PART ONE

# The Making of a Restorer

Gone are the models from Ciociaria, gathered among the flower vendors on the steps of Trinità dei Monti, and the malarial and melancholy bogus herdsmen from the Roman countryside; the last bohemian flowing locks of hair and goatee beards have been cut off and the broad brims of the hats have shrunk considerably. The beautiful Roman street with its spacious, welcoming studios is now inhabited largely by gilded youth, scions of noble or wealthy families, expert daubers in their bachelor pads, who have substituted elegant silk dressing gowns from Via Condotti for the honest canvas duster spattered with multicolored paint. Enormous shiny cars belonging to the Diplomatic Corps block the famous road, while elegant figures with a furtive air come and go. The old Via Margutta is gone and there is no one left to lament its passing.

Giuliano Briganti, *Cosmopolita*, March 1, 1945

CHAPTER 1

# Early Years

Mario Modestini was born in Rome on April 11, 1907. His parents, Enrica Lattanzi (1868–1943) and Antonio Modestini (1865–1924), were from Umbria. Antonio's father was a gilder, who had worked in the Basilica of St. Francis of Assisi, and Antonio moved to Rome when he was fifteen to follow his father's trade. After spending several years working for different employers, he opened his own *bottega* at Via Margutta 50, specializing in gilding, frame making, and the restoration of polychromed and gilded decorative surfaces. Mario recalled visiting his father while Antonio was engaged in the restoration of the great fifteenth-century coffered ceiling of the nave of Santa Maria Maggiore; it was a massive undertaking and his father accomplished it single-handedly, working on a moveable scaffold tower.

Mario's mother, Enrica Lattanzi, originally came from Foligno, not far from Assisi, where her father was a jeweler and watchmaker. He had married Judith Faller from Mannheim in Germany, whom

he had met when she came into his shop to have her watch repaired. I believe that Mario inherited from his German grandmother several attributes of character—he was precise and well-organized, and always kept a cool head. Mario was the youngest of Antonio and Enrica's three children; Luigi was born in 1898, and Concetta, in 1902. Mario said that he passed his early childhood in his mother's kitchen. She was a traditional housewife, who spent all day cooking, preparing meals from excellent seasonal ingredients, and took no shortcuts. Her cooking combined Umbrian dishes with German specialties, such as strudel, which Mario remembered lovingly. His father was a gourmand, so Enrica's efforts did not go unappreciated. The family lived in a commodious apartment in a neighborhood of late nineteenth-century buildings, not far from the old central train station.

Modestini is not a common surname. Mario suggested it was probably Roman in origin, with Assisi and its surrounding area as its locus. Men called "Modestus" figure regularly in accounts from Roman history; one was a famous lawmaker, and his statue, which Mario often pointed out when we drove past it, stands in front of the Palazzo di Giustizia in Rome. A more recent ancestor, Beato Lucio Modestini, a merchant of Cannara (a hamlet in the plain below Assisi), appears in early histories of the Franciscan order; he was the first man to be invested into the Third Order of Franciscans, by St. Francis himself, in the year 1221. A plaque in Cannara commemorates the event. In 1816, Don Pasquale Modestini founded an institute for the education of disadvantaged boys and there is a statue of him in a church in Cannara. However, neither Mario nor his immediate family inherited this religious bent.

## The Spanish Flu

Mario's memoirs begin with events in 1918, toward the end of the First World War, when the *Influenza Spagnola*, the Spanish flu, arrived in Italy. He wrote:

*During the First World War, around 1918, there was a terrible epidemic called the Spanish flu. Hundreds of thousands died. In my family, which consisted of my father, my mother, my sister, and a brother—at that time in the army, at the front—everyone was bedridden with this influenza. I was eleven years old and seemed to be immune to the disease; therefore, I was the only one in the family still able to look after all the invalids. This meant not only taking care of them and giving them medicine, but also grocery shopping, preparing meals, and feeding everyone. During the war there was rationing, so coupons were needed to buy anything and everything, and you had to stand in line for hours, even for coal. From seven in the morning, when I rose, until eleven or eleven-thirty, there were endless queues of people waiting to buy food. Often, after having stood in line for hours, there was nothing left, and you had to return home empty-handed. My mother's sister, together with her husband, both died of the disease within a few days. They lived near us, and I tried to help them as well, but there was nothing that could be done.*

*One morning, while I was waiting on line for something or other, a truck loaded with sacks went by. One of the sacks fell off. Many of us went to see what was inside, hoping that it perhaps contained food, but horrified, we all drew back, repelled by a fetid odor. Inside, there was the body of a dead soldier. The supplies of coffins having been exhausted, bodies were put into sacks to bring them to the cemetery.*

