

## GILDED AGE

Casa Mollino's dining room—an unexpected mix—replete with a marble-column table Mollino designed, Saarinen tulip chairs, a Japanese ceiling lantern, and a standing lamp by Gianfranco Frattini.



Photographed by François Halard



# BURIED TREASURE

When a father-and-son duo discovered the hidden apartment of twentieth-century architect and designer Carlo Mollino, the secrets of his private life and innermost passions were revealed. By Cathryn Drake





## A ROOM OF ONE'S OWN

The "Butterfly Room" with a boat-shaped bed mimicking the Egyptian hieroglyph theme on the pillows below, leopard-skin wallpaper, and butterflies framed on mirrors.



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uring lunch at Casa Mollino, father and son Fulvio and Napoleone Ferrari (no relation to the auto magnate Enzo) tell me how they discovered the mysterious purpose of this hideaway, created by the late Torinese designer, daredevil, and consummate dabbler Carlo Mollino. On the balcony overlooking the Po River with a view of Torino's lush hills beyond, 63-year-old Fulvio serves us home-

made *tagliolini*. Just inside the door, a zebra-skin rug beckons to the darkened interior—full of ornate mirrors, vivid rococo tiles, and red velvet curtains—where a trove of breathtakingly explicit Polaroids of both society women and prostitutes was found after Mollino's death in 1973 at the age of 68.

These stylish photographs—more than 2,000, shot here and in the architect's official studio—turned Mollino into a cult figure. Shockingly direct for their time, they have inspired the likes of Helmut Newton and Juergen Teller. Fulvio published the images in a book in 1985, causing Mollino's conservative former colleagues at the Polytechnic University of Torino to downplay his importance as an architect and characterize him as an eccentric. "Mollino was completely forgotten at that moment—nobody talked about him," Fulvio explains. "The architecture faculty was very Catholic, very straight in that sense, and they could not take the fact that a professor photographed naked women, so they left him in the tomb."

Mollino's sensuous biomorphic designs were a tribute to both the female form and Surrealism. His creations encompassed furniture, fashion, skiing, race cars, airplanes, interiors, and theater sets in addition to buildings—including Torino's wondrously colorful and labyrinthine Teatro Regio, completed the year he died. He even wrote a couple of novels as well as a book about the choreography of skiing, complete with anatomical motion diagrams. "But flying was his great passion," Fulvio says, one that the architect shared with his father, Eugenio, a wealthy engineer. Fascinated by the phenomenon of flight, Mollino became a pilot—from childhood he had produced countless drawings of airplanes that likened them to birds or, as he once wrote, "celestial arabesques." The wacky shape of Mollino's futuristic Bisiluro custom racing car, produced in 1955 for the 24 Hours of Le Mans race, was clearly inspired by aeronautics.

When it comes to furniture, his ardent collectors include the Swiss art dealers Iwan Wirth, of Hauser & Wirth, and Bruno Bischofberger, who founded *Interview* with Andy Warhol. In 2005, a table Mollino designed for the Casa Orengo sold for \$3.8 million at Christie's; it still holds the record price for a piece of twentieth-century furniture. But of the many interiors he designed, Casa Mollino was curiously unknown. The architect had painstakingly decorated the modern-cum-Surrealist apartment over many years, yet he never inhabited it. Fulvio, previously an antique dealer specializing in modern furniture, stumbled upon it in the 1980s while tracking down Mollino designs for a client. Then, about ten years ago, when the engineer who was using it as a studio retired, Fulvio bought the place, which still had many of its original furnishings. "The reason for this house was never known, because Mollino never talked about it and never invited his friends here. He was always very private; he wanted to concentrate on his own interests without being disturbed," Fulvio tells me.



### NUDIST COLONY

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: A Mollino portrait; two of his 1960s Polaroids; Fulvio Ferrari, founder of the museum.



