

Tuscan Pastoral

Renzo Mongiardino transforms a country retreat
for fashion executive Giancarlo Giammetti

BY CHARLES MACLEAN PHOTOGRAPHS BY OBERTO GILI



At La Vagnola, Giancarlo Giammetti's country home away from Rome, the 18th-century stable is now an orangery with an upstairs exercise room. It looks onto the estate's garden, recently transformed by landscape designer Paolo Peyrone, who convinced Giammetti to go all green.



This is my first country house," Giancarlo Giammetti declares as we stroll along a well-kept avenue of cypresses high on the slopes of Mount Cetona. "So I may not be able to answer all of your questions about living in the Italian countryside." The disclaimer carries a lot more charm than conviction. Well versed in every detail of running La Vagnola, the picturesque fifty-acre estate he bought three years ago on the Umbrian-Tuscan border, Giammetti takes the pride and interest of a gentleman farmer in his pastoral refuge from the hurly-burly of the fashion industry.

As business partner of Valentino, emperor of haute couture—they have worked together now for 29 years—Giammetti leads such a high-pressured international existence that a quiet weekend among his olive groves can seem like the ultimate luxury. A sure sign, he admits with a comfortable laugh, that he is getting older.

Before Giammetti discovered Cetona, his home away from Rome was next door to the Peggy Guggenheim Collection in Venice, until the crowds began to spoil the romance of owning a house on the Grand Canal. "The only times I could go there were when all the other tourists went there—I have one month's holiday in August like everyone else. Here life is more peaceful, more relaxing."

Giammetti and I stand and admire views of the rolling Tuscan countryside, which have hardly changed over the millennia. He points out an Etruscan tomb, one of twenty or so remains of that mysterious civilization which litter the property. Olive groves, terraced vineyards, fields of poppies and sunflowers stretch away to distant hilltop towns, the gilt domes of their churches ablaze in the early sun. The classic backdrop of so much great Italian painting, there is something too good to be real about the loveliness of La Vagnola's setting.

The house, which dates from the sixteenth century, forms one side of a piazza in the center of Cetona. Iron gates swing open by remote control to admit video-approved visitors through an ancient archway. Inside the grounds, the town is suddenly left far behind. There is a feeling of having stepped directly into an enchanted landscape. Tucked into the flank of a cliff and shaded by tall chestnut trees and cypress, the house—named after the Terrosi-Vagnoli family, whose land once reached all the way to Siena—seems a natural extension of the garden. But looking out from within, the effect is reversed. Formal arrangements of box hedges and lemon trees in big earthenware pots make a series of garden rooms that give the impression of a leafy summer annex.



Paolo Peyrone, a pupil of the English landscape gardener Russell Page, helped organize the park. Giammetti wanted a garden full of English flowers and would send him pages torn from magazines of delphiniums and phlox and roses—a glossy profusion of color. "But Peyrone said, 'Let's get a bit of green first, and then we'll decide what flowers to have.' And the more green he put, the more I understood that the best color in a garden, especially in Tuscany, is green."

The greening of La Vagnola was a concept shared by the aptly named architectur-



Olivia, a King Charles spaniel, opposite, poses on an Empire settee that belonged to Princess Mathilde, Napoleon's niece. The 19th-century portrait hangs against early 19th century French hand-painted wallpaper. Above: Giammetti unwinds with Olivia and his dachshund, Claus, on a woodland path near his house. Above left: Obelisks flank the entrance to a formal garden of box hedges. Left: German and Italian glassware beneath 19th-century watercolors of grand Austrian and German interiors that inspired many of Renzo Mongiardino's designs for La Vagnola.





al decorator Renzo Mongiardino, who recognized at once that the heart of the house was its garden. "When I first brought him here," explains Giammetti, who made up his mind to buy the house in three hours without having seen the interior, "the only thing Mongiardino said was we needed to build on a big room to project the house into the garden. 'Without it,' he said, 'the house will never work.' "

In the battle that followed with the Landmarks Commission (under whose protection La Vagnola falls), Giammetti realized the importance of getting the local people on his side. He discovered that they had enjoyed free range of La Vagnola's gardens until 1950, when the house was bought by an English colonel who barred the public. Giammetti offered to reopen the park to the people of Cetona one day each month.

