

MANSION



Neo-Gothic décor from an early 1900s renovation

Water damage in the main salon, above, required repairs. Below, dampened paper was used to clean the doorway. The princess picked up a trowel to help with plaster work.



A 15th-century portal



Palace courtyard

largely lived in a self-contained world, maintaining their neo-feudal power and prestige thanks to the island's distant, nominal rulers, first in Spain, then in Naples.

The Rococo and the Belle Époque eras proved to be exceptions, when Sicily absorbed trends from the wider world. He sees the

palace—with its Catalan origins, Rococo flourishes, and pre-World War I reinvention—as a “paradigm of the history of the Sicilian aristocracy.”

The impact of Spain and Naples are on display. In the ballroom, the Rococo frescoes are offset by Spanish-style religious paintings showing martyred saints

withering with illness. When her daughter had her 18th birthday here, says the princess, the family used disco lights to distract guests “from all the diseases.”

A display cabinet in the grand salon has an early 19th-century Neapolitan porcelain service, a gift from the Bourbons, who ruled Sicily from Naples for the better part of two centuries.

Sicily's nobles had lost much of their political and economic power by the second half of the 20th century, but they gained newfound cultural prestige due to Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa (1896-1957), a Palermo prince, whose posthumously published novel, “The Leopard,” about a 19th-century Sicilian nobleman, is a classic of modern European literature. The 1963 film version,

starring Burt Lancaster and Claudia Cardinale, was filmed in and around Palermo.

These days, the princess and her husband maintain many of the social trappings of old-style Sicilian aristocrats, including membership in the Circolo Bellini, the centuries-old Palermo club. And they also belong to the Circolo della Vela Sicilia, the exclusive yacht club in Mondello, the Belle Époque resort. But she can still sound like an ordinary Sicilian, taking pride in making a timbale, the island's ornate answer to lasagna, or enjoying ice-cream and brioché for breakfast. And like many of her fellow Sicilians, she has taken up the hospitality trade, opening up her palace to select tours for a few months each year.

“The cliché of ‘The Leopard’ that Sicilians are lazy and don't want to change isn't true,” she says. “Now everybody is running around trying to save our history—but in a modern way.”

During the early stages of the pandemic, she delved into her family archive and found that a number of key purchases for the palace in the 1880s were connected to an ancestor's winning lottery ticket. She even found the winning number. Ever since, she and her husband have been playing the same number—with nothing yet to show for it, she admits. But if she does win, she will invest it right back in the palace. At the top of her shopping list? Contemporary art. “To emphasize that my palazzo is not a museum,” she says.

HOW SICILIAN NOBLES LIVE TODAY

Sicilian palaces, for the most part, have gone from medieval fortresses to lavish Baroque showpieces, offices, museums or ruins. But for a coterie of Sicilian nobles who grew up with remote family memories of splendor, these homes remain a living presence.

“My grandmother was a baroness,” says Maria-Antonietta Randazzo, a 42-year-old descendant of Sicily's Gagliardo di Carpinello family, who grew up hearing about lost palaces and country houses. Ms. Randazzo, who manages her family's real-estate portfolio, divides her time between a compound in Palermo and her own apartment in Milan, where she combines family heirlooms from Sicily's Liberty period, the local variation on Art Nouveau, with the masters of Italy's Midcentury Modernism, like Gio Ponti. “I like to mix my own past with more recent passions,” she says.

Aloisa Moncada di Paterno's princely grandparents lived in what may be the most legendary palace of all—Palermo's



Palazzo Butera ▲, celebrated for its stucco ceilings, Chinoiserie doors and extensive waterfront facade. After decades of disrepair, it was sold in 2016 to Genoese art collectors Francesca and Massimo Valsecchi, who are turning it into a contemporary residence and private art museum. Ms. Moncada di Paterno, a 58-year-old yacht broker who grew up hearing about Butera in its heyday, is forging a new kind of connection with the palace, collaborating with the Valsecchis on a new outreach program for training young Palermo artists and artisans. She divides her time between a family villa east of

Palermo and an apartment in town, where she uses lighting design from labels such as Milan's Flos. “I am not a typical aristocrat,” she says of her scaled-down lifestyle and high-tech tastes. “I am the opposite.”

Naples-based art curator Pietro Scammacca lives like a typical young professional. “My apartment is very IKEA,” says the 27-year-old Sicilian, who has lived just about everywhere but Sicily. When the need to return home arises, he can take advantage of the family palace in the heart of Catania, Sicily's second city. The immense Palazzo Biscari, which dates to the late 17th century, still belongs to his mother's family. He and his Paris-based parents have an apartment they use for visits.

Until recently, he says, he didn't think much about the palace. “My noble background was something I chose to put aside,” he says. But lately he has decided to stage contemporary art exhibitions there. Space will not be a problem.

How big is the palazzo? “Some people say there are 500 rooms,” he says.



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