*No sooner had my mother and father passed the critical phase of the disease when news arrived that my brother was dying in the military hospital in Turin; though still feverish, they got out of their sickbeds and immediately left for the north, where they found Luigi in desperate condition. He had already been moved into the ward of hopeless cases. They began to apply mustard plasters, which they had brought with them, to his back and chest. He had developed not only pneumonia but pleurisy as well. With their care and medications, they managed to save his life.*

The influenza virus responsible for the pandemic appears to have originated in military training camps in the United States during the spring of 1918 and spread quickly around the globe. It was nicknamed the Spanish flu because Spanish newspapers were the first to report the outbreak in Europe. In Italy, it made its appearance in May and, at first, seemed to be no worse than the usual seasonal cold. One of its many appellations was "summer fever" or "three-day fever," because the symptoms lasted for three or

four days. In July, sufferers began to exhibit more acute symptoms, with severe congestion accompanied by bacterial infections, and the mortality rate began to rise. The disease disappeared in late summer only to return with devastating ferocity in October. This pattern occurred in both Europe and America. Most of the victims were in the prime of life, between fifteen and forty years old. Medical experts disagreed about the cause. At first, some thought it was the return of the Black Death, because many of the afflicted turned purple from hemorrhagic fever before dying. Worried about civilian morale, which, as the war entered its fourth year, was already at a low, the Italian government imposed censorship on the press as well as on all correspondence leaving the country. Nonetheless, rumors spread, exaggerated by the absence of facts. Most of the nation's resources were concentrated on the front lines

3. Mario, approximately age ten.

at the Piave river, very close to Venice, where the military was locked in a bitterly contested stalemate with the Austro-Hungarians. The Italians finally won a decisive victory at the Battle of Vittorio Veneto, which took place at the end of October 1918 and coincided with the worst of the outbreak.

In the cities, there were so many dead that they could no longer be buried properly. Funerals were forbidden, along with the tolling of bells, and bodies were brought to a collection depot, many transported in bags due to a shortage of coffins. Army trucks and soldiers brought them to cemeteries, where the macabre sacks piled up. Relatives were denied access. The disease was highly contagious, and it was rapidly transmitted through the crowds that filled the churches to pray and stood in line for rationed food and fuel. The widespread habit of spitting in the street also spread the deadly virus. In the countryside, entire villages were abandoned; orphaned and hungry children wandered the streets.[1] Mario recalled that the situation was so dire that it seemed like the Apocalypse.

It is estimated that 400,000 Italians died of the flu between 1918 and 1920.[2] Exhausted and malnourished soldiers on the front were particularly vulnerable to the disease, which somehow afflicted three times as many German and Austro-Hungarian troops as their adversaries and was thus a factor in the outcome of the war. Worldwide, the virus killed fifty million people before disappearing in 1920.

## The Rome of Mario's Childhood

After the flu had disappeared—and following his heroic efforts to care for his family—Mario was able once more to enjoy life as a child. Of this period, he wrote:

*Finally, the war ended and I could return to school, which had been closed during the epidemic. I was thus reunited with a little friend of my age, for whom I felt more than friendship. Her name was Wanda; her grandfather was a designer, painter, and*

*decorator called Cantalamessa. Among other things, he designed a five-hundred-lire note for the State Treasury, which had great success and was one of the most beautiful bank notes that has ever been printed. He also painted the entrance hall of the Palazzo Simonetti on Via Vittoria Colonna. Every time I passed this building, I stopped to admire his work. It was a trompe l'oeil done in grisaille that was so amazingly executed that it created an illusion of three-dimensional space that would have fooled anybody. To my surprise and dismay [when I visited the location many years later] the hall had been painted white. In Rome, I have seen many wonderful things of this sort obliterated.*

Another of Mario's favorite places was the Cinema Corso in Piazza San Lorenzo in Lucina, built in 1918. When I first went to Rome with Mario, he was thrilled to take me there. By then the walls were covered with fake red damask wallpaper, and I could see that Mario was disappointed and upset. He explained to me that the interior, when it was first built, was the most innovative architectural project in the city. The architect, Marcello Piacentini (1881–1960), later became the master builder for the Fascist regime. The official style he developed, which can still be seen all over Rome, is ponderous and massive. However, as a young man, Piacentini was adventurous and readily absorbed the influence of the new styles, represented by the Bauhaus and such innovative architects as Le Corbusier and Josef Hoffmann and, with the Cinema Corso, he designed something so avant-garde that it caused public outcry. He was ordered by the court to modify the façade of the cinema at his own expense. However, it was the interior that presented a radical departure from traditional theaters; built entirely of reinforced concrete, the second and third balconies floated in space without support columns. The decorative scheme was influenced by the Vienna Secession and there were bas-reliefs and mosaics by two of the most important art-deco sculptors of the era, the animaliers Alfredo Biagini and Arturo Dazzi.

