



The interior of Casa Mollino, an 18th-century villa located in Turin, Italy, which stands testimony to the life and work of one of Italy's most influential 20th-century designers. © Bart Kiggen

Carlo Mollino by Emily King

There is something odd about Turin. With the Alps looming on the western horizon of its main squares and the fast-flowing river Po hemming it at the east, the city feels contained by nature, yet it has been a cauldron of human industry of all kinds. On one hand it is home to the celebrated car manufacturer Fiat, while on the other it is said to be a focus for the occult. Some say that the entrance to the underworld lies under its Piazza Statuto.

Contemporary visitors wishing to connect with Turin's more enigmatic side are strongly recommended to visit the former apartment of the brilliant Carlo Mollino on the Via Giovanni Francesco Napione, by the river near the city centre. Born in 1905, Mollino worked as an architect, engineer and designer, while also being a prolific photographer and photographic historian, an expert skier, a daredevil pilot and an occasional novelist. He occupied the Casa Mollino from 1960 to his sudden death from a heart attack in 1973, completing its extraordinary Baroque surreal design in 1968, yet is said never to have spent a night there. Restored and maintained by the father-and-son curatorial team Fulvio and Napoleone Ferrari, its interiors were used primarily as a photographic set. After Mollino's death 2,000 Polaroids of women were found stored in boxes in the apartment.

Writing in the architecture magazine *Domus* about an earlier incarnation of the Casa Mollino, the Casa Miller that Mollino completed in 1936, Carlo Levi argued the space was not so much a conventional design as "a novel made of walls and objects, shapes and spaces," its function being "the creation and description of characters". "This is a



closed world," wrote Levi, "We are on stage or within a chapter. The door is locked; what is outside is totally arbitrary." The same is true of the Casa Mollino and, although we can only know the earlier apartment through photographs, it seems that they have much in common. Both sets of rooms fused sleek modernist flourishes with a tendency toward the Turinese Baroque and a decidedly surreal sensibility. If anything, Casa Mollino takes Casa Miller's decorative tropes and ramps them up to the point of claustrophobia. Mollino is said to have taken inspiration from the writer Joris-Karl Huysmans, in particular his book *Against Nature*. "Already, he was dreaming of a refined solitude, a comfortable desert, a motionless ark in which to seek refuge from the unending deluge of human stupidity," wrote Huysmans of the hero of that book Duc Jean Floressas des Esseintes.

Visitors to Casa Mollino are taken on a tour which culminates in a small bedroom furnished with a *bateau lit* surrounded by swagged curtains. The room is papered in a leopard-skin print and on one side there is a wall of framed butterflies. The Ferraris link the butterflies to Mollino's photographic models, suggesting both represent armies of women who were intended to accompany the designer in the afterlife. The costumes shown in Mollino's Polaroids range from filmy underwear to knee-length skirts, high-neck shirts and sensible shoes via various fancy dress adventures including cabaret, can-can and seven veils. Posed against the apartment's mirrors, curtains and photographic murals, the women place their bodies in what appear to be very precisely described shapes. Taken together, the images are evidence of a sustained and nuanced erotic vision.

According to Mollino's biographer Giovanni Brino, that eroticism was the "leitmotiv in [the designer's] entire body of work." "Like all of Mollino's genuine interests, eroticism, in fact, permeates every field of activity in which the architect was engaged," he wrote. Mollino's most famous furniture designs are distinctly sensual – an upholstered reclining chair resting on what appear to be a pair of outstretched legs, or a glass coffee table supported on a slim acrobatic bentwood frame, for example. Likewise there is a sexual charge to his architecture: the long, winding passage that climaxed in the ballroom of the Lutrario dance hall, or the curve of the proscenium of Teatro Regio. Mollino combined his erotic imagination with technical innovation in his work at every scale.

In spite of owning and decorating three ostensibly domestic properties, the *casas* Miller and Mollino and the Villa Zaira in the hills outside Turin, Mollino never moved from his parents' home. His father Eugenio Mollino was a successful engineer who professed disapproval of his son's ventures, yet continued to fund his eccentricities. On his father's death in 1953, Mollino took up motor racing and stunt flying, applying his characteristic voluptuous swoops to the outline of a car bonnet, or the trajectory of an airplane. Decades before, on his graduation from Turin's Polytechnic, Mollino's fellow students had teased him for his alternate bursts of "ferocious activity" and "lethargic incubation". This appears to have been his working method throughout his life. When there was a story to tell, be it sporting, photographic or architectural, Mollino threw his all into its expression. As for what he did the rest of the time behind the closed doors of the Casa Mollino, that remains largely mysterious.

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