

ART & EVENTS

WHAT'S NEW, NOTEWORTHY AND ENTICING IN THE CULTURAL WORLD

Making scents

The story of Fragonard, one of France's oldest fragrance houses, is told in an assemblage of personal treasures redolent of the past.

PHOTOGRAPHER: MARTIN MORRELL PRODUCER: CAROLYN QUARTERMAINE
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A fresco forms the backdrop at one end of an atmospheric former photographer's studio in the town of Grasse, south of France. Here lie beloved pieces of family history and antiques collected by the Costa family of French perfumery Fragonard, and curated by artist and art director Carolyn Quartermaine. On the table are books about perfume alongside a drawing by Fragonard matriarch Hélène Costa, and a length of silk ribbon taken from her nearby Musée Provençal du Costume et du Bijou. **Details, last pages.**

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Opposite: Quartermaine played with colour by mixing elements from the Fragonard archives, such as photographs and a 17th-century gilt frame, with pieces of hand-dyed silk. On the rack hang three rare 18th-century silk jackets in terracotta and ochre hues. Some Provençale hats rest on the floor, while KnollStudio 'Bertoia' side chairs add a little mid-century modern. **This page:** a selection of 18th- and 19th-century perfume bottles is arranged with a picture of Hélène Costa at the beach, a tin of fine French tea Mariage Frères and pieces of vintage fabric.



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Above: antique fragrance labels with an engraved 18th-century Turkish silver perfume bottle and a pear-cut crystal bottle with vermeil base and neck from the 19th century.

Above right: an intricately hand-embroidered wedding quilt from Marseilles depicts iconography related to happiness and fertility, behind a gilded rack displaying a 19th-century linen christening dress; an antique Provençale chair completes the nostalgic mood. **Opposite:** armfuls of *Mimosa* flowers, for which Grasse is known, form a backdrop to heirlooms and memorabilia. On the trestle table are perfume bottles arranged in a small travel box and a *florentin*, a vessel for distilling essential oils.

WHEN YOU THINK of fragrance, it is impossible not to think first of France, then its perfume capital, the southern hilltop town of Grasse, and next, undoubtedly, one of the country’s most formative and longest-running fragrance houses, the four-generations-old Fragonard.

Some may argue that Fragonard (named after the celebrated 18th-century painter and Grasse native Jean-Honoré Fragonard by its founder Eugène Fuchs in 1926) is Grasse, especially now that much of the land used for flower growing, which once made the region so famous, has been sold and given over to the demands of expensive real estate and tourism. Indeed, without the passion and dedication of the Fragonard family — now under the guidance of Fuchs’s great-granddaughters Anne, Agnès and Françoise Costa — who continue to celebrate the history of the area, much of its heritage would surely be lost. The Costas have established several museums showcasing the rich cultural history of the region, including thousands of artefacts that belonged to their father, accomplished collector Jean-François Costa.

“We were born into a family of collectors,” explains Agnès Costa of the vast collections of paintings, costumes, silverware and perfume paraphernalia spanning over 3000 years — including fine artworks, antique bottles, household artefacts and ancient copper stills — that are displayed throughout the family’s museums. As well as in their own shops and factories, collections are housed in nearby landmark buildings in both Grasse and Paris. The most famous are the Musée de Parfums, located on the first floor of the original Fragonard perfume factory in Grasse (opened by Jean-François in 1978), and their mother Hélène’s Musée Provençal du Costume et du Bijou, filled with rare antique Provençale clothing and jewellery, established in a nearby 18th-century private mansion in 1997.

Enter the artist and art director Carolyn Quartermaine, friends with the daughters for more than two decades, and a new exhibition space — an 18th-century townhouse called the Hôtel de Villeneuve — to share the personal heritage of a family that has become synonymous with the world of perfume. “Part of what we do has always been about sharing our past, culture and know-how with our visitors,” says Costa. “We are so very aware of how lucky we are to have inherited this great culture and life in such a special spot in France, and we want as many people as possible to experience it with us.”

The townhouse, one of Grasse’s most elegant buildings, was bought eight years ago with the intention of creating office space for the Fragonard staff, but the building proved too special for such an ordinary purpose. “After seeing how beautiful it was, we thought that, given our culture is to always share our places with our visitors, we should open it to the public,” says Costa. >



Quartermaine likes to play with unexpected textures, **above**, such as empty gilded frames to accentuate the pieces on show. "It provides a different perspective and way of seeing things that might not otherwise catch our eye," she says. On the floor, objects for her exhibition are being laid out and considered. "Pinning and hanging different objects together, rather than leaving it all perfectly framed, implies a sense of the story continuing, hinting at the next chapter, a possible next discovery," says Quartermaine. Pictured, **above right**, are family photographs; fabric dyed by Quartermaine; travel tickets; and a little gold bag from the family's archives. **Details, last pages.**

< Here, the family's collections of paintings, including many by Fragonard, alongside works by Marguerite Gérard and Jean-Baptiste Mallet, are on permanent display. But it was the photographer's studio in the townhouse's garden, untouched for about 90 years, that took Quartermaine's breath away.

"It has a real feeling of being like Matisse's studio with its grey, faded walls — a grey you can't fake — and original *tomette* [hexagonal tile] floor, palm trees outside the window and a dreamy sense of what one imagines being in the south of France is all about," she says. She goes on to explain that until very recently, the origins of the studio were unknown. "I was talking with a dealer friend of mine who had come to Grasse and he told me it and the house had belonged to a local banker, Jean Luce, who had also dabbled on the side in photography."

For the next year, Quartermaine's vignettes from the family's vast personal archive, until now pretty much untouched and composed by her within the faded walls of the studio, are on show in the townhouse's museum. Making use of her curatorial eye, Quartermaine has mixed collages of personal mementos, photographs and *objets* (many on loan from the family's other museums that are not always on display) with splashes of colour and modern touches to make each little collection feel light, fresh and inviting. "I didn't want to do a purely historical display," says Quartermaine. "My way of framing and using colour brings in a fresh eye so that people come to it anew. My work is never solely nostalgic."

Quartermaine confesses that bringing together the exhibition, which opened in April and will run for the next year, was extremely emotional. "I've been finding my own story amongst their story," she says. "There are moments where I've had a good cry because it's just touched that spot that feels personal but joyous, too, because of what has been and what can be passed on. I'd like to think that visitors will feel the same way — that they will look at it and remember their own pasts and relate to the passion and dynamism of this unique family. They have relentless energy, generosity and humanity, which shows through in how this family has lived, and continues to live, over many generations."

The exhibition is also a timely homage to the driving force of the Costas, father Jean-François, who died last year at 92. As Quartermaine went through boxes upon boxes of books, photographs, theatre and train tickets, even Agnès's sketches as a child, a whole journey of a family came to life: "It is the small, perhaps even insignificant details, like a signature on a letter or a stamp, that bring their story together, that reveal their passion for beauty and hard work and the strong ties of family," says Quartermaine. "Everything the Costa family does and stands for comes out of this heritage." *Musée Fragonard, Hôtel de Villeneuve, 14 Rue Jean Ossola, 06130 Grasse, France, (+33) 4 93 36 02 07.*