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THE WORLD OF INTERIORS

THE HOUSE THAT FORGOT TIME
In an east London merchant's home,
Georgian life endures. Almost...

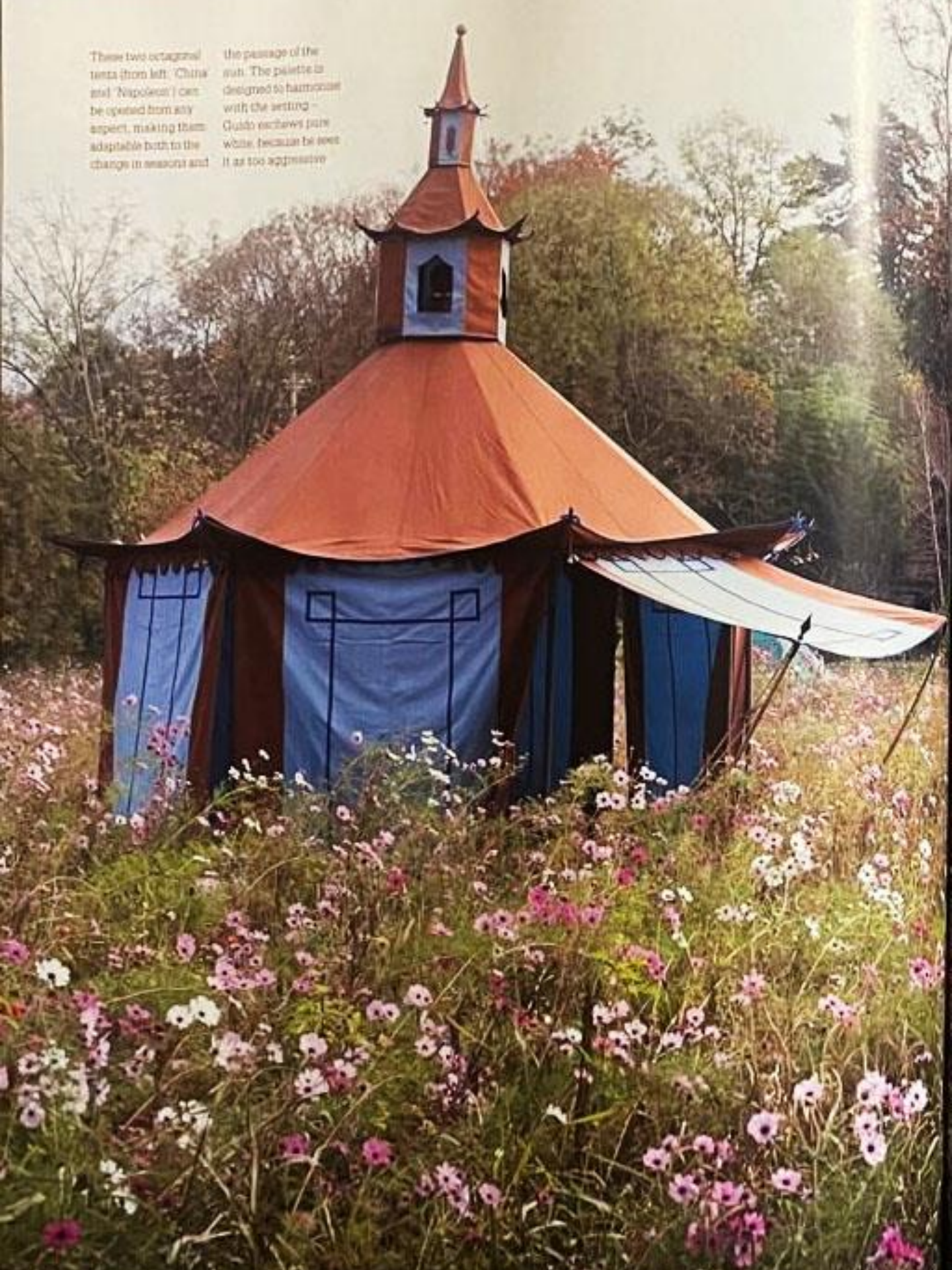


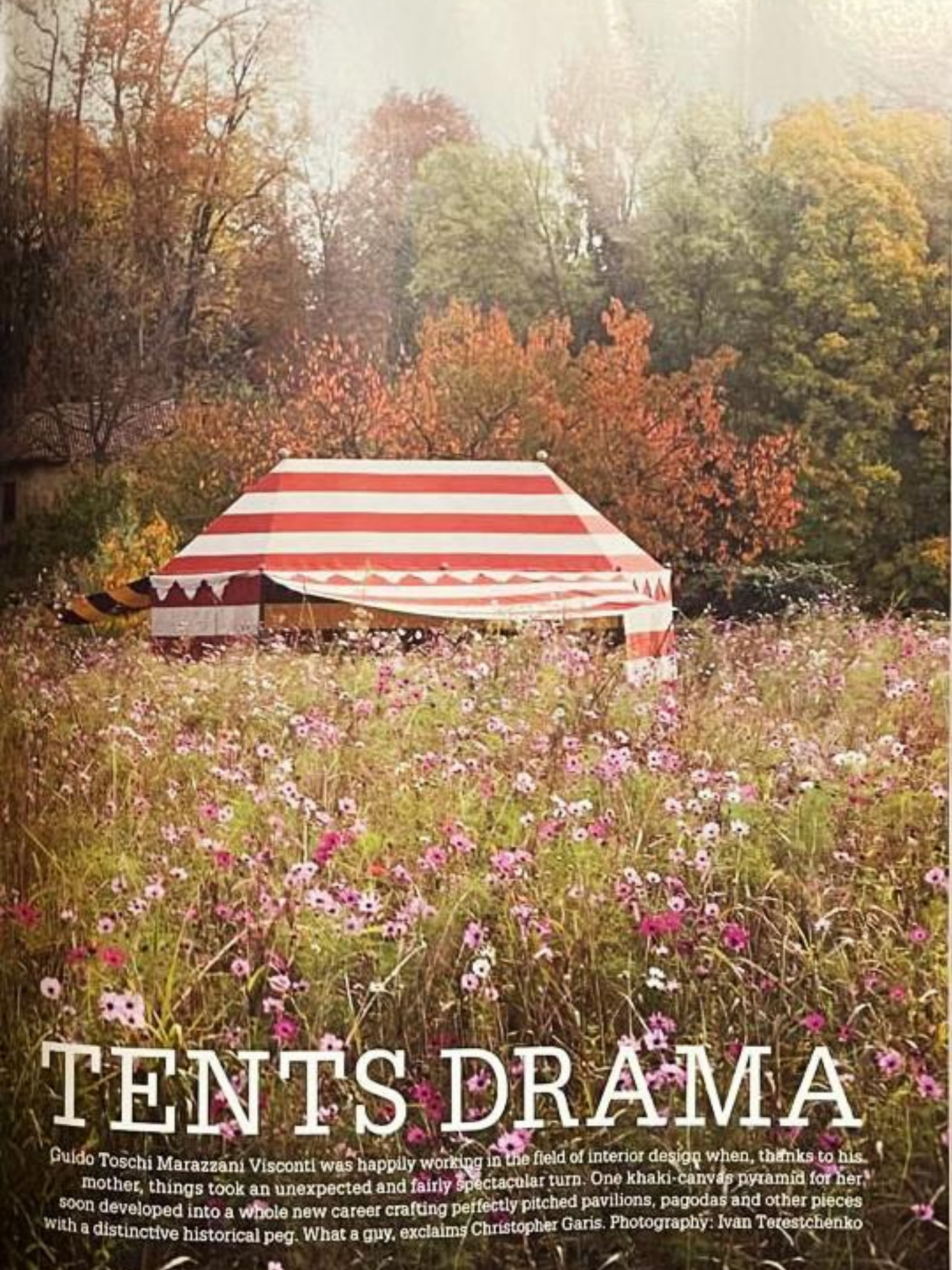
NEW GAULDEN AGE Exiled nobleman's
Somerset manor reawakened

