The New Criterion

Features December 2007

The great collectors

by *Marco Grassi*

On some of the great collectors of the twentieth century.

One way to understand the history of art is through a history of collecting. We can divide the last century into four periods, each exemplifying certain attitudes towards art collecting. The first might be called the *imperial* phase; it encompasses the period from about 1880 to 1920. This era saw the headlong rush of an emerging industrial and merchant grandee class to acquire status, legitimacy, and social distinction. Collecting art was an obvious strategy; the example had already been well established for at least two centuries by the English aristocracy. By now, we have gotten to know the characters that animated this world of excess and display. Excellent biographies, occasionally more than one, have been written about the *über*-dealer Joseph Duveen, about Bernard Berenson and Wilhelm von Bode, the age's art oracles, and, of course, about the great accumulators Morgan, Frick, Altman, and even about lesser lights such as Clarence MacKay.

The period and events that follow the flamboyant, over-reaching—and very substantial—accomplishments of our home-grown Edwardians are far less familiar. The story, however, merits closer attention, not least because it marks the beginning of a different approach to collecting. What set the process in motion was surely inauspicious: a chance encounter of a very young man and a slightly older woman in the park of Milan's Castello Sforzesco. The year was 1897 and the meeting forever changed their lives. Alessandro Contini was tall and fair-haired—and he cut an imposing figure. Born in Ancona in 1878, he was in Italy pursuing a growing philatelic business, mostly sold out of his well-stocked briefcase. The woman, unmarried but with a young child, was from the Lombard hinterland and of the most modest origins. It would be difficult to imagine a less adequate counterpart to the dashing and enterprising young stamp dealer than the short, stocky, and dark Vittoria Galli. Social convention alone should have discouraged a man such as Contini from taking the slightest interest in the impoverished *paesana*. And yet he must have instantly recognized in this woman such immense resources of intelligence, ambition, and capability to have made her attraction irresistible—all qualities that would propel the improbable pair to unimaginable heights of influence, wealth, and notoriety.

The Continis were soon married and travelling far beyond Italy in the adventuresome pursuit of rare stamps; to Spain, to the United States and, finally, to South America, where they uncovered endless rarities of the ex-colonies' early postal services.

The Continis were soon married and travelling far beyond Italy in the adventuresome pursuit of rare stamps.

Having returned to Italy shortly after World War i, Alessandro Contini went to Bergamo to collect on a rather large debt from a colleague. Short of cash, the colleague convinced Contini to settle by taking some paintings instead of *lire*—paintings that soon proved to be an even more profitable commodity than his accustomed stock-in-trade. In quick order, the newly minted art dealer and his wife returned to Spain, liquidated their considerable stock of South American stamps, and purchased about forty canvasses by El Greco, Murillo, Velázquez, and Zurbarán, all then quite obscure.

In 1921, the Continis rented a grand villa in Rome and arranged the first public showing in Italy of the art of Spain's "Golden Age"—an epochal exhibition with a memorable catalogue. It was a pioneering exploit that confirmed the couple's emergence onto the art world stage. Museums and collectors everywhere quickly realized that seventeenth-century Spanish art could not be absent in any serious anthology of European painting. The visit by the king, Victor Emmanuel iii, crowned their efforts. The titles of Count and Countess soon followed for the enterprising pair (Contini having previously already doubled his barrels by adding "Bonacossi" to his surname).

Count Alessandro Contini-Bonacossi, with the redoubtable "Donna" Vittoria never far from his side, now plunged headlong into the international art trade. To aid in his future purchases and, again guided by his keen perception, Contini sought help from the struggling young scholar Roberto Longhi, generously helping him to complete his studies. It was an investment that repaid the Count handsomely: Longhi went on to become one of the twentieth century's most accomplished and influential art historians. Contini was also quick to understand the importance of conservation. The talented Roman restorer Stefano Pichetto was the first (of many) craftsmen who benefitted greatly from his business.

