



EXCLUSIVE

STUNNING

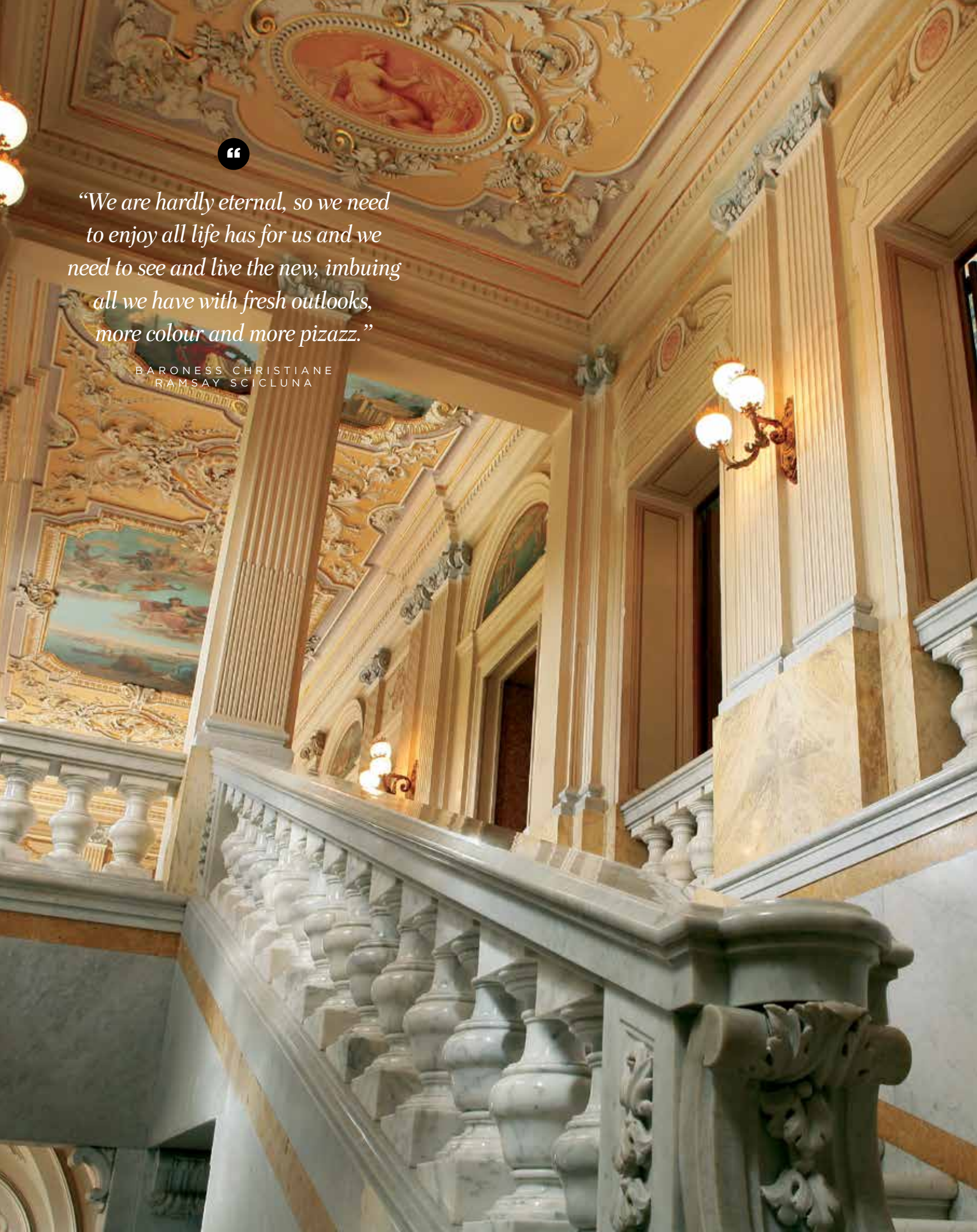
At Any Age

story VICTOR CALLEJA

photos JEAN MARC ZERFA

I have always been fascinated by nobility which conjures up a world long gone of things done well, of dedication to the arts, of manners unsurpassed, all melding in tasteful delicacy with a hint of ennui. All done, even the ennui, with commitment. I always thought this was part of a dream that has now faded and become an anachronistic icon of days gone by. When I enter the world of Palazzo Parisio in Naxxar I realise that nobility in its pure form is still alive, smiling and laughing out loud.