Mario was terribly downcast by the destruction of the Cinema Corso and incredulous that the authorities had allowed such a thing to happen. He was so disgusted that we didn't stay to see the

movie but went to dinner instead to console ourselves with good food and wine. Today, only the façade remains, the interior having been converted into a Louis Vuitton store.

## The Rise of Fascism

In Italy, the period following the First World War was a time of great social unrest and economic distress. Italy had fought hard against the Austrians and was ultimately successful. Of the 5.5 million men deployed, there were more than 2 million injuries, and 655,000 lives were lost. At the peace conference in Versailles, where the victors divided the spoils, Italy was disappointed to receive only the formerly Austrian area of the Tyrol. Though ambitions to acquire colonies in East Africa may have been unrealistic, the failure to gain the Italian-speaking peninsula of Istria was bitterly received, not least because the citizens of Istria had voted in favor of Italian rule, particularly those of Fiume in Croatia, an important deep-water port on the Adriatic. The settlement was called the *vittoria mutilata* (the mutilated victory) by some of the veterans of the Alpine campaign. Gabriele D'Annunzio, who in addition to being a famous journalist, novelist, playwright, and poet was also a highly-decorated soldier and had served as an airman in the war, became a hero for the disenchanted veterans known as the *Arditi*, the shock troops who had fought most aggressively in the Alps. In 1915, D'Annunzio had been a passionate *interventista,* advocating for Italy's entrance into the war, and now he felt that his country, after all its sacrifices, had been betrayed. He and his followers, many wearing black shirts or sweaters that had been part of their military uniforms, marched on Fiume in September 1919, occupying the city until Italian government troops ousted them a year later in December 1920.

This episode made an impression on the ex-Socialist war hero, journalist, orator, and publisher of the Milan-based right-wing newspaper *Popolo d'Italia*, Benito Mussolini (1883–1945). Meanwhile,

on the left, the Socialists and Marxists, who had opposed Italy's participation in the war, mounted daily demonstrations, occupations, and strikes. Between June 1919 and October 1922, the office of the prime minister changed four times. In October 1919, the government passed a bill authorizing the formation of an extra-military force of forty thousand troops, the *Guardia Regia,* to quell the demonstrations in the streets. Mario vividly recalled the traumatic outcome of one of these demonstrations:

*One day, I found myself in the middle of a leftist demonstration with a school friend, Nino Longobardi. We were on a street that intersected with a square in which a large political assembly was being held. As we neared the square, my friend leaned around the corner of a building to see what was happening. At that instant, a group of Guardia Regia fired a volley at the crowd, and he was hit in the head by a bullet that killed him on the spot. I leaned over his lifeless body and realized there was nothing that could be done. Unfortunately, there were others killed and wounded in that demonstration, and they were not the last. Things continued in this way for a long time, the situation growing worse and worse. One government succeeded another without effecting any improvement in the situation, until finally, with the permission of the monarchy, Mussolini and his Fascist Party took over and ultimately destroyed the nation.*

During the civil conflict, three thousand civilians died. The economy was in a disastrous state, with high inflation, unemployment, and rampant hunger. From the wings, Mussolini maneuvered to take advantage of the situation. Failing to gain more than a handful of votes in the election of 1919, he organized the disparate squads of veterans fighting the Socialists into a group he called *Fasci di Combattimento* [Fighting Units]. They wore the black shirts of D'Annunzio's *Arditi* as a uniform. The leaders in each province, the *ras*,[3] gradually came under his control as well. There were fierce clashes between the Fascists and Socialists.

During one summer night in 1922, the Blackshirts burned Socialist and Communist homes and headquarters in the provinces of Ravenna, Forlí, and Ferrara, and not long afterward, northern

Italy was entirely in their hands. Mussolini's strategy was to further destabilize the government through this violence. Eventually, he united the various Fascist squadrons under the umbrella of a new national party, the Partito Nazionale Fascista (PNF). Deftly sidestepping D'Annunzio, Mussolini announced that his followers would march on Rome. The fragile liberal government crumbled, and on October 28, 1922, King Vittorio Emanuele III succumbed to the widespread fear of a Bolshevik-style revolution and asked Mussolini to form a new government.