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These two octagonal tents (from left: 'China' and 'Napoleon') can be opened from any aspect, making them adaptable both to the change in seasons and

the passage of the rain. The palette is designed to harmonize with the setting - Guido eschews pure white, because he sees it as too aggressive





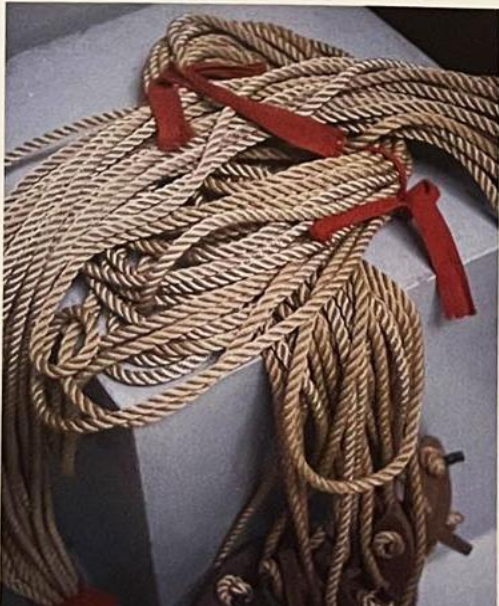
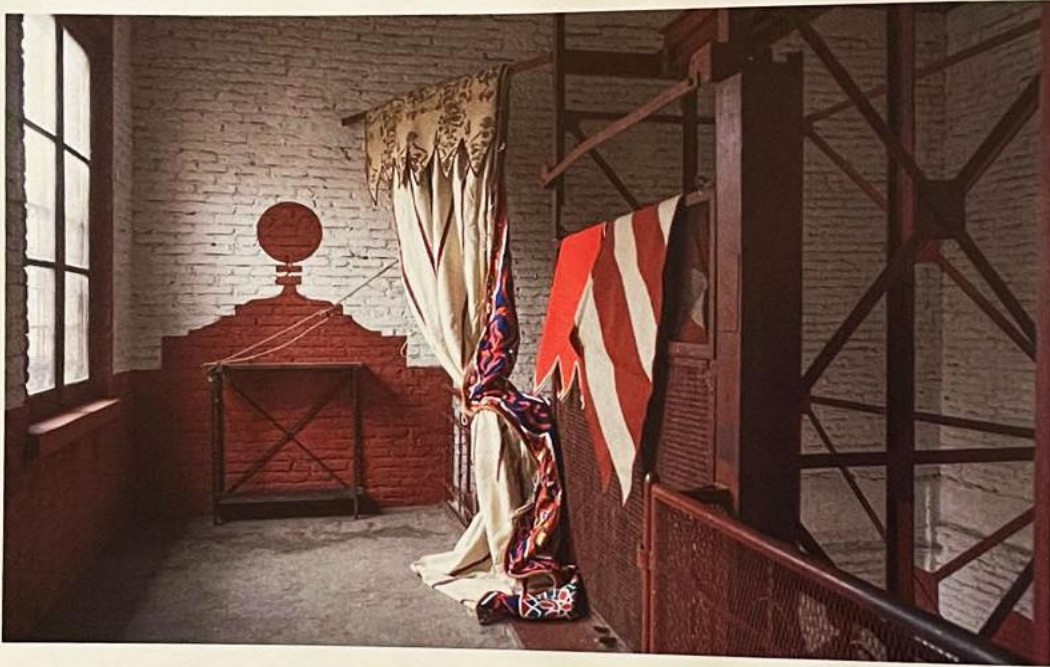
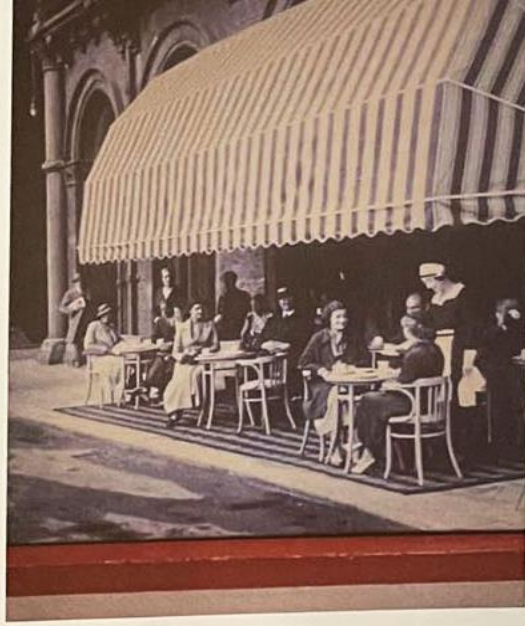
TENTS DRAMA

