



PHOTOGRAPHED BY **SIMON WATSON**  
A SAFE DISTANCE FROM THE RECENT SCANDALS  
PLACUING THEIR BLUEBLOODED CLAN, THE ARRIVABENE  
FAMILY ROOTS IN QUIET, MAJESTIC GRANDELIR IN  
THEIR PALAZZO ON THE CRANO CANAL  
BY **MARELLA CARACCILO**

venice



The second-floor landing of the grand staircase inside the Palazzo Papadopoli. The lamp, designed by Michelangelo Guggenheim, bears the Papadopoli family crest.



This page, clockwise from top: The library; a room with chinoiserie-inspired murals; a glimpse of the family's cozier quarters on the top floor. **Opposite:** Palazzo Papadopoli, which dates back to the 16th century, is the largest private palazzo on the Grand Canal.



a recent morning in Venice, Countess Bianca di Savoia Aosta Arrivabene, a descendant of what used to be the Italian royal family, is watering the roses in her palatial garden. Suddenly she stops. She smells something iffy coming from the shed, she explains. Glancing around with her wolfish blue eyes, she darts toward it. "Aha! The gardener must have seen a mouse," she says, crouching into the shed's dark recesses and digging out bags of old garbage herself. "He's terrified of them, so whenever he sees one, I have to clean up and make sure there are none left before he resumes his job."

The 41-year-old Bianca, whom most people call by her first name, is used to taking care of things herself. With five children and a successful career as chief representative of Christie's in the Veneto region, she leads a full life. It is a life, however, that has been made more complicated in the past few years by the fact that members of her family have had their sometimes racy private lives scrutinized by the Italian press.

It all started in October 2005, when her father, Amedeo, the Duke of Aosta, spoke on national television about having fathered an illegitimate child with a much younger woman. Although Kyara van Ellinkhuizen, the 39-year-old woman in question, had given multiple interviews about the affair, it was Amedeo's own confession that caused the greater stir. A descendant of the first king of Italy, the Duke of Aosta belongs to what is commonly considered the most aristocratic—and best-looking—branch of the former royal family. (The monarchy was abolished in the aftermath of World War II.) Although his longtime second wife, Silvia Paternò di Spedalotto, stood by his side during and after the teeth-clenching interview, his persona as a respectable, quiet gentleman farmer in Tuscany was tainted by the publicity. Ginevra, the Duke's child with van Ellinkhuizen, is now 18 months old. She lives with her mother and has been officially recognized as the Duke of Aosta's daughter.

In June 2006 scandal struck again. Prince Victor Emmanuel IV of Savoy, a cousin on Bianca's father's side and the would-be king of Italy, was torpedoed by accusations regarding financial corruption and an involvement

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with illegal gambling and prostitution. Victor Emmanuel was indicted and imprisoned for several weeks, but the charges were subsequently dropped. This was not his first brush with the law. In 1978 he allegedly shot a 19-year-old German named Dirk Hamer, who died four months afterward. Thirteen years later, Victor Emmanuel was acquitted in a French court.

The turn of events has created a rift within the Italian monarchist movement, rekindling an age-old feud between the two branches of the family, both of which claim their right to the would-be kingdom. Although a return to the monarchy in Italy is a most unlikely scenario, leading monarchists have placed Bianca's father and her brother Aimone, who works in Moscow and is engaged to Olga of Greece, as the first in line of succession to Italy's throne.

Back in Venice, life seems to flow more gracefully. Bianca is trying to put some distance between herself and the media attention that has enveloped her family. "My mind, these days, is focused on a much more interesting issue," she says, half jokingly. "I must tend to the needs of a demanding creature." That creature is the family palace. Even in Venice, a city not known for architectural demureness, Palazzo Papadopoli is impossible to miss. With its 21,000-square-foot interior, it's the largest private palazzo on the Grand Canal and one of the largest in Venice.

"Nicolò Papadopoli, a forebear of my father, bought this palace in the middle of the 19th century and transformed it completely," says Bianca's husband of 19 years, Count Gilberto Arrivabene Valenti Gonzaga, whose long name mirrors an equally complex family history that goes back 800

years. The Papadopolis, an industrial dynasty of Greek origin, were so rich that when Napoleon went to Venice, he taxed them 10 times more than he did other aristocratic families. "Venetians would say the Papadopolis were so wealthy, they owned their own wave in the ocean," says Gilberto.

The Papadopolis bought two smaller palaces next door and tore them down in order to make space for a garden and a new wing. Michelangelo Guggenheim, the chicest designer of the era, reimagined the rooms to reflect the period's taste for bombastic, overdecorated interiors. Some rooms are so spacious that the Arrivabene brood—four girls and a boy, ranging in age from six to 16—use them for roller-skating and playing soccer.

