

The New Criterion

Notebook June 2018

“Heini” & Getty

by Marco Grassi

On Baron Hans Heinrich Thyssen-Bornemisza & J. Paul Getty.

There was a time, within living memory, when millionaires were considered in some quarters “enemies of the people.” Today, the consonant M has been replaced by the consonant B and billionaires are now folk heroes; one is currently president of the United States. Moreover, until the recent past, possessing great wealth meant also visibly, even ostentatiously, enjoying it (thereby attracting the opprobrium just mentioned). One millionaire in particular may have enjoyed it more than any other: partying more, marrying more, and, in general, spending more—his name, straight out of a Franz Lehár operetta, was Baron Hans Heinrich Thyssen-Bornemisza. Vacuous and ephemeral as he may have been, “Heini” Thyssen remained, nonetheless, a passionate and very perceptive collector of European paintings and works of art throughout all of his adult life.

The grandson of the “German Carnegie,” Heini was the heir to that portion of the Thyssen fortune that had been divided between his uncle Fritz, an early Hitler supporter, and his father, “old” Heinrich, who instead wanted no part of the new regime—going so far as to assume his wife’s Hungarian name and citizenship. He went one step further in the early 1930s and emigrated to Lugano, Switzerland. There, on a splendid lakeside property, he built a multi-gallery annex to house a collection of paintings that would eventually rival Henry Clay Frick’s in New York. The timing was surely right: a thumping buyer’s market reigned for years in the wake of the Wall Street Crash of 1929, allowing Thyssen an opportunity to purchase, among others, two absolute masterworks from the Otto H. Kahn Collection in New York: Frans Hals’s *Family Portrait in a Landscape* (ca. 1648) and the *Standing Knight* by Vittore Carpaccio (1510). The latter is the first full-figure portrait in Western art and the subject has been credibly identified as a likeness of the adolescent Francesco Maria I della Rovere. If this is true, the Renaissance grandee can posthumously boast of having sat for three of Italy’s greatest artists: Carpaccio, Raphael, and Titian. The latter two portraits are in the Uffizi in Florence, one showing the victor of the Battle of Fornovo as a mature warrior in full military regalia.

Florence was rapidly disappearing from the “art world” map.

Not surprisingly, “Thyssen” and “Villa Favorita,” as the Baron’s villa was called, were names familiar to me as I was growing up in Florence in a family that, on my father’s

side, had been involved in the arts, as dealers, for three generations. So, still in my early twenties, and fresh out of university and military service, I accompanied my parents to Lugano to view the storied Thyssen Collection, naturally as paying visitors. I was just beginning my apprenticeship at the Uffizi Gabinetto del Restauro, and my father never tired of accompanying me on my expeditions to see as many paintings in as many museums and exhibitions as possible. I passed another four years in more formal, academic training: first at the Istituto Centrale del Restauro in Rome and then at Zürich’s Schweitzerisches Institut für Kunstwissenschaft. At last, by 1962, I felt the time had come to start my own private conservation practice. Fortunately, Florentine palazzi have an overabundance of cubic feet—huge rooms no longer suitable for domestic use. In one such space I arranged the surprisingly few essential tools and materials needed to start work—work that began trickling in, mostly from family friends. It was hardly a flourishing enterprise. Even then, Florence was rapidly disappearing from the “art world” map, a victim of the Depression, the War, and a waning interest in the Renaissance (Mannerism and Baroque were now the new flavors). Historic firms such as Bardini, Volpi, and even our own “Luigi Grassi & Sons” were long since shuttered, leaving only a smattering of small-time antique shops along the Via dei Fossi whose proprietors were anything but ideal clients for an ambitious paintings conservator at the outset of his career. I was even beginning to consider a move to London, or, possibly, New York.

