — in 2000, protecting the passage from the elements. Simon Watson



In the main salon, a rosewood pianoforte, a plaster bust of Hippocrates atop a walnut fratino table and a mantel adorned with the plaster coat of arms of Vittorio Amedeo I, Duke of Savoy, installed there by his gamekeeper in the 17th century.
Simon Watson

Indeed, it was a scene out of Proust by way of Poe: the devoutly religious ladies in their 70s and 80s in pearls, rattling around in the brick-and-stone mansion that had been owned through the Middle Ages and early Renaissance by the Duke of Savoy, whose family ruled the then-independent Piedmont region. Raised in a wealthy Turin clan, the sisters had purchased the weekend home in the 1930s from a local lawyer, using their combined inheritances (their only brother got the bulk of the family estate, as was the custom at the time); they moved there permanently when the Allies began bombing Turin during World War II.

Despite the cavernous volumes, with its chestnut-beamed, 16-foot-high-ceilinged salon and plaster fireplace topped with the coat of arms of the House of Savoy (added in the 17th century by the property's gamekeeper and chief of the castle guards, to whom the duke gave the house), the women spent much of their time in the villa's three beige upstairs bedrooms and an adjoining sitting room. Their taste in furnishings ran to fusty embroideries and the occasional gilt-framed ecclesiastical oil portrait. "It was dark and a little sad," Toschi says. They bred rabbits in the long, narrow dining room, the only chamber with access to the gardens ("I learned about sex from watching those rabbits procreate," he adds) and, with the help of a farmer, grew peppers, tomatoes and green beans in the terraced gardens. Once, when he was about 7, Toschi wandered outside and brought in a handful of plums from the trees for his mother. "The aunties yelled at me," he says. "They told me that it was their fruit, not ours."



The fabric walls in one of the guest bedrooms soften the effect of this 19th-century medieval revival throne *baldacchino*, which Toschi converted into a canopy for a bed. Simon Watson



In the main bedroom, Toschi upholstered the exterior of an 18th-century canopy bed in gold cotton canvas and its interior in an Indian block print fabric to contrast with the dusty sage green walls decorated with a fleur-de-lis roller stamp. *Simon*



In the ground-floor dining room, Toschi hung antique pewter plates and wooden sculptures imitating trophy mounts. *Simon Watson*



Toschi worked with local artisans to replicate the antique sconces and 17th-century chairs in the ground-floor dining room after originals found in the house. Simon



In the upstairs dining room, a pair of antique papier-mâché candle sconces and a mirror in a guilliche frame sit above a Baroque painted-wood console. Simon Watson

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Yet Toschi's great-aunts provided in other ways: He learned the beauty of sewing from Giovanna and Angela, who made the coverlets for the sisters' single beds, and Pierina taught him the decorative painting skills she used to create delicate abstract motifs on the coffered ceilings of one of the dining rooms and main salon. Vittoria, an herbalist, concocted potions from the exotic plants she cultivated. For a creative child who loved the Knights of the Round Table, the fortresslike edifice with its idiosyncratic inhabitants and panoramic view of the valley was a paradise that would, years later, inspire his obsession with tent making. "I will forever remember the perfume of the pears and apples in the trees and the earthiness of the animals they kept," he says. "That's what shaped me."



In the staircase, a still life of a dahlia painted by Toschi's great-aunt Pierina hangs on a wall with a trompe l'oeil dalle en pierre motif above a slate shelf.
Simon Watson



A Carrara marble baker's table, a backsplash of Portuguese tiles and a wood-burning stove in front of the ancient hearth in the kitchen.
Simon Watson



In a sitting room adjoining the bedrooms, an 18th-century chandelier and an 1870s wax paper panel with palm and primrose hang over a settee and chairs that Toschi covered in a toile de Jouy reprinted based on fragments of the original. The rug is Chinese from the 1930s. Simon Watson



In another guest bedroom, twin 19th-century Piedmontese cherry-and-rosewood beds and pink walls with blue roller stamp details. Simon Watson