Maintaining the palace has plagued the Count's sleep for decades. "I was nine years old and living in Rome when my father died," says Gilberto, whom friends and family call Gibi. "By that time most of the Papadopolis and Arrivabene fortunes had been dispersed. My mother, my two sisters and I were left mostly with this crumbling old palazzo and a lot of worries."

A handsome 46-year-old with a beard and a mane of graying hair, Gilberto got himself a real job as soon as he could. After working in advertising in Milan, he jumped at an opportunity in Venice to work for Aon insurance brokers. He is also a self-taught designer and recently founded a company called A Venetian Design that produces a line of sophisticated glassware. "I used to design things for my family and friends," says Gilberto. "When the demand became greater than expected, we decided to get serious." Every piece, whether it be a cup, a candleholder or a carafe, is hand-blown in Murano.



UNTIL WORLD WAR I, THE PALAZZO WAS HOME TO 88 PEOPLE. "EIGHT OF THEM WERE FAMILY MEMBERS, AND THE REST WERE SERVANTS AND CRAFTSMEN."

A series of large glasses displaying the facade of a Venetian palazzo are hand-engraved using a painstakingly slow technique that is nearly extinct.

Giberto says his father, a high-ranking officer in the Italian navy, imparted to him an unusually stern education: "I remember him coming into the nursery when we were kids just to make sure I washed with icy cold water, while my sisters were allowed to have warm baths." He blames that strictness for making him feel what he describes as "a manic pressure and responsibility about keeping up family traditions and a sense of place." His heightened sense of duty includes a lifelong commitment to holding on to the family palazzo.

At 18, Giberto persuaded a bank to give him a huge mortgage in order to repair the palazzo's leaking roof, which in turn gave him leverage to renegotiate rental fees with his tenants. (With his family no longer living there, the palazzo had been divided into apartments.) By then, most of the palace's furniture and paintings had been sold in an effort to keep up with the exorbitant expense of owning a palazzo in Venice. "The problem here is not just the salt air and the humidity that eats up the walls," says Giberto. It's the 18th-century terrazzo floors, the frescoed paintings on the walls and everything else that requires continuous care and attention. "Up to World War I," he says in an attempt to put things in perspective, "there were 88 people living in this palazzo. Eight of them were family members, and the rest were servants and craftsmen. Bianca and I," he adds in what sounds like a massive understatement, "have learned to live more efficiently."

When they moved into the attic in 1989, Bianca was just 23 and her husband five years older. Their presence quickly transformed the rambling palace into a comfortable home. Bianca planted roses and wisteria in the garden, and the attic became crowded with little Arrivabenes, their voices echoing in the hollow vastness of the rooms below. The magnitude of owning such a grand home, however, became clear three years ago, when the tenants, mostly aristocrats and academics who had occupied the main floor for decades, left. "Suddenly we had all this empty space to deal with," says Bianca. With the help of friends like painter-in-residence Davide Battistin and several local technicians and craftsmen, the couple restored the palazzo to its original grandeur.

Nineteenth-century Murano chandeliers were dismantled and carefully polished. Miles of delicate stucco decorations on the walls were repaired and cleaned. The Tiepolo fresco covering the ceiling below a bathroom also needed work. "One day I left the tap running," Bianca recalls, still cringing. "Water flooded through the painting and onto the floor. I remember thinking, 'If the marriage survives this disaster, it will survive anything.'" Most important, the ancient wiring was replaced by a state-of-the-art computerized system that is put to full use when the Arrivabenes host a party or rent out the palazzo for an event.

Sitting cross-legged on the floor in the unfurnished room under the restored Tiepolo ceiling, Bianca delves into what Venice and this palace mean to her. "I grew up on a farm in Tuscany with my father and my younger brother and sister," says Bianca, whose parents separated when she was nine. (Her mother, the beautiful Claude d'Orléans, a descendant of the French royal family, recently married for the third time.) "I have happy memories of days bicycling in a landscape of wheat fields and olive groves." Living in Venice, she says, gives her a similar sense of inner joy. As for the palazzo, "I love the story," she says simply.

Meanwhile, Bianca has learned to distance herself from the complexities of her clan's emotionally charged history. "So many people have written and analyzed it," she says, "there is not much left to discover." By creating a brood of her own and working with her husband during their hands-on restoration of Palazzo Papadopoli, Bianca has created a family narrative that seems closer to her nature. "This is a private story," Bianca concludes, "and, to my eyes at least, a more gripping one." ●



This page, clockwise from top left: A view of the garden; glassware from Giberto's line, A Venetian Design; Bianca, in a Prada blouse, and Giberto. Opposite: The ballroom with its two magnificent Murano chandeliers.