Then, one day, mirabile dictu, things changed: an old friend called asking if she could visit my studio with someone she knew. The friend was a beautiful young German-Argentine woman whose father had retired to a villa in Fiesole, above the city; her friend turned out to be Heini Thyssen, the son of the originator of the Thyssen collection. The Baron was in the midst of paying furious court to the young lady—probably the only one who was to steadfastly refuse his marriage proposals. When the pair turned up at my studio door, I noticed that Thyssen was carrying a canvas tote bag. After some preliminary pleasantries, a polychrome wooden female portrait bust emerged from its ad-hoc packaging. Even as it was being placed on my work-table I recognized it at once as an almost comical late-nineteenth-century imitation of a Florentine Renaissance sculpture—the real item being so rare that Sherman Lee, the renowned director of the Cleveland Museum, described one as “the cow with five legs.” Not wishing to play the smart aleck in my first encounter with one of the world’s greatest collectors, I furrowed my brow and suggested that if he would consent to leave the object with me, I would carefully “study” it and render my opinion in due course. My visitors thanked me and departed. I thereupon immediately set to work preparing an elaborate “technical,” and unequivocally damning, report, replete with macro- photographs and comparative images from similar (genuine) objects in the Bargello museum and the Louvre. The thick dossier was dispatched to Lugano, not long after which I was invited to visit the “Villa Favorita,” naturally in the company of the German-Argentine young lady. I never doubted for a moment that her ready acceptance was predicated by my presence as “chaperone.”

When I turned up at the Villa Favorita for dinner on the appointed day, I was particularly pleased to note that I was being ushered admission-free through the garden gate-house. An after-dinner tour of the gallery allowed me to demonstrate to my host some fancy attribution footwork, which, sadly, seemed to be lost on him, focused as he was on his *other* guest. We three reconvened the following day for lunch, at the end of which, quite nonchalantly, Thyssen offered me the position of resident conservator to the collection. After stammering something about needing to “think about it,” I returned to Florence virtually walking on air. Breathlessly, I relayed the momentous news to my father. He instantly brought me back to earth by counseling me to refuse. In his wisdom, he well knew that there is considerable risk in putting oneself in the employ of an enormously rich and powerful person. One can be “in” one day and, just as arbitrarily, “out” the next—the fate famously suffered by Charlot in Chaplin’s *City Lights*.

On the Baron’s next visit to Florence, I had carefully rehearsed my reply to his offer: I proposed to him that I serve as “visiting” rather than “resident” conservator, proffering valid, but not necessarily convincing, reasons. I still vividly remember my excruciating anxiety as the three of us sat at Harry’s Bar. I

I had in my care a handful of masterpieces and dozens of highly significant works.

imagined my future career instantly evaporating should Heini’s answer begin with “well, in that case . . .” Instead, for more than twenty years—until 1990, when the collection was relocated to Madrid—I was to enjoy the distinct privilege of having in my care a handful of masterpieces and dozens of other highly significant works. Particularly exciting for me were the instances when I was asked to examine items at sales or with dealers. Occasionally, these encounters resulted in works being added to the Thyssen collection. Several times, I was given the opportunity, by lesser-known private sources, of presenting the Baron interesting properties that might complement the collection’s existing holdings. In one such event, an incredibly rare and sublime example of early Sienese art found its permanent home with Thyssen. It is the great and almost miraculously preserved *Crucifixion with the Virgin and St. John* by Ugolino da Siena (*ca.* 1330–35). The painting had not surfaced since the 1890s when it was published in the Toscanelli Collection catalogue. Another privilege afforded me was the pleasure of strolling at will, often entirely alone and undisturbed, through Thyssen’s incomparable anthology of European art. After a year or two, I was on intimate terms with virtually every centimeter of those painted surfaces. I never learned, nor did I ask Thyssen, if his bringing that phony sculpture to my studio in Florence was simply a “test.”