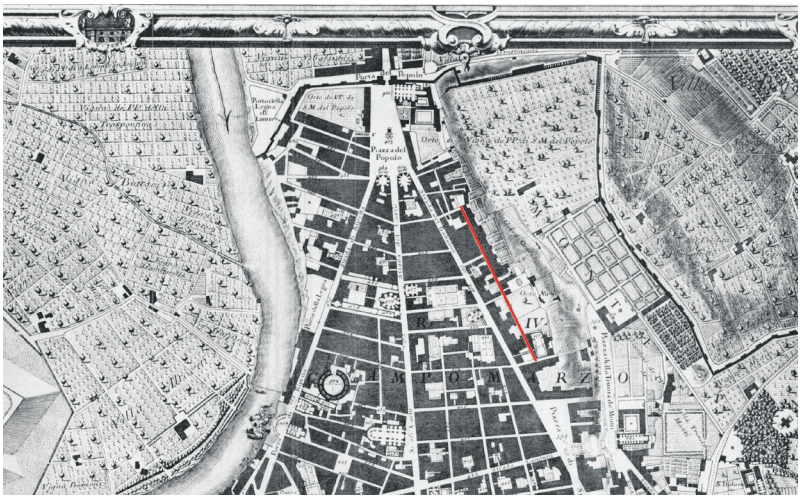
4. Benito Mussolini, ca. 1925.

## Via Margutta

This was part of the backdrop to Mario's young life. In 1922, he was fifteen years old and apprenticed to his father. He had finished middle school at fourteen and was determined to become a painter, despite pressure from his father to continue his studies and become a doctor of medicine like his uncle, Guglielmo. Mario begged to be allowed to work in his father's shop on Via Margutta, the street of artists. His father tried to dissuade his son from the profession by giving him the most tedious and unenjoyable tasks, one of which was to prepare the gilder's whiting, *gesso di Bologna*, which came in little cakes. First, it had to be shaved into flakes, then ground with water on a slab of marble using a glass muller. His father's assistants told Mario that he would know when the gesso was ground finely enough when it started to smell of garlic. So, he ground diligently, eventually noticing that all the men were laughing, and he finally got the joke. He was also the delivery boy and rode his bicycle all over Rome, carrying his father's frames. Antonio Modestini loved good food and wine, and Mario inherited these tastes. Every day, just before lunchtime, Mario would bicycle home, collect the proper three-course meal his mother had prepared, and bring it to his father at his shop. Today, it would take a long time to cover that same distance, but in those days, the streets were empty and the traffic consisted mainly of bicycles and horse-drawn vehicles, including trams, with very few automobiles.

Via Margutta was an enchanting place and was originally settled by painters from northern Europe in the seventeenth century. Its real heyday, however, was during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when painters from all over Europe flocked to Rome. This retardataire world continued into the early twentieth century when Mario was a boy, and was the scene of some of his fondest memories.

Although I had spent a good deal of time in Rome, I was not familiar with the tucked-away Via Margutta until I met Mario. As



5. Detail of a map of Rome in 1748, by Giuseppe Nolli.
Via Margutta is indicated in red.

there were no important churches or works of art to visit, I never had reason to pass that way. For Mario, however, the street was a magnet, and as soon as we arrived in the city, he led us there. As we happily explored the neighborhood hand in hand, Mario told me of the area's history and his life there in the 1920s and 1930s. The gate of 51A, the Studi Rasinelli, one of the many places on the Via Margutta where Mario had lived, was usually open, and he would stop by and chat with its residents, some of whom Mario had known since his youth, such as the sculptor Pericle Fazzini (1913–1987), whose enormous studio was on the right as one entered. Fazzini adopted a modernist style in his youth and is best known for his extensive work in the Vatican.[4] He died not long after I first met him, but his wife, Anita, kept the studio for some time.

Mario was well-known and liked in Via Margutta and the surrounding streets, and he was always greeted enthusiastically. The fact that he had gone to America and become a great success was a source of pride among his former neighbors. He showed me where his father's *bottega* had been, at number 50, and the sites of

the *Accademia Inglese* and the *Scuola Libera del Nudo*, where he was finally able to work from live models rather than plaster casts. I tried to imagine the street as it was then, and Mario as an aspiring painter, working in his garret, fooling around with his friends, playing jokes on each other, dressing up for *Carnevale*, and competing in spaghetti-eating contests.