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“We are hardly eternal, so we need to enjoy all life has for us and we need to see and live the new, imbuing all we have with fresh outlooks, more colour and more pizzazz.”

BARONESS CHRISTIANE
RAMSAY SCICLUNA



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I meet - let me give her full rightful name - Christiane Ramsay Scicluna, Baroness of Tabria. She tells me to call her Muffy because that is what she is to all her friends, but I hesitate and still refer to her as the Baroness.

We meet to discuss the Palazzo, its lasting power, her passion for food, gardens and people. I, the clod who is far from noble by birth, am daunted by all this. I am perplexed how to refer to her daughter and how to put my inquisitive, boring questions to get some insightful comments about Malta, its soul and the hospitality business in general.

The place is aflush with taste and everything around me is spotless and perfectly done. The Baroness is unmistakably noble in her ways, in her speech and in her taste: but my worries about it being a daunting affair quickly disappear, and I realise I can relax, feel at home and fire away my intrusive questions.

The Baroness does not bite. She barks her laughter, she flings her arms around, she talks incessantly about her ideas, ideals and love of

beauty and she actually explains to uncouth me that she is daunted herself by my presence, wondering how she is expected to answer my questions. ‘Be yourself,’ I hear myself tell her, now at my ease and bewitched by her presence and contagious flamboyance.

Her parting shot at the end of our meeting was “I do hope I didn’t sound like a dense platinum blonde.”. Is this a façade of put-me-down to get people to fall in love with her or is it really her, full of self-deprecation? To me she comes through as a lovely piece of art—with a wonderfully ornate frame to go perfectly with the art at the palazzo.

What is amazing is that this woman started off alone at the palazzo, with just a friend to help her. She managed to convert a jewel of the national heritage—one intrinsically tied to her family as it was built by her great grandfather—into a place to visit and view not just its quirky beauty but also enjoy coffee, tea, delicious food and hold events to impress. She did this and more, all in her baroque way, with pizzazz and brio.



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Today Palazzo Parisio has evolved from a small enterprise run by the Baroness and her daughter Justine, into a truly important part of what cosmopolitan Malta offers—a classy place with good food from morning to the evening, in surroundings really fit for lords, ladies and people of leisure—and business. There are now quite a few people assisting the place to keep it going at its established pace: still laid back but with a sprinkling of idiosyncrasies that dazzle.

We waft around admiring the whole edifice with its baroque, rococo and myriad touches, a truly eclectic display of fun and games with putti looking on and paintings of dowagers in grand frames lording over us and enjoying the whole scene of vitality. The Baroness—“oh please,” she pleads, “do remember to call me Muffy”—talks eloquently of how she wanted to save this place. Until she took it over and gave it a new look and new, vibrant life, it was rather an old relic, a piece of history going decrepit and wasted.

“Life and buildings,” she tells me in a conspiratorial voice, “need new energy at all points of life. We are hardly eternal, so we need to enjoy all life has for us and we need to see and live the new, imbuing all we have with fresh outlooks, more colour and more pizzazz.” As she says this her daughter, Justine, joins us and the conversation about how we renew ourselves takes on a new light—Justine, I realise as I speak to her in depth, is hardly her mother or a double of her and yet in her own way it is the Baroness herself but transformed, new and with a difference.

They are two inseparable and successful women tied, it would seem, at the hip. They exude charm, elegance and wonderful Italianate garrulousness and joie de vivre. They are passion personified. The daughter is less effusive, more rational, more reflective. Unlike her mother, she does not speak in superlatives. But both are fascinating.





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*Life is so full of diversity—
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colour, design or ideas.*



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The mummy and daughter duo act as if a few months of age separate them and nothing can come between them. Like Louis the palazzo cat, who in his own way exudes an air of mystery and charm, if confronted I have no doubt they can put you in your rightful place.

