

# Marella Agnelli, Society's 'Last Swan' and a Passionate Gardener, Is Dead at 91

Marella Agnelli and her husband, Giovanni Agnelli, in 1988. Alberto Ramella/Associated Press

By **Bonnie Wertheim**

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Marella Agnelli, a descendant of Neapolitan nobility who lived a rarefied life of palatial estates, ornamental gardens, fine art, high fashion and lofty society, died on Saturday at her home in Turin, Italy. She was 91.

The death was announced by the Agnelli family in a statement.

With her husband, Giovanni Agnelli of the Fiat car manufacturing empire, Mrs. Agnelli owned more than [a dozen homes](#), including an estate in Turin, a ski lodge in the Italian Alps and a Park Avenue apartment in New York. She cultivated an esteemed social circle that included the Kennedys, Henry Kissinger, Katharine Graham and Truman Capote. The couple's closets were filled with immaculate clothes.

Mrs. Agnelli's beauty captivated the imagination of artists and fashion designers. Andy Warhol and Richard Avedon created portraits of her. She was among Valentino Garavani's earliest and most beloved customers. Mr. Capote counted her as one of his "Swans," the stylish and wealthy women with whom he surrounded himself. He [reportedly](#) told [Ms. Graham, the Washington Post publisher](#) at the time, that if Mrs. Agnelli and Babe Paley, another of his socialite muses, "were both in Tiffany's window, Marella would be a little more expensive."

Mrs. Agnelli remained active and creative in her later years, purchasing and restoring a dilapidated villa in Marrakesh, Morocco, publishing an autobiographical coffee table book and appearing in an HBO documentary about the life of her husband, in 2003.

She was born Princess Marella Caracciolo di Castagneto on May 4, 1927, in Florence. Her mother, the former Margaret Clarke of Peoria, Ill., was a wealthy Anglo-American expatriate, the daughter of a distiller; her father, Filippo Caracciolo, was part of a Neapolitan noble family.

The Agnellis in Rome in 1954. Zuma Press Inc/Alamy

In a first-person article for Vanity Fair in 2014, Mrs. Agnelli described the company her family kept as "a set of people who spent their days visiting one

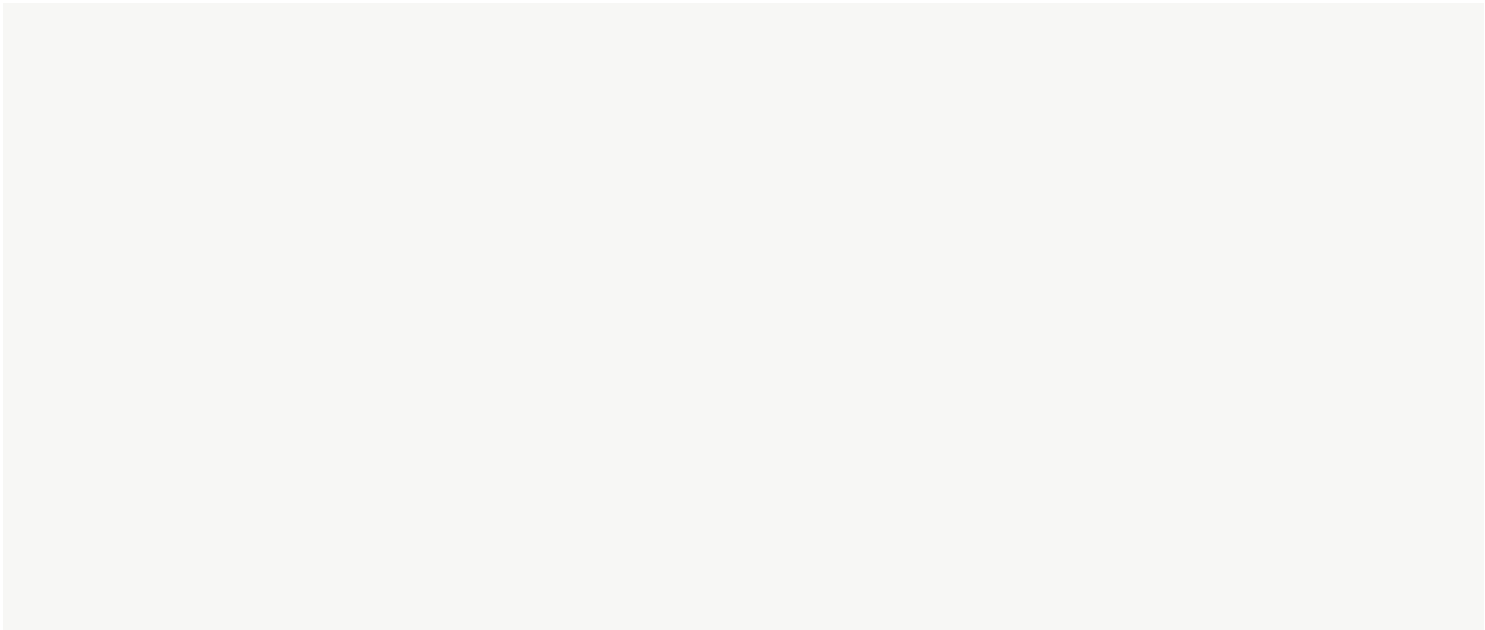
another's exquisitely refined gardens and crumbling villas on the hills of Florence and getting into interminable philosophical disquisitions.”