He scored further diplomatic points when he presented the town with a painting of Garibaldi, a popular figure locally, who once spent a few days at La Vagnola between campaigns. In a corner of the garden stands a bust of the Great Liberator and a bronze copy of the letter he wrote thanking the landowner of the day for his hospitality. Giammetti tells the story of how some of the villagers believed that "Firmato" at the bottom of the letter, which means "Signed" in Italian, was Garibaldi's first

In the main drawing room, left, trompe l'oeil columns that match the existing real ones were applied to the early 19th century wallpaper painted to look like swagged curtains. The sofas and Empire chairs are upholstered in a Valentino checked fabric for the home which repeats in the curtains. The crystal in the foreground is antique Baccarat. Below: At the opposite end of the room, school of Zurbarán paintings flank a collection of mid 19th century Italian marble vases. Details see Resources.



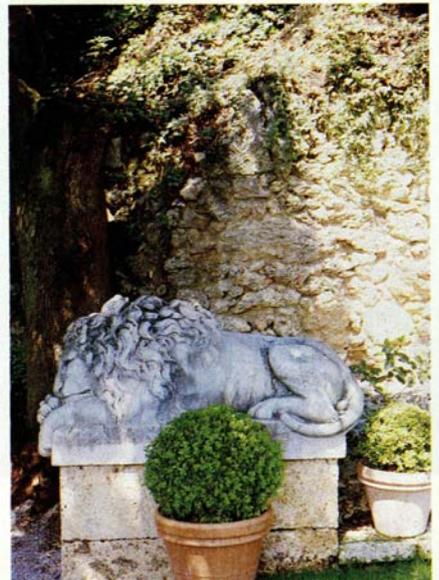


name and accordingly gave it to their sons. But it was Giammetti's decision to employ mostly local craftsmen to carry out alterations on the house that finally won the support of the Communist mayor and townspeople. After a six-month delay, Giammetti got the go-ahead to build his drawing room on the park.

The interior of La Vagnola has undergone its most complete transformation since the eighteenth century when two separate buildings were joined to form the existing structure. There is no mistaking Mongiardino's influence on the spirit of the facelift. Walls, floors, and ceilings all bear his indelible signature of elaborate hand-painted papers and Byzantine ceramic invention. The kitchen, a TV den in the tower, and some children's guest rooms were left to the elegantly spare vision of Tommaso Ziffer, a young decorator friend of Giammetti's.

The second stage of Mongiardino's plan involved persuading Giammetti to buy a set of early nineteenth century watercolors of grand Austrian and German interiors. Oddly reminiscent of the decor found in

Mongiardino used an inspired mix of marble and local terracotta tiles to pave the floor in the entrance to the dining room, left. His designs for the walls and ceiling were inspired by rooms in Florence's Palazzo Pitti. The tiered corner cupboards and the fringed light fixture are also Mongiardino originals. The table and side chairs are 19th century Italian. Below: A sleeping lion guards the entrance to 18th-century man-made grottoes that honeycomb the cliff above La Vagnola.



Inside the grounds, there is the feeling of having stepped directly into an enchanted landscape

La Turkerie, a magnificent frescoed pavilion that stands in the middle of the garden, was built by the Terrosi-Vagnoli family in 1837 in honor of a visiting pasha.





Tongue-wagging 18th-century Chinese-style figurines sit cross-legged under Meissen vases of lilacs in the garden room Mongiardino added to join the house with its verdant surroundings. The ensemble of wicker furniture is 19th century English.





Tuscan houses during the seventeenth century, these conversation pieces provided the inspiration, design, and color schemes for the most important rooms. The sketches, which now hang in the garden room, are amusing to read either as a key or as testimony to La Vagnola's stylistic pedigree.