They now run Palazzo Parisio together, in harmony that sometimes sports arguments and a few catty looks or words, but on the whole in complete synch with each other. They both believe earnestly in one strong point which comes naturally to them—to extend what they have at home, their own way of life, to the places they run and in all they do or ever want to do. To them living the dream of being hospitable is not something they need to practise—it just comes naturally and is a part of their life.

Both believe more should be done to turn all our places into beautiful ones, especially those which are used as venues for people to eat, drink, meet up or celebrate significant events. All should be adorned with individual style—this is after all what the man behind the palazzo did: he had his own style and built his palace in that mode, even if some parts are considered overdone.

Both Justine and Muffy believe that is the way life is—some like it and some like it less, or even hate it. Life is so full of diversity—beauty lies in diversity be it colour, design or ideas. Their philosophy is to have several different aspects of life, colour, architecture, food and living, which will give us all a better outlook on visual style, if not make us better humans. These are not just words—their attitude can be seen and experienced in all the rooms of the palazzo, garden, café, restaurant and boutique.

What is amazing about this duo is that they differ so much but then talk the same language in different degrees and both finish off each other's sentences, adding to the flow. "Food and service must be passionate as without passion there is just blandness. For blandness there are many places and destinations available," they intone, practically singing out of the same hymn book.





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They were both educated in England, both lived abroad for a long time, but both have a way of speaking that fuses the British, Italian and Maltese way. They talk passionately about Malta and all that it offers—both to locals and to foreigners living here or just visiting. They believe Malta has a legacy, a history, an astounding connection to art and hospitality, which they want to convey in all they do. And they are certainly doing this at the Palazzo.

The women at the helm are hardly just talk and no walk. They literally walk you around till you feel giddy. The place is stuffed full of gracious and mind-sweeping artefacts and enough gilding to rival Versailles and its famed Hall of Mirrors.

When I mention Versailles the baroness sighs deeply and appears to swoon rather dramatically, exclaiming, “Ah Versailles! How wonderful, how wonderfully ornate and beautiful. We were there some time ago and amongst all that antique splendour was the most outrageously modern and incongruous pink dog—a sculpture by the inimitable and deeply controversial Jeff Koons.

