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There is so little to remember of anyone—an anecdote, a conversation at table. But every memory is turned over and over, every word, however chance, written in the heart in the hope that memory will fulfill itself and become flesh, and that the wanderers will find a way home, and the perished, whose lack we always feel, will step through the door finally and stroke our hair with dreaming, habitual fondness, not having meant to keep us waiting long.

Marilynne Robinson, *Housekeeping*.  
London and Boston: Faber & Faber, 1981

## Introduction

THIS BOOK IS, in part, based on a memoir that my husband, Mario Modestini, began to write in the early 1990s at our farmhouse in Troghi, not far from Florence. Mario had a long and illustrious career as one of the twentieth century's finest restorers and connoisseurs of Italian painting, and he liked to tell his younger colleagues stories about people and events that had occurred long before they were born. These tales enthralled his listeners, who urged him to record them. Mario rarely put pen to paper, so I was surprised to find him one morning in the library writing, filling whole legal pads with stories from his life in his neat script.

I transcribed the original Italian text and gave the pages to Mario to revise and correct. The episodes he described were not necessarily in chronological order, and I tried to organize them in a logical sequence. Eventually, I translated the text into English. Mario corrected the English translation, and we spoke often about



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the shape of the manuscript and what more might be included, but he had already set down everything he felt was important.

The memoir concentrated on two periods in Mario's life: his years in Rome up until 1949 when he moved to New York; and events that occurred during the years he was involved with the Samuel H. Kress Foundation, from 1949 until 1961.<sup>1</sup> Although these two accounts were fairly complete, his recollections about his life after the 1961 dispersal of the Kress Collection when he worked as a private restorer were limited to only a few episodes.

Eventually we became distracted by other things and put the memoirs aside. Much later Mario wrote some additional pages, sporadic thoughts about particular paintings or topics that he felt important to record. I was not aware of this material until I came across some random sheets when I began working on the book in earnest after Mario's death. Nonetheless, there were still huge gaps in the memoir after 1961.

To turn the fragmentary manuscript into a complete account of Mario's life, I drew on many sources: research in archives, libraries and on the internet; material from Mario's files; information from Mario's friends and family members; above all, my recollections of the conversations in which Mario and I engaged for twenty-three years about works of art and the restoration of paintings. As I worked, I began to remember, and would find information that corroborated or expanded upon things that Mario had written. Often this happened quite by chance, but the frequency of these inadvertent discoveries made me feel at times that Mario was an invisible collaborator.

A recurring theme in the book is the notable restorations that Mario carried out in the course of his long career and some of the problems they presented. For the benefit of readers who might not be knowledgeable about the materials and techniques of old master paintings, I have appended some basic information about their manufacture and the degradation caused by chemical reactions within the complex matrices of pigments, mediums, adhesives, and varnishes of which they are composed. Often these individual

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components change over the centuries in different ways in relation to one another, making it difficult, and, at times, impossible, for the viewer to perceive the artist's original intent.

Artists were often aware that the initial appearance, and thus the full meaning, of their work would not endure. In a famous, oft-quoted passage, the eighteenth-century English painter William Hogarth (1697–1764) lamented the effects that time would have on his paintings:

Let us now see in what manner time operates ... in order to discover if any changes ... can give a picture more union and harmony than has been in the power of a skillful master, with all his rules of art to do. When colours change at all it must be somewhat in the manner following, for as they are made some



1. William Hogarth, *Time Smoking a Picture*, ca. 1761, etching and aquatint, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 23.5 × 18.4 cm.

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of metal, some of earth, some of stone and others of more perishable materials, time cannot operate on them otherwise than as by daily experience we find it doth, which is, that one changes darker, another lighter, one quite to a different colour, whilst another, as ultramarine, will keep its natural brightness ... Therefore how is it possible that such different materials, ever variously changing ... should accidentally coincide with the artist's intention?<sup>2</sup>

Unlike most of the other arts, music for example, which can be performed many times in different ways without damaging the original score, the figurative arts are permanently changed, not only by materials that age, but also by the interpretation created by restoration, which endures for many years and sometimes forever. While music critics abound, very little critical assessment of restoration is available to the public.

The effect of restorers' interventions, however well intentioned, on these distorted expressions of a painter's genius was a subject of paramount interest to Mario and often the cause of distress. One of my objectives in this book is to provide non-specialists with a few tools to help them understand what they are seeing when they look at a painting.

## Preface

ON JANUARY 28, 2006, my husband, Mario Modestini, passed away two months before his ninety-ninth birthday. Ninety-eight is a great age, and he lived a remarkable life, yet I never thought that day would come—or rather, I thought that when it did come (at some indefinite future date), I would be prepared to meet it. Although I was thirty-nine years his junior, Mario and I had a great deal in common. He often said that he wished he could make a deal with the devil to turn back the years so that we could have more time together.