Guido Toschi Marazzani Visconti was happily working in the field of interior design when, thanks to his mother, things took an unexpected and fairly spectacular turn. One khaki-canvas pyramid for her soon developed into a whole new career crafting perfectly pitched pavilions, pagodas and other pieces with a distinctive historical peg. What a guy, exclaims Christopher Garis. Photography: Ivan Terestchenko



This page, clockwise from top left: even the twig-like bells dangling from the eight flared corners are made at Guido's factory in Turin; deep blue passementerie has been hand-stitched on to the valance and the flaps; this 25sq m pyramid tent in solid and striped green fabrics is crowned with a handmade brass pineapple finial; the 'Napoleon' was inspired by camps that would have been set up along the esplanade at the Hôtel des Invalides in Paris; iron posts are here topped with brass finials. Opposite: workers erect one of the 'China' models, which is based on 18th-century garden follies





This page, clockwise from top left: at the Turin headquarters, employees manoeuvre one of the finished pagodas down the stairs prior to dispatch. While most of the tents are stored in duffel bags, this particular model is formed of preassembled parts; this photograph of an awning outside a Belgian café is one of several that have served as reference points; Guido has decorated the walls of the stairwell with stencils of his own design. Here, various valances and fabrics are stored on display; wares are stored with military precision; the guys are made of either cotton or nylon rope.

Opposite: in the process of assembly, this Gothic tent features quatrefoil tracery above the door as well as a royal blue ceiling

stars. This page: it stands six metres tall before a 19th-century gatehouse in the countryside of the Lombardy region



HOW INTERIOR designer Guido Toschi Marazzani Visconti came to make tents – tents beautiful enough to pass the muster of aesthetes such as Roberto Peregalli (blue and white for a birthday in Capri) and Benedikt and Nencia Bolza (cream and rust for Castello di Reschio; *WoI* Sept 2015), as well as a long list of loyal clients – is a story that begins years ago, in his mother's garden in the hills of Piedmont, not far from Turin. To hear him tell it, he was practically forced into making her a tent when, after some looking, the only thing commercially available was in white, which Guido describes as the worst colour imaginable in a garden: 'It's aggressive.' With the help of a local seamstress he measured out old khaki canvas, cut wooden posts, and strung the whole thing together with a few metres of cotton rope.

It certainly looked the part, and for years remained a calling card of sorts for his mother's friends, bringing him a lot of custom. He was already working as an interior decorator, but this hobby slowly began to take over. Things became serious when his partner, Massimo Rausa, left his job at the European Union and started managing the office. Because of Guido's temperament, both men agree that making tents would never have evolved beyond a pastime had it not been for this development. 'Without Massimo there would be no company,' Guido says.

He made that first tent around the time he was completing his national service as a cavalryman in the Friulian hills, and had become familiar with the single-man shelters as well as the large ten-man tents used in the field. A true tent, like these, is held up with posts and guys, the tension of the canvas helping to keep everything upright. For his mother, he constructed a variety of a model he still uses today, called the 'Marquise', a square structure with a pyramidal top. In some instances the four corners are supported by bamboo pikes fitted with decorative spearheads, while the striped side panels can remain closed or hoisted out to create a wide covered area that looks ready to host a meeting of Roman tribunes devising military strategy.