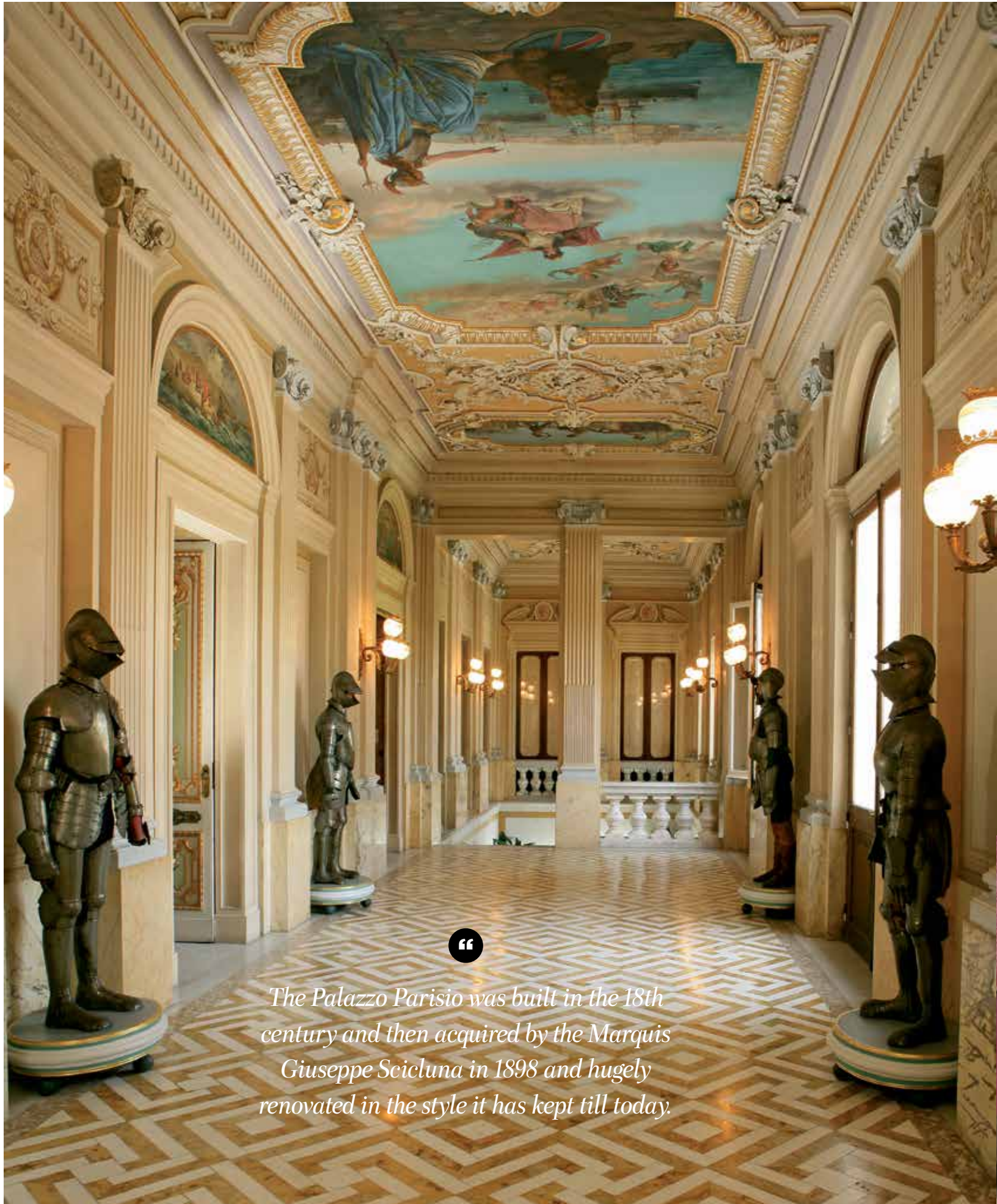
“They had it on display for a time and it was sensational. The old with the new—the outré of today with what was outré yesterday and they work together perfectly fighting for their own space yet giving each other more scope and giving all viewers a visual feast. One needs to defy old ideas with the new, even have a bit of a peculiar feel which makes you stand out. I love this, and I love art to challenge, to add a bit of newness to what is traditional and acceptable.”

Talk of the new moves on to talk of new projects while art, even the whimsical, keeps coming at you. There is a wall with an array of hearts—little ceramic hearts which are beautiful, but which also have a deeper meaning, or at least a naughtier feel than what greets your eye at first sight. Some hearts which were designed by the Austrian artist and ceramist, Margit Herz, are just love offerings—in brilliant red or gold. Some are takes on the shape of the heart with posteriors and breasts making them ever so wickedly playful and talking points.



“*I love this, and I love art to challenge, to add a bit of newness to what is traditional and acceptable.*”

JUSTINE PERGOLA



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The Palazzo Parisio was built in the 18th century and then acquired by the Marquis Giuseppe Scicluna in 1898 and hugely renovated in the style it has kept till today.



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This nod to what is a perfect shape—the heart as envisaged by artists and cupids—but with a new twist is what they attempt to do and succeed grandly. All is like an extension of their own life, handled with loving care and part of the noble offering.

Muffy and Justine are constantly planning new ventures, and a small hotel annex has been on their mind for a number of years. Justine says that the “hotel will be a truly boutique one. We have the plans ready and an Italian designer who loves life, architecture and all things Maltese came over to Malta and lived with us for an extended time. He loved and breathed our style and he has come up with a concept which is a way forward for us. Anyone living with us in the Palazzo annex will feel they are part of our fabric and will be able to roam the gardens and eat at the palazzo, to live just like my great-grandfather did: in style, grandeur and surrounded by warmth.”

The Palazzo Parisio was built in the 18th century and then acquired by the Marquis Giuseppe Scicluna in 1898 and hugely renovated in the style it has kept till today. The Palazzo Parisio experience has a deeply evocative brand name associated with it, the Luna brand.