I met him at a gallery opening in New York in the early 1980s. The room was crowded, and suddenly my closest friend materialized before me, saying, “Dianne, I’d like to introduce you to Mario Modestini.” She stepped aside, and I looked into the kind, sensitive, intelligent face, and the startlingly blue eyes, of the most famous restorer in New York. Mario smiled at me and said with great warmth, “Hello,” with the emphasis on the last

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syllable. He was swiftly swept away by his companion, an attractive older woman with blond hair in a stylish French twist. At that time, I was a restorer in the paintings conservation department of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and although I had heard of Mario Modestini when I first became interested in conservation as a college senior, the notion I had of him was a bit different from the man I met that evening. My boss at the Met, John Brealey, had described him as sophisticated, shrewd, and “a very dangerous man.” In the light of that portrayal, I imagined Mario as a slim, suave figure in a pinstriped suit with greased, marcelled hair and a thin mustache, like a villain in a silent movie.

I didn't give the brief encounter at the opening any further thought until a couple of years later when the director of the Samuel H. Kress Foundation, Marilyn Perry, engaged me to survey the paintings that formerly belonged to the foundation, now located in eighteen Regional Museums. After Marilyn and I returned from our first inspection tour, she told me that Mario, who had been the conservator and curator of the Kress Foundation, was anxious to hear about the condition of the paintings we had seen because there were rumors that many of the pictures were in poor state. (Mario told me, much later, that after he met me at that gallery opening, he wanted to contact me but hadn't and so he was very pleased to realize that I was the restorer hired by Marilyn to survey the Kress paintings.)

And so, one Sunday in December 1983, I loitered outside Mario's apartment building on East 52nd Street, wearing my best clothes. I was early and very nervous. At exactly five minutes before the appointed time, I entered the lobby, the doorman rang up, and I took the elevator to the top floor. With great trepidation, I rang the bell, and a few minutes later, Mario opened his apartment door. He was wearing a blue-plaid flannel shirt and green corduroy trousers. He gave me a strange look, which I later realized was because I had recently gotten what I considered a very chic haircut—extremely short on one side, long on the other, and shingled in the back although I had decided against the purple rinse the stylist

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suggested. From the landing, a flight of stairs led down to Mario's double-height studio. One wall was covered from floor to ceiling with books. In front of the tall, north-facing windows were two easels, a small tabouret, and a photographer's lamp. The wide windowsills held an array of jars containing solvents, varnishes, and brushes, as well as pots of flourishing African violets.

To my relief, Marilyn Perry had already arrived. After the usual pleasantries, Mario sat down next to me on the sofa and picked up the loose-leaf binders with my notes. Turning the pages, he asked about each painting, every one of which he remembered in detail after twenty-five years, while I strained to recall them, craning my neck to try to read what I had written. Mario made short work of the reports and invited Marilyn and me to lunch at Gino's. A watering hole for Italian expats and journalists, this popular restaurant had opened in the 1950s when there were no genuine Italian restaurants on the East Side, and it was memorable not only for the food, but also for its red wallpaper decorated with yellow zebras. Over a glass of wine, I began to relax. Though Mario spoke impeccable English, he and Marilyn preferred to speak in Italian, and I found I could still garble a few of the phrases I had learned as a student in Florence. After lunch, Marilyn left for another appointment, and Mario asked if I would like to come back to his studio to look at the pictures he was working on, an invitation I gratefully accepted. I had worked at the Metropolitan for ten years and, although it wasn't easy to identify the painters, my training served me well in the ensuing discussion. Over tea, Mario and I talked for hours about paintings, approaches to restoration, and the cleaning of the Sistine chapel ceiling, which we had both visited.

The next evening around six o'clock, my direct line at the museum rang. It was Mario, inviting me to dinner. *Oh dear*, I thought. *What have I gotten myself into? This is a lonely old man who needs company.* But I accepted his invitation anyway and met him at an Italian restaurant in Midtown, where we had good, simple food and again we found that we had a great deal to talk about. It was apparent that Mario was hardly a lonely old man. He led an active

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social life, considerably livelier than my own. The reason he was free that evening, I later learned, was that his companion—the blonde with the French twist—had stayed on at her house in Mount Kisco, where they usually spent the weekend.

Over the next year, Mario called periodically to invite me for lunch or dinner. I knew that he was attracted to me, and we had many things in common, but there were thirty-nine years between us. Not to mention the long-time companion. Just the same, during the following summer when my phone rang often it would be Mario, calling from some part of the world, and chatting with him always put me in a good humor. When we saw each other again in the autumn we both decided to take a chance on this unconventional relationship.

Mario was seventy-five when we met but he had the energy and optimism of a much younger man, which he retained into his nineties. During the last several years of his life, Mario suffered from heart failure. At one point, he decided that he would rather stay at home than struggle with shortness of breath. Nothing would induce him to go out. He didn't want to be seen using a walker or in a wheelchair. So, I bought him Sulka dressing gowns and he looked, as he always had, relaxed and distinguished in every situation. He received friends and visitors and continued to work on the memoir that he had begun to write a decade earlier.

