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Ravenna's New Museum: Lord Byron, Il Risorgimento, and Dolls

Palazzo Guiccioli immortalizes the romance between England's great Romantic-era poet and an Italian countess



Italian Hours

Lucy Gordan



The entrance to Palazzo Guiccioli in Ravenna, where Byron lived from 1819-21 (Photo: Emanuele Rambaldi, Castrocaro, 2024)

On November 29 the first museum in the world dedicated to England's great Romantic-era poet Lord George Gordon Byron opened in Ravenna. It's an appropriate date since 2024 is the 200th anniversary of his death on April 19 probably from rheumatic fever, in Missolonghi, Greece where he, a champion of liberty, was fighting for Greece's independence from Turkish oppression.

The Museum is located in the center of Ravenna in the vast 16th-century *Palazzo Guiccioli* (Via Cavour 54). Byron, flamboyant, breath-takingly handsome, and forever restless, lived here blissfully from 1819 to 1821 with his soul-mate mistress Teresa Gamba Guiccioli. She'd already been living here with her husband, Count Alessandro Guiccioli (1761-1840), a miserly widower always in search of money, after her father, Count Ruggero Gamba, had arranged their marriage. Teresa was 18 years old; Guiccioli almost 60.



Basket belonging to Teresa Guiccioli (Photo: Emanuele Rambaldi, Castrocaro, 2024)

The lovers first met in April 2, 1819 in Venice at the “salon” of Countess Benzoni. Accompanied by her husband, Teresa had been married only a few months and was three months pregnant, but it was love at first sight.

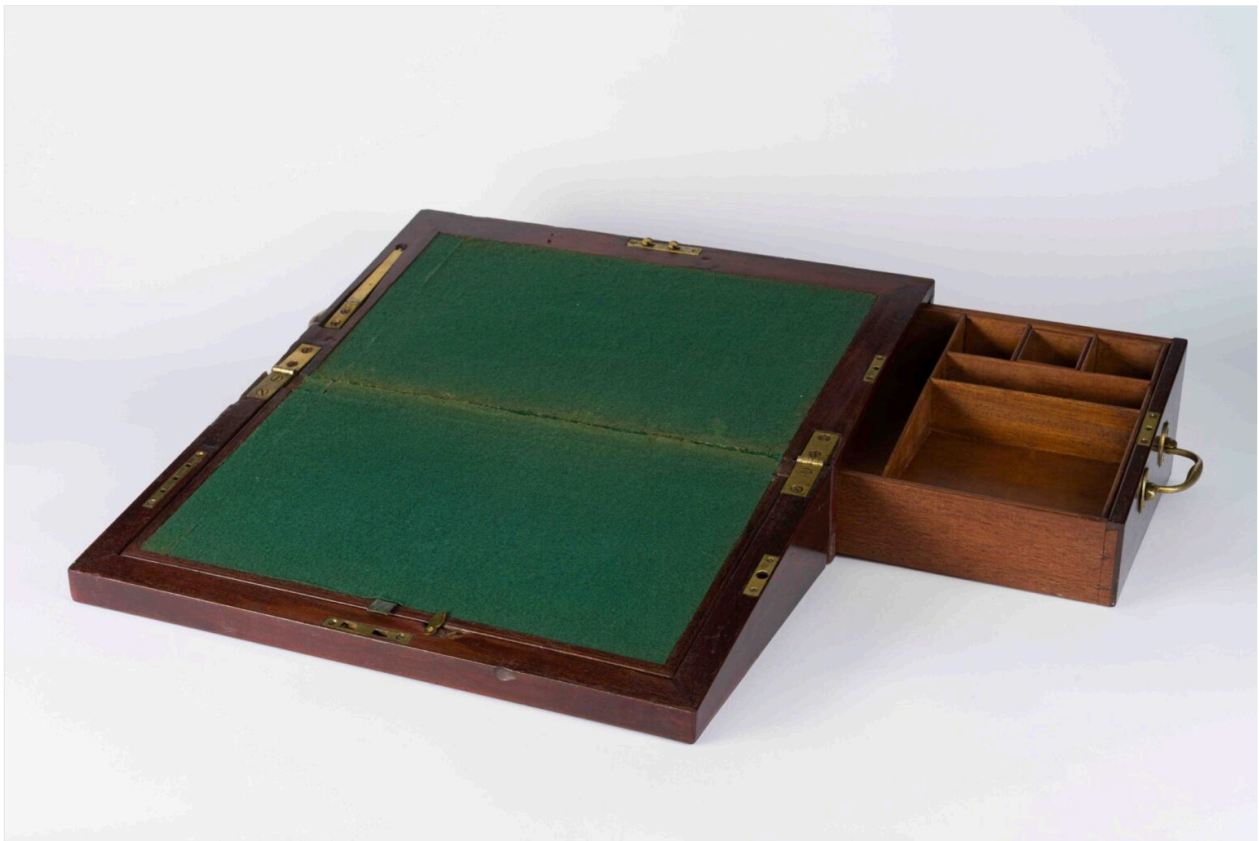
Byron had been living in exile in Venice since 1816. For on April 25th of that year, facing mounting pressures resulting from his failed marriage, his numerous scandalous affairs, and huge debts, he left England never to return.