### PERFECT MATCH

LEFT: Napoleone Ferrari guarded by an Austrian Jugendstil bust by Friedrich Goldscheider. BELOW: A bathroom covered in sun-inspired tiles from Ceramica Matteo d'Agostino.







He springs up from the table. “I’ll show you where we found the key to open the mystery of this secret apartment—Mollino left it in an incredible place.” He opens the architect’s 1949 book on photography, *Message from the Darkroom*, and points to the image of the Egyptian Queen Tye on the frontispiece. “This portrait has nothing to do with the contents, so we asked, Why did Mollino put this queen in this book?” For the Ferraris, the cryptic message shows that he intended the house as a metaphorical pyramid constructed by a pharaoh to contain all of the things he loved and needed for the afterlife; that, like the Egyptians, Mollino believed our earthly existence is only a parenthesis to our eternal life. Two lion statuettes flank the door opening onto the balcony where we’re sitting, from which, as Mollino wrote, “The pharaoh could exit unseen from the stone door of the pyramid to contemplate the beauty of the Nile one more time”—the Po River in this case.

he walls of an intimate bedchamber are covered in a leopard pattern, and on one there are hundreds of butterflies, preserved under glass and ordered in battalions like the terra-cotta warriors in the Chinese emperor’s tomb in Xi’an. (These are the shawabti, Fulvio says, the slaves who will serve the pharaoh in his afterlife.) For the Surrealists, the butterfly was a symbol for woman. “Women were one of the most important things in Mollino’s life, something that he was really attracted to,” 35-year-old Napoleone says. “And if you look at his architecture and furniture design, he’s always elegant, refined, subtle, and mysterious—the traditional feminine qualities.” Shells, another object suggesting the female form, are all over the house too. In many of Mollino’s black-and-white portraits from the thirties, the woman is caressing a conch, which, Napoleone tells me, is also an allusion to architecture. “Mollino really conceived his work and interiors like the shell, which is the perfect rational house,” the younger Ferrari continues.

For Mollino—who never married—this place served as a sort of identification card. “He did not write treatises or indicate solutions for the lives of others,” Fulvio says. “He was a philosopher dedicated to himself, to understanding his own persona.” Mollino was indeed something of a sphinx, and the Ferraris, who have so far published twelve books on him, want to set the record straight: He was not a madman but a visionary whose masterwork—the reflection of everything he believed—survived only by chance. “This is a marvelous house because it is the fruit of a marvelous person,” Fulvio emphasizes. “It is dedicated to this idea of being able to reach a kind of eternity.”

I ask the Ferraris if they think fate brought them to this place. Fulvio smiles quizzically: “In Mollino’s life, there were many coincidences, but we do not devote much attention to those events. Although we must admit there are things that seem unusual to us, let’s say, we are more scientific.” Napoleone adds, “Mollino really believed in intuition and chance. And I think that is one important reason he made this house.” He likens the alluring, visceral Casa Mollino—holding both otherworldly and earthly attractions—to a divine offering. We look down at the graceful herons on the rocks below, the Po rushing by their spindly legs, and Fulvio adds: “Sometimes you have this impression that he saw something that you can’t. It’s fantastic.” □

## DREAM BUILDING

CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: The living room boasts a Le Corbusier chaise longue; Mollino in 1938; a model for the car he hoped would break the land speed record; and an advertisement for his Casa del Sole, a ski lodge in Turin.




## LIFE IMITATING ART

ABOVE: Photos of a young Mollino and a shot of his Casa Miller. LEFT: A Mollino-designed fireplace and walls papered in photographic enlargements of an eighteenth-century German engraving.







Mollino intended the house as a metaphorical tomb, like a pyramid constructed by a pharaoh to contain all of the things he loved and needed for the afterlife.

#### PRIVATE LAIR

This antique door with its oval mirror opens onto the entryway, where a crystal lamp designed by Venini in the sixties hangs from the ceiling and an iconic Mollino chair perches at the end of the hall.