As Guido started taking on projects, his very first designs were clean and crisp. But sharp lines made modern shapes and these pieces intruded too loudly on the landscape. Like his work, he is reserved by nature, happy to wait to be approached at a party rather than bursting forth. 'It might reflect my character, but I prefer my work to be soft-spoken. A tent in a garden should be like a watch, something that completes an outfit, but not the first thing you see.' Like an effective camouflage, a certain amount of busyness helps fabric sink into the landscape, and it took time to find the right balance between intricate shapes and spartan finishes that characterise many of his tents.

Looking through his catalogue, one can begin to spot a variety of cultural allusions: the heavy draping of saffron and crimson in a Canaletto or the copper ornaments perched atop Venetian stalls in a Guardi. The images of Luchino Visconti films (no relation) have lingered like dreams in his memory – the heavy lambrequins framing windows, decorative epaulettes in military uniforms and toothy valances on shop awnings.

Guido has done a significant amount of research to find and revive historical shapes that evoke a childlike wonder while remaining utterly practical. The 'Napoleon', for instance, is based

on a tent that was frequently used by the French army in the 18th century. Its rectangular shape juts out on the shorter ends to create an extended hexagon; inside, with the sides closed, it could be a perfectly contained bedroom. Lift one of the larger faces into an awning with a pair of posts and the room becomes a pavilion, waiting to be fitted with daybeds looking out over an advantageous view. Or raise all of the sides and the 'Napoleon' stretches out to provide shade for a lunch party.

Tents are our proto-homes, and it is easy to be lulled to childlike wonder on entering one. Memories of school camp or of constructing elaborate blanket forts as a child seem to be universal experiences, just as the stylistic references they offer us can come from any number of sources from around the world. Circular Mongolian 'war tents' known as yurts or gers are made with hard-bodied structures covered in felt that during the reign of Genghis Khan would have been filled with silks and the spoils of village raids and coerced tribute. Expansive Berber tents of the Sahara made of dark camel-hair fabric use a post-and-rope design that

mimics the undulating sand hills of the desert. Tripod tipis of the Lakota or *lavvu* of the Sami offer up yet another reference point, as do the pagodas of East Asia. But Guido also looks to sources closer to home, specifically to the skirted umbrellas of the late 19th-century beaches of Brittany and the baldachins from papal processions. For each new project, he likes to allow a property to become his for a moment and imagine what he would most like to see. 'I am sure I'd have more business if I listened to my clients, but that's how I work.' Trusting his gut has paid off, and what began as a side project has developed into a practice with ten full-time staff.

Back in their office, an old vermouth factory in the industrial north of Turin, Guido and Massimo sketch out ideas. Each piece is entirely made in this two-storey building. During the busy season leading

up to spring the rooms are abuzz with activity, be it welding beams, hemming seams or sitting with a set of watercolours to design the next pavilion. In a side room, finished tents in green polypropylene sacks are stored on shelves with the organisation of an army depot, ready to be hauled out and deployed at a moment's notice. 'It is essential to the tent that it is an impermanent structure, that it exists, but can be dismantled and moved should the desire strike.' These days, Guido has resorted to using lightweight scaffolding for some of the larger and more elaborate pieces, meaning that not all of them need to be 'pitched' in the traditional sense. But those that use the tension of the fabric to remain upright are still his favourite; these are the ones that retain a fragility that is freeing.

When he was a young man searching for direction he once visited Renzo Mongiardino to ask for work. Mongiardino was by then nearing the end of his career and rebuffed this request. Instead, the master interior designer proffered this advice: 'Look at things you love and inhale them into your imagination. If you can make them yours, they will return to you years later. And that is the time to close your eyes and dream and create.' Now, having been an observer all his life, Guido has only to close his eyes to see his next project ■

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