The origin and heart of this book are Mario's own words. One of the highlights of his wondrous career was his role in the acquisition of Leonardo da Vinci's *Ginevra de' Benci* for the National Gallery in Washington DC, from the Prince of Liechtenstein. It was a great coup, carried out in perfect secrecy. This is what he wrote:

*Toward the end of 1965, John Walker [director of the National Gallery of Art] telephoned and asked me if I would come to Washington to discuss a matter that was highly confidential and sensitive. With great secrecy and reserve, he said that Mr. Paul Mellon would like me to go to Vaduz, in Liechtenstein, to examine a painting that was considered to be by Leonardo da Vinci. It was a portrait of a young woman, Ginevra*

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*de' Benci, and dated from the last years of Leonardo's sojourn in Florence [before he left for Milan in 1482]. He told me that Carter Brown, the gallery's chief curator, would accompany me, as it was official government business. The importance of this acquisition could hardly be overstated. If the painting were genuine, it was the last Leonardo in the world that might conceivably be for sale. [There is another Leonardo in the private collection of the Princes Czartoryski in Krakow, *The Lady with the Ermine*, but it is considered a national treasure, and would never be allowed to leave Poland.] If the gallery were successful, it would possess the only painting by Leonardo in America. Before my trip, elaborate plans were made. For example, when we spoke by phone, we would never refer to the painting by name, but instead, use the code name "the bird."*

*In the past, some critics had attributed the painting to Lorenzo di Credi, and, although most experts thought it was by Leonardo, there was still a slight question. Before leaving, I put together a file of photographs of all the known paintings and some drawings by Leonardo, to compare with *Ginevra*. When I arrived in Vaduz with Carter, the Princess received us graciously, but also with a certain coldness. Understandably, the family was loath to part with the masterpiece of their collection, but needed to raise money. The next morning, the painting was brought up from the wine cellar to the apartment of the Prince's secretary, so that I could study it at close range. It did not take long for me to be convinced that it was by Leonardo. Comparing the painting with the various photographic details, I rapidly concluded that the painting was by the same hand as the artist who made the beautiful drawings of the eddies of water, which were exactly like the curls of *Ginevra's* hair. It was also in excellent condition, except for a small damage to the bridge of the nose. Unfortunately, it had been cut down along the bottom. The reverse was also painted with a design featuring two encircled branches of juniper and laurel in the center of the panel, and from this design it was possible to determine that the painting had lost approximately two inches at the bottom.*

*After examining the painting, I called John Walker, who was anxiously awaiting the verdict. I said, according to the code we had established, "the bird is 100 percent okay," meaning that the gallery could proceed with the \$5 million acquisition. When we returned to Washington, I discussed my conclusions about the attribution and the condition of the painting with Walker and Mr. Mellon.*

*About a month later, I left again for Vaduz, this time accompanied by the treasurer of the gallery, Ernest Fiedler, to take possession of the painting. In the*





2. Mario Modestini in Vaduz examining Leonardo da Vinci's *Ginevra de' Benci*.

meantime, technicians at the gallery had modified an ordinary Samsonite Tourist suitcase into a unique container for the panel. The conditions of temperature and humidity of the Vaduz wine cellar were reproduced inside the suitcase and could be maintained for the entire eight-hour journey. In the gallery, a room had been prepared with the same climatic conditions to receive the painting upon its arrival. The suitcase traveled with us in the first-class cabin in its own seat under the name "Mrs. Modestini." The curiosity of the other passengers was indescribable. A whole first-class seat for a Samsonite suitcase! What could possibly be inside? Whenever Ernie or I had to get up to use the bathroom, the other would take the seat next to the Samsonite case. It was snowing when we arrived in New York and the flight was delayed. No sooner had the plane landed and come to a stop than the doors opened and two FBI agents entered asking for Mr. Modestini. They identified themselves, grabbed the suitcase, and said, "Follow us." Mr. Mellon's private plane was waiting on the tarmac nearby to whisk us off to National Airport, where a private car took us directly to the gallery. By this time, it was nearly midnight.

A table had been prepared in the climate-controlled room. In front of the assembled staff, I opened the suitcase and removed the famous portrait. The painting is rather small and, when I took it out, it seemed to me that there was less excitement

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*than there might have been about the arrival of this much-desired object. Perhaps, after all, everyone was slightly disappointed to see this small panel of a modest young girl. However, by the next morning, the press had been informed and was in full cry. For days, nobody talked about anything except the Leonardo that had come to America. Time magazine wrote a detailed story, describing the clandestine security arrangements and code words.<sup>1</sup> I found an appropriate frame for the Ginevra, and she was hung on the walls of the National Gallery. Visitors stood in long lines to catch a glimpse of her, as they had several years earlier for the Mona Lisa, which had been loaned to Washington at the express wish of Jacqueline Kennedy. Naturally the two paintings cannot be compared, but Ginevra is the only painting by Leonardo that will ever belong to an American museum.*

It is my hope that this book will inform and entertain the reader with Mario's engaging stories of people and events, add to the historical record, and shed some light on the complexities created by the many vicissitudes in the life of old master paintings that are often revealed during their restoration, refracted through the life and career of one of the world's greatest practitioners of that art.