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# THE WORLD OF INTERIORS



# PARADISO REGAINED

Accused of treason and starved to death in 1289, Ugolino della Gherardesca was placed in the lowest circle of Hell in Dante's *Inferno*. Today he can be found – in sculpted form – throughout his descendants' castle in Tuscany, which, as James Sherwood reports, has been lovingly rescued from perdition. Photography: Simon Upton





The long gallery is dominated by an 18th-century Venetian chandelier. Two editions of Carpeaux's sculpture of Ugolino della Gherardesca and his dying family are displayed by the windows



**FOR MUCH OF A** history that dates back to the year 1000, the castle that crowns the Medieval hilltop village of Castagneto Carducci in the Livorno province of Tuscany has been a sleeping giant. With its aristocratic Italian family owning seven other castles in the surrounding landscape that was once its own fiefdom, not to mention famous palazzi in Florence and Pisa, Castello della Gherardesca has remained relatively unloved, little more than a repository for unused family furniture.

Until, that is, a decade ago, when its present owners – siblings Count Gaddo, Contessa Sibilla and Count Manfredi della Gherardesca – inherited the property and resolved to restore and refurbish this sleeping beauty as a family home.

'The earliest inscription we have found relating the castle to the Della Gherardesca is 1349,' says Manfredi, a London-based art consultant. 'But the interior you see today is largely the taste of my great-great-grandfather, who installed the staircase in 1857, as recorded by a plaque. My grandfather, Gaddo della Gherardesca, didn't like the castle and built a villa by the sea in 1920, where my parents also lived until the 1960s. My parents lived in the castle for about a decade when we were small but only in one apartment on the first floor.'

Recent family history reads like the sequel to Lampedusa's *The Leopard*. 'During World War II my grandfather was wanted by the Fascists because he was helping the partisans, many of whom worked on our estates,' recalls Sibilla, director of PR for Florentine fashion foundation Pitti Immagine. 'He and the men of my family had to flee dressed as peasants. Nonna Emilia hid her jewels up one of the chimneys in Castagneto. They lived as fugitives for nine months, never staying in the same place for longer than a day; sleeping in friends' farmhouses and even in Etruscan tombs hidden in the woodlands that we owned. They were never caught.'

'When the Germans retreated from Italy they looted many private houses and Castagneto suffered,' says Manfredi. 'We had fine collections of Renaissance medals and bronzes that were stolen.

Drawers from 17th- and 18th-century furniture were stripped out to take smaller objects from the castle.' His sister continues: 'Pope Castagneto; it became the family storage vault full of dusty old furniture that nobody wanted. The second floor was filled with trunks, old stateroom chairs and mattresses piled up like The Princess and the Pea. There were guardians and housekeepers living in the out-houses but nobody really knew what was in there. Many things disappeared over the years.'

'When the siblings' grandfather left Castagneto to their father, he didn't include the contents of the castle; so even furniture and paintings associated with the castle in living memory were lost. 'Fortunately,' says Manfredi, 'our mother, Adriana Guillichini, was the last of the line of an old aristocratic family with an unoccupied palazzo in Arezzo, and she brought many of the pieces you see here today to the castle.' A vast carved-wood 17th-century Guillichini coat of arms surmounted by a 16th-century majolica dish now hangs in the entrance hall of the castle. 'She deserves to be there,' says the contessa of her mother's coat of arms. 'She contributed a great deal to the resurrection of the castle.'

Gaddo and his sister, Sibilla, spent many years restoring the infrastructure of the castle over countless weekends; guests were

handed a bucket on arrival and asked to help shore up leaks in the roofs. Gaddo and Manfredi have been conscientiously buying back portraits and sculpture relating to the family's formidable history. 'We had a marriage with the Medici in 1553 so we share a lot of blood,' explains Manfredi. The count acquires family portraits and busts that come up at auction to complement masterpieces that already hang in the castle – such as Jusus Suterstam's 17th-century portrait of Cardinal Leopoldo de Medici.

The Chinese Bedroom – dominated by an 18th-century gilded Tuscan state bed hung with yellow silk trimmed in red-velvet passementerie – is an example of the Della Gherardesca's ingenuity. The trompe-l'oeil wall painting of exotic birds 'wants to be 18th-century Chinese silk wallpaper', according to Manfredi, who commissioned it, but was in fact inspired by gouaches of tropical birds that still hang in his sister's bedroom. The count's Florentine upholsterer remounted the silk on the state bed, which may once have stood in the Della Gherardesca palazzo in Florence. He also found the stylistically correct gilded curtain tops for the rooms.