Marella's world expanded with her education. She studied art and design at the Académie des Beaux-Arts and Académie Julian in Paris before moving to New York in the early 1950s. There she modeled in exchange for the chance to learn about photography from Erwin Blumenfeld, a Vogue contributor.

The life of Mr. Agnelli, known as Gianni to his friends, seemed in line with the adventurous one she hoped to lead. She had heard stories about his service in World War II from friends and knew well of his tight-knit family's penchant for glamour and speed.

Fiat, the company Mr. Agnelli's grandfather founded in 1899 in Turin, had experienced tremendous growth after the war during a period known as Italy's “miracolo economico,” or economic miracle. Accordingly, the Agnellis insulated their lives with excess: parties, villas, yachts, cars, women.

Gianni, the eldest of the seven Agnelli children and the head of the family since his parents' deaths, had a reputation for being a playboy and had frequently been mentioned in gossip columns. So when he and Marella got engaged in 1953, it was a relief to his siblings.



The Agnellis' villa in the hills of Italy's Piedmont region. Horst P. Horst/Condé Nast, via Getty Images

The couple married on Nov. 19, 1953, in the chapel of [Osthoffen castle](#) in northeast France. Marella wore a white satin Balenciaga gown with sleeves and a long veil, Gianni a tailcoat and pinstripe pants. He supported himself on crutches, still healing from a car accident the year before. It was the first of many well-documented appearances they would make as a stylish couple.

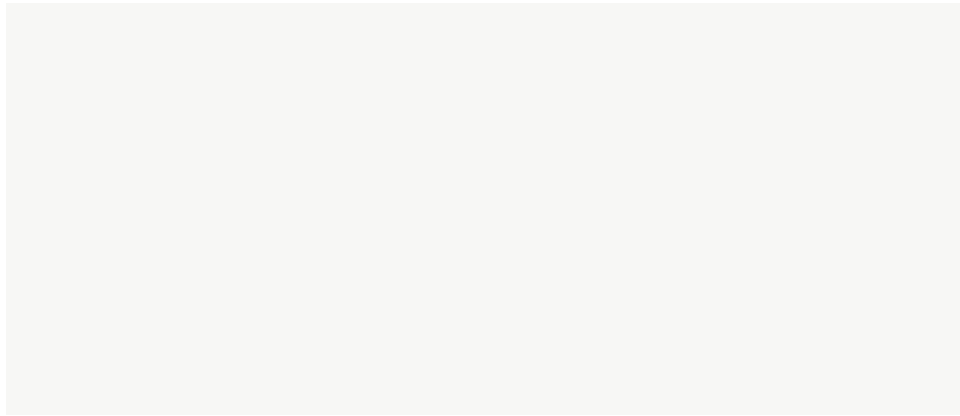
Another image of Mrs. Agnelli, from December of that year, would help define an era of beauty. Richard Avedon shot her in half profile, wearing a strapless gown that accentuated her long neck. The black-and-white image, which is in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, [has been compared to a](#)