By the mid-1920s, the two Contini, undeterred by their halting grasp of any language other than Italian, set out for New York. At that time, the art trade was fiercely territorial, and New York was very much the preserve of long-established concerns such as Duveen, Wildenstein, and Knoedler, the traditional purveyors of fine art to the "imperial" gilded age collectors. Contini, of course,

understood this and devised an effective strategy. He and Donna Vittoria arrived in New York with a varied assortment of recently discovered (by Longhi) and restored (by Pichetto) master paintings. Taking a large and commodious suite at the Plaza, they arranged their wares in their rooms and discreetly made them available to collectors, scholars, and curators, some of whom may have been as much attracted by Donna Vittoria's expertise in the kitchen as by the pictures on the walls.

It was an entirely new way to do business—no lavish gallery, no large staff or huge inventory, no costly advertising, and, above all, no threatening foot in enemy territory. Throughout many fruitful and successful years, there was never to be a "Contini Gallery." Even when the couple later moved to Florence into an imposing neo-classical pile surrounded by a lovely park, the only place of business was to remain their home—simply "Villa Vittoria." Perhaps without realizing it, Contini had become the first, and arguably the most successful, "private art dealer" in the world. It was an innovation far ahead of its time, anticipating, as it did, the mobility, ease of communications, flexibility, and accessibility to information which are so much part of today's globalized art trade.

On their second visit to New York in 1926, Count Alessandro Contini-Bonacossi and Donna Vittoria met a lady who later visited them for tea in their apartment at the Plaza. Impressed by their expertise in artistic matters and their good sense of style, she asked them if they might not help her arrange some furniture in a friend's apartment. The lady's name was Delora Kilvert, and her friend was Samuel Kress. In no time at all, Kress's apartment was transformed, and substantially enriched, not only with furniture, but with tapestries, bronzes, and paintings—lots of paintings. At the time he and the two Contini crossed paths, Kress was in his early sixties and had achieved pre-eminence as a mass-marketing genius to rival the legendary Woolworth. Kress emporia had multiplied across the country from a first, humble dry-goods store in Allentown, Pennsylvania. Samuel Kress was now a very rich man—a veritable emblem of the classic American saga of relentless dedication to hard work, honest dealing, and entrepreneurial risk-taking.

It became obvious to Count Contini and the somewhat dour, single-minded Kress that their collaboration resulted in something quite different from the obligatory ornament for a *grand seigneur*. The works of art would never be accompanied, as might have been expected, by the hundred-meter yacht, the racing stables, the vast country house, or the other accoutrements of princely life. With Kress, the collection became a single epic enterprise: an attempt to assemble as ample and comprehensive an anthology of Western European art as resources and availability permitted. Painting, sculpture, works of art, furniture—everything was considered pertinent to the grand design. The progress of this massive accumulation was guided by criteria specific to the new and rapidly evolving discipline of art history. More significantly, the collection reflected an awareness that even a modest, obscure, or aesthetically displeasing item can possess great value in providing the tissue and texture that connect all the chapters of the art-historical record. There would, of course, be many masterpieces, but these were never the exclusive focus.

Innovative, as well, was the way the Kress collection was assembled: both the collector and the dealer went about it as serious businessmen. There are accounts of endless sessions at the Plaza and at the Kress home during which the two titans would go toe-to-toe exercising their unparalleled negotiating skills in what was occasionally described as a *souk*-like atmosphere. Kress, with Contini, can be thought of as exemplifying the second phase of collecting in America.

The disposal of this vast cultural patrimony is even more remarkable.