Luna, moon in Italian, is the last part of the family name, Scicluna, and sounds ever so poetical. To me the name has a beautifully sonorous sound and evokes lush gardens, lazy evenings and glorious days waiting for the moon to add its soft sparkle. It is a name that was chosen by Justine who often sits there taking it all in and contributing just enough from the whole scenario to articulate what her mother would have insinuated in her baroque way.

I came to Palazzo Parisio expecting to be overwhelmed. I leave immersed in a love of life and all it offers in a mesmerising way.





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PALAZZO PARISIO GARDENS



by Clare Littlewood

Have you ever seen huge stone arches soaring skywards? You will when you visit the extraordinary gardens nurtured by Baroness Christiane Ramsay Scicluna behind the home so lovingly rebuilt and extended by her great-grandfather between 1900 and 1906. These monumental gates seem weightless, borne upwards by carved stone wings at their summit. They were designed by the Milanese architect Carlo Sada, responsible for the decoration of the Opera House in Catania, along with the original garden layout and other architectural features.

When the reconstruction by Marquis Scicluna was completed the grounds were much more extensive than now but were later reduced in size, leaving two distinct gardens. The first is formal and walled adjoining the palace leading into a luxuriant second garden beyond, full of botanical treasures, both Mediterranean and exotic. The first rigorously symmetrical garden is divided into four parterres with a central pathway, the perfect setting for fairytale weddings. On one side it is flanked by a wall of exuberantly cascading bougainvilleas, an explosion of colour. The other side is enclosed by a magnificent eighteenth century *orangerie*, unusually constructed entirely in stone, containing a grotto dating back to the seventeenth century,

housing an elaborate water feature, no longer in use, which sprayed water from every stone within. The Baroness would dearly love to restore this and to heat the building to house exotic plants and birds, inspired by Lady Walton at La Mortella on Ischia. The conservatory was built in 1733 by the Grand Master Manuel de Vilhena to overwinter the citrus trees grown to supply oranges and lemons for the house.

This garden leads into the second one with a large central pool, home to a flourishing harem of female turtles splashing and sunbathing happily amongst the carp and waterlilies. The Baroness makes sure she finds time to visit her “girls” and feed them titbits of smoked salmon from the

kitchen. A tracery of symmetrical stone and cobble pathways winds around this pond and through important collections of informally planted Citrus trees, exquisite Brugmansia of all colours, over 65 varieties of Hibiscus, Strelitzia, Duranta erecta, Magnolia grandiflora, Ceiba speciosa, Jacaranda mimosaeifolia, Araucaria, Erithrina cristagalli and a multitude of other delights. Their common names evoke a world of beauty and fascination: Angels’ trumpets, Brazilian Skyflower, Bird of Paradise, Coral Tree, Blue Potato Bush, Soap Tree, Mexican Fan Palm, Norfolk Island Pine, Caviar lime, Buddha’s fingers, Prickly Pears, to name just a few, offering colour and perfume all year round from every corner of the world.

The second “soaring” gate opens onto an enchanted olive grove of magical secular trees leading to a belvedere overlooking the bay where Saint Paul the Apostle, the spiritual father of the Maltese, was said to have been shipwrecked, documented in the New Testament.

An intricate watering system runs below the gardens and under the palace itself consisting of extensive waterways, a cistern and wells which keep the garden cool in times of drought. The stone removed from the ground to create these waterways was used to build the palazzo.

The garden is a proud member of the prestigious *Grandi Giardini Italiani* network (Great Italian Gardens) which rarely extends its membership beyond the borders of Italy, the only garden in Malta to bear this honour.

The stroke of luck that saved this magnificent palace and its gardens from neglect and inevitable decay is the passion and dedication of Scicluna’s heiress, Baroness Christiane, now lovingly assisted by her daughter Justine. Together they devote every waking moment to battling against the elements: poor soil, African heat, scarce water and no professional gardeners, to make the grounds buzz with happy activity, refreshing their charm and appeal, while great-grandfather smiles on them from high, hopefully Saint Paul too.

