

Queen of Nice's famed Negresco hotel dies at 95



In this file photo taken on January 13, 2011 Jeanne Augier, owner of famous hotel The Negresco poses with her dogs Lily (left) and Lilou (right) in the Versailles lounge of the palace in Nice, south-eastern France. — AFP photos



In this file photo taken on January 13, 2011 Jeanne Augier poses with her dogs Lily (left) and Lilou (right) in front of the palace in Nice, southeastern France.

Gates 'not rich enough'

Among the Negresco's rejected suitors, according to Nice Matin, were the Sultan of Brunei and Microsoft founder Bill Gates, who gave her a blank cheque which she returned with the message "You are not rich enough!". But she failed to prevent the hotel becoming the subject of several legal battles, including one involving a young art historian whom she tasked with creating an inventory of her collection who was charged with trying to take advantage of her. Suffering from memory loss, Augier was appointed a guardian in 2013 to protect her and she spent her final years confined to a wheelchair.

The Negresco has borne witness to some of the defining moments in Nice's history, including the July 2016 Bastille Day attack, when a jihadist used a truck to mow down revelers on the seafront promenade in front of the hotel. The building's main hall was turned into a field hospital in the wake of the attack, which deeply scarred the city. Augier, who lived in an apartment on the sixth floor of the Negresco, built up a huge collection of 6,000 artworks, which are dotted throughout the hotel. Among her prize acquisitions were a famous portrait of "Sun King" Louis XIV and a huge canary yellow female figure by sculptor Niki de Saint Phalle. — AFP

Jetset favorite

Named after its Romanian-born founder Henri Negresco, the hotel opened in 1913 and immediately became an instant favorite with European royalty and glitterati. Each of its 124 rooms has unique furnishings, including items from Augier's vast personal art collection, some of which date back to the 16th century. An elegant figure, who dyed her carefully coiffed hair auburn and wore ruby red lipstick, the widow from Brittany devoted her life to preserving the hotel's heritage. Apart from her employees, who called her "Madame", she also lavished attention on her cats and dogs.

Her 97-percent stake in the hotel, which is profitable, was valued at between 300 and 400 million euros (\$340 to \$460 million) in 2016, excluding the art and furniture. Augier, who had no children, nieces or nephews, sought to protect her staff and legacy by bequeathing the hotel to a special fund in 2009 to try to ward off foreign buyers after her death. "I must have a hundred offers a year to buy the Negresco. It's out of the question," she told Liberation newspaper in 2009. An animal lover who campaigned against bullfighting and a defender of refugees, she also tasked the fund with the vague mission of "easing animal and human suffering".



In this file photo taken on February 14, 2002 Jeanne Augier poses in front of her hotel in Nice.

Four men go on trial for theft of giant gold coin from Berlin museum

Four men went on trial yesterday for stealing a gold coin the size of a manhole cover from one of Germany's flagship museums in a daring night-time heist using a ladder and a wheelbarrow. German authorities believe the 100 kg (220 pound) Canadian "Big Maple Leaf" - once recognized as the biggest gold coin in the world - has been melted down since its theft from Berlin's Bode Museum in March 2017.

Prosecutors say three of the suspects broke into the museum through an upstairs window and used a ladder, wheelbarrow and rope to extract the coin from a bullet-proof glass. The fourth suspect was a museum guard accused of helping them. The coin, more than half a meter (yard) in diameter, three cm (1.2 inches) thick and made from ultra-pure gold, is one of just six produced by the Royal Canadian Mint in 2007 and was loaned to the museum by a private owner. It has a face value of \$1 million but is thought to be worth four times as much. It was recognized by the Guinness

Book of World Records as the largest gold coin in the world at the time it was made, although Australia has since minted one even bigger. Like other Canadian coins it bears the image of Canada's head of state, Britain's Queen Elizabeth.

The suspects were not identified under German legal rules. Three of them are related and three were under the age of 21 at the time of the crime, which means the trial took place in a youth court. The men hid their faces behind magazines as they entered the court and during the proceedings. All are charged with serious theft, said the court. German media say the men could face up to three years and 10 months jail. The Bode Museum has one of the world's largest coin collections with more than 540,000 items. — Reuters