By 1971, Thyssen had been married for several years to Denise, his fourth wife. She proceed to enliven the otherwise deserted Villa Favorita with frequent invitations to the international “jet set,” as it was then called. One card-carrying member of that group—who, ironically, never flew—was J. Paul Getty. In June of that year, the insular world on the shores of Lake Lugano was astir with the news that the so-called “richest man in the world” would be paying a visit. The Thyssens, of course, arranged a suitable welcome at a lunch; dinner evidently didn’t suit the nearly

eighty-year-old magnate. Getty had taken a room at the old Hotel Splendide in town and planned to stay overnight. At the appointed hour, two oversize Cadillacs drove up to the villa; one with the lone Getty and the other with his retinue comprising Mary Tessier, an elegant lady friend “of a certain age,” Henry d’Abo, an upper-crust Brit, and two other women whose names I no longer recall. I was deputized to greet the guests at the end of the villa’s winding driveway and was somewhat surprised to see Getty, entirely alone, in the back seat of the first car. I couldn’t help but notice that this vehicle was, despite its immense size, only a two-door coupe. Chatting briefly with the driver, I learned that Mr. G. traveled very reluctantly and then only by the sort of robust conveyance from which he would not fall if a door accidentally opened.

The lunch, served on the villa’s leafy terrace, was pleasant enough—with the conversation turning at one point to matters pertaining to the Soviet Union. Thyssen, in fact, had recently returned from a visit there. Later, he changed the subject and asked Getty his thoughts about shipping, a business in which Thyssen was deeply involved. The older man’s eyes lit up. What followed was a rhapsodic account of how marvelously young people behaved in the Russian socialist workers’ paradise, never, ever, asking for a tip. Mme. Tessier gently nudged him with a reminder that the subject was shipping. “Oh,” Getty said, “I thought we were talking about *tipping*.” For the notorious tightwad, the definition of paradise was clearly a place where one never needed to spare a dime.

Another, more serious, topic at the lunch was the upcoming Christie’s sale in London where Titian’s *Death of Actaeon* (ca. 1559–76) would be coming on the block from the collection of the Seventh Earl of Harewood. The huge canvas was the last of the artist’s famous “poesie” (poems) remaining in private hands. Even though the work was not in stellar condition, and was clearly inferior to the others of the same group, there was little doubt that the bidding would soar. Thyssen good-naturedly chided Getty about not ever having bought a really decent painting; this Titian was his big chance. The long, careful visit to the Favorita Gallery that followed must have made a powerful impression, because it was later learned that Getty had purchased the picture from the London dealer Julius Weitzner. “Julie,” as he was universally known, was the reigning auction-room *capo* at the time. He won the lot for £1,700,000, telling everyone after the sale “yeah, I bought it for stock.” That may not have been as much of a joke as it sounded, because Julie eventually pocketed a profit of more than £80,000 when Getty at last decided to go for it. In the end, the California skinflint was spared the agony of writing a huge check when the painting was denied an export license (it is now in the National Gallery, London). In fact, Getty was to become identified with great paintings only after his death—when his lavish bequest became available to the museum bearing his name.

After our lunch at the Villa Favorita, it was expected that I would lead a gallery tour and continue further conversations about art. Mr. Getty must have become convinced of the depth of my connoisseurship—a decidedly optimistic impression. In any case, he promptly invited me to join him that evening at the Splendide for more chat, but after dinner, naturally. I found him occupying what must have been the smallest room of that grand hotel, probably one originally reserved for a maid or butler. There was only a bed and two chairs, and so, within minutes, every

surface, including the floor, was covered with large photographs of a painting about which Getty obviously cared passionately. The artist and composition were easily recognizable: it was one of the versions of The Madonna of Loreto, also known as The Virgin of the Veil (ca. 1508–09), variously identified as a late work by Raphael, or, more probably, his pupil Gianfrancesco Penni. The best of these variants has always been identified as the one in the Musée Condé in Chantilly. Getty had purchased his version from Agnew's Gallery before the War, and there was no disabusing him of the notion that he owned not only the "prime" version, but that it had to be by Raphael himself. I patiently listened to an interminable and convoluted argument about provenance, original documentation, "internal" evidence about the panel and its markings, and all manner of other "proofs" that scholarship had uncovered. Having had neither the expertise nor the inclination to express an informed judgment, I continued to nod my assent and eventually left Mr. Getty in his tiny room, hopefully a happier man.

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 36 Number 10 , on page 89

Copyright © 2024 The New Criterion | www.newcriterion.com

<https://newcriterion.com/issues/2018/6/heini-getty-9899>