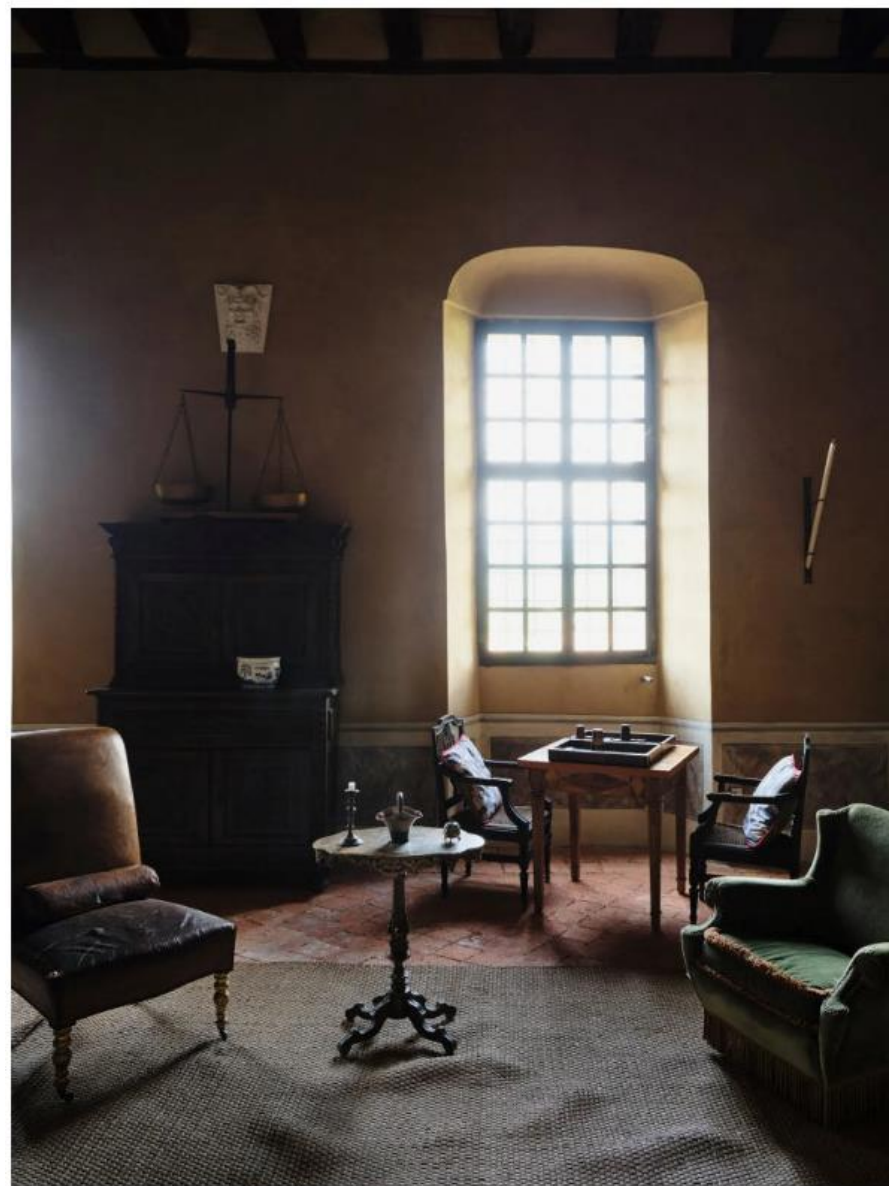


Toschi created these canopies at his atelier in Turin to shade a seating area behind the house, at the top of the terraced back garden.
Simon Watson

IN 1992, THE last great-aunt died at home, as they all had, at age 94. Toschi's mother, with a final shudder, threw some covers over the furniture and closed the place down. Over the years, it became a warehouse of sorts for the extended family's castoffs, piled so high you couldn't even see the giant fireplace. But in 2016, when his mother died, Toschi decided it was time to resuscitate the mansion; he was determined to give it a new life by imbuing it with a sense of joyous informality.

The aunts had demanded fanatical cleanliness, and the few modifications they made were utilitarian. Among the most laborious tasks Toschi undertook was removing from the floors of the grand salon the 1950s-era ceramic tile — an inexpensive, German-made type called clinker, which the sisters loved for its shiny, impermeable surface. Beneath the tile and a thick slathering of concrete lay centuries-old brick, with all its crenulated character. "It took forever to chisel the concrete out, and it changed everything," he says.

The six bedrooms are now unrecognizable from the muted cells to which the sisters repaired; each has its own palette and distinct character, much like Toschi's tents, which are inspired by archetypal facets of history, including papal *baldacchinos* and the Napoleonic crusades. The couple's canopied bed is tailored from gold canvas with ivory embellishments, as though it were an ultrarefined version of their outdoor tents. In one of the guest rooms, a narrow bed has been fashioned from a carved, wooden 18th-century Italianate throne that they bought on impulse from the back of an antiques shop truck that was delivering a carpet they'd purchased.



Toschi and Rausa's backgammon table is set up in the drawing room by the large, leaded-glass windows that look onto the terraced garden. Simon Watson

As a rebuke to his great-aunts' sobriety, Toschi has banished the "sad taupe," as he calls it, that once was everywhere. The rooms are now painted in ripe shades of pale teal and coral, and several are adorned with the *rullo decorativo* technique, said to be a favorite of Mongiardino's, in which a paint-loaded roller with a design cut into it is used to create vertical ribbons of pattern in a contrasting hue. The big, square sitting room, where the sisters once gathered in the evenings on dowdy divans, knitting or playing cards, is now a dramatic but cozy space with sofas reupholstered in custom-dyed toile de Jouy to match the originals, a pair of late 19th-century wax paper panels, a Baroque console and a crystal chandelier.

The couple now spend most of their time at the house: They didn't imagine doing so when they were renovating, as both have long kept well-appointed apartments in Turin, much closer to their studio, but during the pandemic, they decided not to return full time to the city. Each morning, they load their three rescue dogs into the back of their Range Rover and head to the office, and each evening they return and spend time in the garden, often gathering fruit from the trees there. That they inadvertently have followed the path of the five aunties — seeking refuge in the country from a city that had come to feel unsafe — strikes them as ironic but also nostalgic. "We have changed this place so much," says Toschi, "but the history is still here, and always will be."

Production: Christopher Garis



The rosewood piano in the main salon was purchased for Toschi's mother when she was learning to play. Above, a faux-candlestick sconce Toschi designed when he was first electrifying the room. Simon Watson