What was accomplished by Samuel Kress and subsequently continued by his younger brother Rush is simply astounding. By the early 1960s, the collection comprised over one thousand paintings, thirteen-hundred sculptures, and conspicuous holdings of drawing, furniture, and works of art. The disposal of this vast cultural patrimony is even more remarkable. Starting in the mid-1930s, and under the stewardship of the newly formed Kress Foundation, museums in eighteen cities received significant portions of the collection's principal inventory of paintings. Less important paintings were arranged in "study collections" and gifted to twenty-three colleges and universities. New York's Metropolitan Museum and the Philadelphia Museum of Art received specific bequests of paintings, tapestries, and furniture, while the Morgan Library was enriched with a multitude of Old Master drawings and medieval manuscripts. The greatest beneficiary of all, however, was to be the National Gallery in Washington. One hundred of the Kress Collection's most important paintings joined the Mellon, Widener, and Dale bequests, at first on loan and then, finally in 1961, as permanent gifts. Thanks to the magnificent generosity of Samuel Kress and the foundation that he initiated and that lives on to this day, the entire nation benefitted from the enlightened dispersal.

The Contini-Bonacossi saga, however, concludes on a rather more melancholy note. After the war, Contini's contacts with Hermann Göring were severely criticized, although no illegal dealings between the two were ever uncovered. When the Count died in 1955, he may well have been one of the richest men in Italy, leaving significant real-estate holdings, industrial concerns, philatelic collections, and a superb art collection. Virtually all of this huge estate disappeared through years of wrangling over death duties and litigation among heirs. The grand endowment of the entire collection to the city of Florence, which Donna Vittoria had imagined, was never realized. The only vestige of this noble intention is a handful of paintings that the Italian state was able to wrest away from the estate in lieu of concessions on the export of the collection. They are now housed in rooms attached to the Uffizi Gallery but that have proven, over the years, to be almost impossible to visit. Sadly, they remain as the only, and inadequate, memorial to the remarkable career of the Count Contini-Bonacossi.

The finest and rarest Spanish picture to have been acquired, and always kept, by Contini was the famous 1633 *Still Life with Lemons, Oranges and a Rose*, signed by Francisco de Zurbarán. This memorable icon of seventeenth-century art passed out of the Contini estate and into the hands of Norton Simon in 1972. The California industrialist, to be sure, was no novice collector; in 1965 he had already appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine with his record-setting purchase at auction of Rembrandt's *Portrait of Titus*. And yet, Zurbarán's *Still Life*, with its specific Contini/Kress associations, serves as a fitting milestone in the transition from one era of collecting to the next. If Kress had been businessman-as-collector, Simon was collector-as-businessman. Whereas Kress's loyalty to his dealer Contini never faltered, Simon was loyal to no one. Although he knew and respected all the major players of his time—dealers, auctioneers, scholars, and conservators—and was famous for seeking advice from all of them, in the end, Simon remained always his own best advisor.

Another, and particularly significant, aspect of Simon's new approach to collecting was his pitiless and relentless negotiating style. If Kress has occasionally been described as "tough," the adjective invariably attributed to Simon is "brutal." A favorite strategy was to ask that an item be sent to California for approval, whereupon months of silence would ensue. This would generally rattle the seller sufficiently so as to give Simon the strong advantage he needed to beat down the price. Buying an option in offered works was another way to prolong the process and exhaust the opposition. On occasion, Simon did not hesitate to unleash his company's lawyers on a hapless dealer—all in pursuit of tactical superiority and leverage. What is also revealing is the fact that Simon always lived in relatively modest homes, first in Highland Park then later in Malibu. Never in all those years was more than a small fraction of the art he owned actually displayed in them; his collection was, quite aptly, called "a museum without walls." The bulk of the collection was usually in storage, on loan to museums, or traveling in temporary exhibitions.

Nothing could be further from the image of the traditional grandee-collector than the carefree, wheeling-and-dealing Simon; in the end, he cared not a whit about the social status and *caché* that collecting had bestowed on generations of his predecessors. It was the art and the process of acquiring it that mattered, and whether it is a tribute to Simon's intuition, cunning, or the thoroughness of his research (or, probably, all of these combined), the result he achieved can only be described with superlatives. In the early 1980s, it all finally came together in what had been the Pasadena Museum of Art. The quality, rarity, art-historical range, and sheer beauty of the now-renamed Norton Simon Museum is as much an enduring monument to the man as the Kress Foundation's gift to the nation is to its namesake.