Although Count Manfredi is not terribly fond of the 19th Neo-Renaissance and Neo-Etruscan frescoes in the vaulted dining room and long gallery, he has accepted that they are part of the castle's history. He is, however, looking forward to the removal of cabinets full of Etruscan antiquities. 'Because Castagneto was built on an Etruscan necropolis, every time the farmers dug a spade into the soil, they found another tomb,' he says. 'I cannot wait to get rid of those old pots. Thank goodness it became law in the 1920s that everything buried below 3m belonged to the state, or we'd have had a house full of the stuff.'

Sentiment rather than pride motivates the Della Gherardesca acquisitions. In a recent Christie's sale of jewels inherited by Maria Gabriella di Savoia (daughter of the last king of Italy), Count Manfredi bought a diamond-encrusted badge with the crown and moniker of Queen Elena (wife of Vittorio Emanuele III). His great-grandmother Margherita della Gherardesca was lady-in-waiting to Queen Elena, and the badge is intended for his daughter, who is named after Margherita.

Another recent acquisition for Castagneto Carducci is a sketch by Delacroix for an idealistic rendering of the most famous of the Della Gherardesca ancestors, Count Ugolino, whose story is celebrated many times by poets and artists such as Geoffrey Chaucer, Joshua Reynolds, William Blake and Percy Bysshe Shelley. A 13th-century paterfamilias, Ugolino lost a political struggle with the rival Visconti family in 1289, and was imprisoned in a tower with his sons and grandsons and starved to death. Forty years later, Dante placed Ugolino, gnawing the skull of his captor, in the lowest circle of Hell in his *Inferno*, thus placing the Della Gherardesca family forever in the pantheon of Italian culture. As Count Gaddo says: 'The family has the most fantastic PR: Dante Alighieri.'

A cast of Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux's sculpture of Ugolino and his writhing, dying sons sits at the foot of the castle's sinuous driveway. What should be a heroic study of the fall of a once-mighty family now stands guard outside the castle at Castagneto Carducci, testament to the fact that nothing can defeat the Della Gherardesca. ■ Castello della Gherardesca, Castagneto Carducci, 57022 Livorno, Italy, is available for hire. Ring 0770 742267, or visit [castellodellacastagneto.com](http://castellodellacastagneto.com)



Opposite: trophies from Africa and a narwhal tusk surround a passage entrance, which frames the 19th-century stained glass of another door. This page: portraits of various ancestors hang in the Blue Room





This page, clockwise from top: the castle sits proud of the Medieval hilltop village of Castagneto Carducci in Livorno; 17th-century Roman architectural capriccios hang in the entrance hall



over an 18th-century Tuscan walnut bench emblazoned with the family coat of arms; in the barrel-vaulted library, a billiard table covered with an 18th-century altar cloth displays 17th- and 18th-century globes and early majolica from Lucca.

On the far left is an elaborately carved and gilded lamp, probably from the Palazzo della Gherardesca in Florence; a 17th-century carved-wood Guillichini coat of arms (from the siblings' mother's side) hangs in the entrance hall. Below



it is an Italian Louis XIV chair covered in embossed Cordoban leather. Opposite: the library's frescoes, done in 1909,

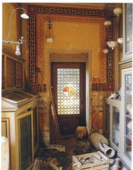
feature the coats of arms and names of 18 family castles in the surrounding fields



A 17th-century Flemish painting of a bear hunt hangs over the fireplace in the dining room. The table is laid with the Della Gherardescas' collection of Baccarat crystal







This page, clockwise from top: the wooden garden seat is one of two, copied from a set at Houghton Hall in Norfolk. The ancient Roman busts on the right were found discarded in a granary of the castle; the kitchen retains its furniture from the 1930s; the *stanza dei paramenti*, or robing room, holds vestments worn by successive generations of Catholic priests in the church adjoining the castle. Antique livery for the household are also stored here, and the family's collection of reliquaries is displayed on the table; the neo-Persian decoration in this room was done at the turn of the 20th century. Opposite: cupboards in the pantry are painted the same green as the kitchen's furniture





This page: on the recently hand-painted walls of the Chinese Bedroom hang portraits of Ferdinand III, Grand Duke of Tuscany, and his wife Luiza Maria Amelia. Opposite: the restored 18th-century state bed