## [Modigliani painting.](#)

After the wedding, Mrs. Agnelli was not eager to take on the role of housewife. She had recently spent 18 months apprenticing with Blumenfeld and accepted a reporting job with Condé Nast, which she abandoned after the wedding.

What she did love, though, was the leisure and the luxury. In the Vanity Fair article, she recalled a shopping trip in Paris shortly after the wedding. Mrs. Agnelli had booked an overnight train from Turin, and when she boarded her sleeping car, she found that it was full of her home comforts: monogrammed towels, her favorite toiletries, even fresh flowers.

“This, I soon discovered, was how the Agnellis traveled when they took a night train,” Mrs. Agnelli wrote. “This was also when I realized I had entered a very different way of life from the one I was used to.”



Marella Agnelli during the funeral service for her husband, Gianni Agnelli, of the Fiat car manufacturing empire, in Turin, Italy, in 2003. Agence France-Presse

She developed the Agnellis’ taste for the finer things in life — custom garments, formal dinner parties, designer furnishings — while maintaining a relaxed home atmosphere. After a tour of the extravagant apartment of the billionaire couple Sid and Mercedes Bass, Mrs. Agnelli [reportedly remarked](#): “It will take her another lifetime to understand wicker.”

The couple had their first child, Edoardo, in 1954, and Margherita followed the next year. Mrs. Agnelli is survived by her daughter, Margherita Agnelli de Pahlen, her brother Nicola Caracciolo di Castagneto and eight grandchildren. Her son died in 2000.

As parents Marella and Gianni continued to refine their image as a power couple. They acquired an expansive contemporary art collection that included works by Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg and Frank Stella; yachted up and down the Amalfi Coast with John and Jacqueline Kennedy and swam in the Adriatic Sea with Mr. Capote; collected cars, yachts and private planes; and cultivated acres of pristine gardens at their several homes on three continents.

Gardening was one of Mrs. Agnelli’s lifelong passions. She spent decades working with the English garden designer Russell Page to perfect her family’s 25 acres at Villar Perosa in Turin, and later got involved with the Italian Environmental Fund, an organization focused on preserving historic landscapes. Her love of landscape architecture was cataloged in two books that

she co-wrote, “Gardens of the Italian Villas” (1987) and “The Agnelli Gardens at Villar Perosa: Two Centuries of a Family Retreat” (1998).

In 2002 the couple founded [Pinacoteca Giovanni e Marella Agnelli](#), a Renzo Piano-designed museum in Turin housing their collection of works by Matisse, Modigliani, Renoir and Manet, among others. Mr. Agnelli [died of prostate cancer](#) the next year at 81.

After her husband’s death, Mrs. Agnelli took on one of her most ambitious projects: the reconstruction of Ain Kassimou, a villa in Marrakesh that she had purchased from the Hermès family. The interior designer Bill Willis and the landscape architect Madison Cox helped her turn the property into an expertly manicured garden estate. Its renovation and cultivation, along with those of her other homes, was chronicled in Mrs. Agnelli’s 2014 autobiography, “The Last Swan.”

“One is never really ‘done’ with a garden, just as one is never ‘done’ with life,” Mrs. Agnelli wrote in *Vanity Fair*, just before her book’s publication. “Day by day and step by step, one just keeps on finding new and clever ways to make them flourish, both in sunshine and in storm.”

Gaia Pianigiani and Vanessa Friedman contributed reporting.

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