Informed by anonymous letters of his wife's affair, Guiccioli took Teresa home to Ravenna, but, after she lost their baby, she refused to get out of bed unless he accepted Byron as her “*cavalier servente*” and agreed to host him in *Palazzo Guiccioli*. In spite of public ridicule, the Count agreed in June 1819 and covered for the two lovers until Byron refused his several requests for money.

Soon afterwards, with her father's support, Teresa petitioned Pope Pius VII for a separation. Although the Count tried to defend himself by pointing out his wife's infidelity, on July 14, 1820 the Pope granted the separation on the condition that she live with her father. So, Teresa had to move out of *Palazzo Guiccioli*, but Byron remained.

His sojourn at *Palazzo Guiccioli* spanned his most prolific years. In his small study there he completed his masterpieces *Don Juan*, *Sardanapalus*, *The Two Foscari*, *The Prophecy of Dante* and the final canto of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*. In

addition, during horseback rides in the pine forest outside Ravenna Teresa's brother Pietro, who later accompanied him to Greece, inflamed Byron's politically revolutionary conscience.



Byron's traveling desk (Photo: Emanuele Rambaldi, Castrocaro, 2024)

The multimedia Byron Museum on the *Palazzo's* mezzanine floor consists of eight rooms: "On his travels", "In Venice", "In Ravenna", "Listening to Byron", "Literature and Life", "Byronmania", "The Romances", and "In Greece". Many of the objects on display had belonged to Teresa. Particularly sentimental are the traveling chest she used to preserve her Byronic memorabilia, locks of his hair, flakes of his sun-burnt skin, a basket full of their love letters, and Byron's traveling desk which he'd brought from England and gave to a heartbroken Teresa, along with several manuscripts, at his departure on July 16th, 1823 for Greece, thereby indicating to her his decision to abandon composing poetry in favor of political action.

Today almost all of Byron's papers are in three collections: Pforzheimer, Arents, and Berg, all at the main branch of the New York Public Library on Fifth Avenue and 42nd Street.



5) Renato Guttuso's painting (1952) of the Battle at Ponte dell'Ammiraglio, which took place at this medieval bridge near Palermo on May 27, 1860 between Garibaldi's Redshirts and the Bourbon army. Garibaldi lost the battle, but took Palermo three days later.

Speaking of 19th-century politics, on the main floor is *Palazzo Guiccioli's* second museum dedicated to the *Risorgimento* or the unification of Italy. On display here are some 450 paintings sculptures photographs, weapons, military uniforms, medals, documents and posters, which belong to the municipality of Ravenna, the Fondazione Spadolini Nuova Antologia and the Fondazione Bettino Craxi. The politicians Giovanni Spadolini and Bettino Craxi were the foremost collectors of *Risorgimento* memorabilia.

The largest section here is devoted to Giuseppe Garibaldi and his wife Anita, who after their unsuccessful Defense of Rome, died, pregnant and sick with malaria, on August 4, 1849, in her husband's arms at Guiccioli Farm in Mandriole near Ravenna. On display here are an elaborately-carved coral and gold bracelet, given to Anita by Giuseppe, her boots and her bright yellow shawl.



Gold-set hand-carved coral bracelet belonging to Anita Garibaldi (Photo: Emanuele Rambaldi, Castrocaro, 2024)

The Doll Museum, located in the early 20th-century annexes of *Palazzo Guiccioli*, features some 2,000 toys, but mostly dolls plus their clothes, accessories, and houses. Dating from 1850 to the mid-20th century, the dolls are made of porcelain, cloth, celluloid, felt, and papier-mâché. Noteworthy are those made of paper sent to Italian girls thanks to the Marshall Plan after World War II.

All three museums are multi-media with videos and touch-screens. They're open from 10 AM to 6 PM Tuesday-Sunday. Closed Monday. Entrance fees: adults 10 euros, senior citizens (over 65) 8 euros, young people (up to age 26) 5 euros, and children up to age 11 free.

For advance booking click on www.palazzoguiccioli.it.

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Italian Hours

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