It is interesting to consider that after the museum found its "walls," the collecting virtually ceased; for the last dozen years of his life, Simon simply enjoyed endlessly hanging and re-hanging his fabulous collection. Perhaps the thrill of the chase (and the kill) had become too expensive or not sufficiently rewarding.

The model that Simon perfected has cast a very long shadow in our contemporary art world. Ever since Simon, the last trace of romance, commitment, and vision seems to have drained from the pursuit and purchase of fine arts. If Norton Simon's style and methods can be described as those of a *modern* collector, how else but *postmodern* could one desribe the Saatchi brothers? Through these advertising magnates, the exploitation of art for speculative and headline-grabbing self-aggrandizement has become the norm. Museums, rather than being final destinations for lifelong collecting endeavors, have all too often become useful marketing stopovers for lender-entrepreneurs who exercise *droit de seigneur* over their holdings. Trustees and curators, in their pursuit of ever-increasing attendance figures, have become willing partners in this minuet, occasionally mortgaging the future of their institutions to build huge "signature" buildings designed by headline architects. The thousands of cubic feet added recently to the Denver Art Museum by Daniel Libeskind is a perfect example: this addition exudes as ephemeral an air as the materials from which it is constructed and the installations it contains.

The model that Simon perfected has cast a very long shadow in our contemporary art world.

A visit to the yearly Miami-Basel *kermesse* should serve to convince a serious observer that the progression noted during the past century will, almost certainly, not be reversed in the course of the next. Drawing a line, in this time frame, from Frick through Kress and Simon, and ending with Saatchi, one sees all too clearly how these collectors embody the aspirations, myths, and ideals of each period; and how—in an ascending curve—the function of money has played an ever-increasing role. Wealth, of course, has always been important, but now it has become, finally, the only protagonist—the ultimate reference of merit, quality, content, and meaning. A stroll through the cavernous exhibition hall during Miami-Basel, not to mention the score of satellite marketplaces that spring up around it, cannot exactly be described as a life-enhancing experience. This has little to do with the material on view—the artistic validity of which may or may not be confirmed in decades to come. What reverberates through the myriad stands and tumultuous crowds is the urgency of the speculative imperative: a refrain endlessly repeated—now is the moment to cash in, now is the moment to buy or to sell. And this drumbeat of blatant venality—as obsessive as the disco rhythm that seems to permeate the entire town—becomes, itself, the main event. Depressing as this would appear, there can be little doubt that it is entrenched, at least for now.

Were it not for the welcome and occasional exception, the prospects, looking ahead, would appear bleak indeed. The small but remarkably comprehensive collection of American pop art, a promised gift from John Wilmerding to the Princeton Art Museum, is that rare and reassuring point of light in the darkening sky. A distinguished scholar of American nineteenth-century painting, Professor Wilmerding has, over many years, exercised his unerring eye and thorough understanding of the period in choosing not the largest, not the most obvious, not the flashiest, nor, assuredly, the most expensive examples of all the major pop artists—but they are the right examples. And seen

together, as they recently were at Princeton, the effect was nothing short of illuminating and delightful, even for one not charitably disposed toward the genre. The Wilmerding Collection is also, above all else, an object lesson on taste, intelligence, knowledge, and time—so indispensible to the gathering of works of art. The problem, today, appears to be the money. Not only is it not lacking (if one considers current auction price levels), but it has also positively swallowed up other considerations of collecting art. This being the case, there is ample reason to doubt whether a future generation of American collectors will bring the same intensity and dedication that propelled the Kresses and Simons of the last century to such memorable achievements. One can only hope that a few of those friendly ghosts from the past will be there to guide them.

Marco Grassi is a private paintings conservator and dealer in New York and the author of *In the Kitchen of Art*, released in April 2021 by Criterion Books.

This article originally appeared in The New Criterion, Volume 26 Number 4 , on page 10
Copyright © 2024 The New Criterion | www.newcriterion.com
https://newcriterion.com/issues/2007/12/the-great-collectors