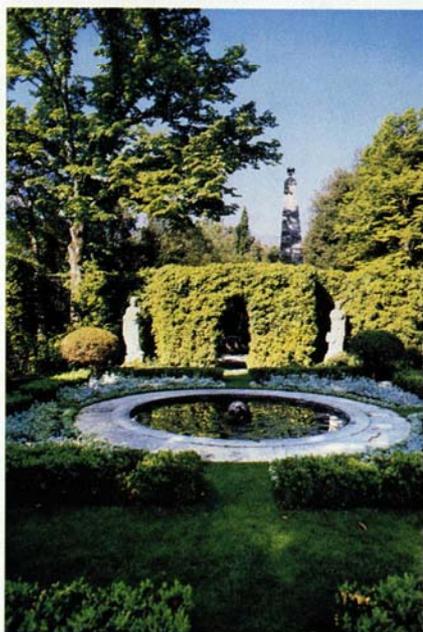
It is not always easy to gauge the relationship between decorator and client. Giammetti, who studied architecture before turning to fashion, found that Mongiardino could be magisterially stubborn but that working with him was like being reeducated in his own taste. "He takes the line that when he has given you a good shell, you can do what you want in a house. When he has to make sofas and curtains and arrange the flowers, he always hates the house afterward because it doesn't reflect the personality of the owner. The only complaint I (Text continued on page 241)

The light-filled garden room, above, has walls made of Bohemian glass tile. Top right: Sophia Loren was the inaugural guest in this sumptuously appointed bedroom, crowned with a lacy ceiling designed by Mongiardino. Center: The reading room opens into the library where books are shelved in a cabinet modeled after a historic Venetian design. The towering green and white ceramic stove, c. 1790, is used for decoration only, unlike the Louis XV duchesse, which is more comfortable than it looks. Right: La Vagnola, tucked behind chestnut trees, looks onto a green garden dotted with boxwood in earthenware pots. A monument to Garibaldi stands in a corner.



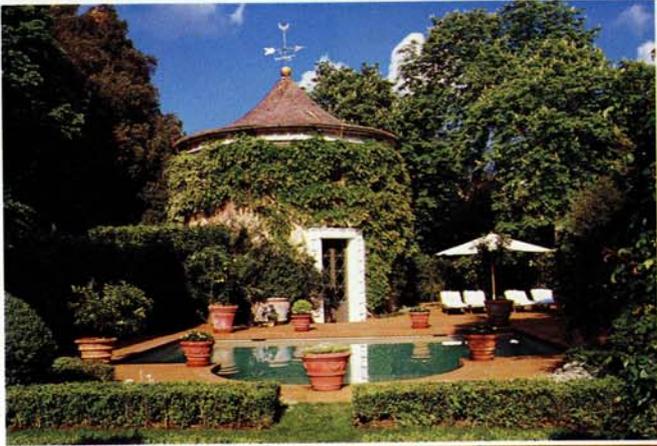


Mongiardino's ornate designs for the ceiling and walls of the ground-floor living room, left, were drawn in the studio, then applied in place. The sofas are covered in contemporary needlepoint. Above: Beyond the gates, the formal compartments of the garden give way to the rolling Tuscan countryside. Below left: A garden room appointed with a lily pond, arched hedge, and antique statues.



Tommaso Ziffer, a young decorator friend of Giammetti's, designed the all-white kitchen, above. Right: The master bedroom features its original sky-blue ceiling painted with Classical borders, a 19th-century sleigh bed with a vintage canopy, and a 19th-century needlepoint rug. Left: Giammetti's framed collection of Victorian plaster seals hangs in a corner of his bedroom.





Giammetti says the curtained closets in his crimson dressing room, right, are for convenience: "I don't waste much time thinking about clothes." The daybed is 19th century Swedish. The round table and walls and ceiling are Mongiardino designs. Above: La Turkerie viewed from poolside.