Mario said that when he was working for his father, there were art studios, art dealers, and artisans of every sort on the Via Margutta: bronze casters, model makers, frame makers, carpenters, potters, printers, and specialists in every branch of the decorative arts. It was an artists' colony—some might have called it an independent nation—right in the center of Rome between the Piazza del Popolo and the Spanish Steps. Here, everyone knew everyone else and what they were up to, both professionally and personally. People gathered in small groups outside the studio

6. Via Margutta, looking towards Piazza del Popolo.

entrances, busily gossiping about their colleagues and spreading the latest news. Mario described how, in between jobs, models would stroll about in their traditional Ciociarian folk costumes—Ciociaria being the barren, mountainous district south of Rome, to which Sophia Loren fled in the film *La Ciociara (Two Women)*. Their attire, familiar from countless nineteenth-century paintings, consisted of a low-cut bodice under which they wore a high-necked blouse made of thin, white linen with large, puffy sleeves. Across these were bands of drawn-work. They also wore a sort of apron made from colorful pieces of heavy fabric worked in imitation of brocade. A lace scarf was tied around the neck, and on their heads, they wore a cloth of white material which, folded in various ways, helped to balance the articles they carried there. Both men and women wore primitive shoes made of thick leather and fixed with laces, *ciociari*, that criss-crossed the leg.

Mario recalled that the Ciociarians were exceptionally handsome and gracious people. By the end of the nineteenth century, they were popular subjects, indispensable for certain kinds of paintings, and a few became celebrities and muses for the artists for whom they posed. In the early morning, they would gather in Piazza di Spagna, at the foot of the steps, and wait to be hired by painters from the nearby Via Margutta. To pass the time, they would play pipes and horns and dance the *saltarello*.[5] Mario was utterly fascinated by them and could still recall their names and histories later in life.

The world of professional models underlines the degree to which painting in early twentieth-century Rome was notably static, a trend that persisted into the 1920s and '30s, in comparison with the artistic revolution taking place elsewhere. Sentimental subjects, such as cardinals and musketeers, painted in oil or watercolor, were popular with tourists, as were conventional landscapes, animal paintings, and of course, portraiture. Many of the artists of the day were excellent painters, but their work was out of fashion even at the time they were making it, and today most of their names have been forgotten except by a few experts. Among the most highly


7. Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot, *Italian Girl*, 1872, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington DC, 65.2 × 55.1 cm.

regarded were Gerolamo Induno (1827-1890), Mariano Fortuny (1871–1949), Giorgio Szoldaticz (1873–1955), Enrico Coleman (1846–1911), and Giulio Aristide Sartorio (1860–1932).

The conventional buildings on the Via del Babuino side of the Via Margutta contained apartments with rooms improvised for painters to work. On the other (Pincio) side, there were large

complexes of purpose-built art studios. The sculpture studios were on the street level, with forty-foot ceilings and enormous windows set high in the walls, while those for painters were, for the most part, top-lit, and some even had mezzanines with miniscule living quarters. Some of them were very grand and filled with exotic objects to be used as props in the paintings: oriental carpets, easels, couches, and heavy antique furniture. Framed paintings hung floor to ceiling on walls. Other spaces, such as some of those in which Mario lived, were just cubbyholes and garrets. The Studi Rasinelli, Via Margutta 51A, is the largest of these establishments, with studios that go all the way to the top of the Pincian Hill along a series of winding paths and stairs. Highly evocative, it was here that Gregory Peck lived in the film *Roman Holiday*.

8. Giuseppe Signorini (1857–1932), a successful Orientalist painter, in his Paris studio (Frick Photoarchive); his studio on Via Margutta would have been very similar.

Via Margutta is still suffused with magic, and although it is no longer exclusively the domain of painters and sculptors, many artists and art galleries remain. After the war, the neighborhood became popular in the film world. Federico Fellini and Marcello Mastroianni lived there. Today, it remains a tight-knit community with an active street life—it is closed to traffic—and everyone still seems to know each other.

Mario's enchantment with the life of Via Margutta influenced him for the rest of his life. Its painters were his heroes, romantic figures whom he strived to emulate. Because of them, he clung to his passion for art despite his father's opposition and, through a series of unforeseen events, launched his career as a restorer of paintings.

CHAPTER 2

# From Art Student to Art Restorer

## Art School

While Mario was falling in love with the picturesque world of the Via Margutta, he was also acquiring the fundamentals of traditional painting at the Scuola Preparatoria alle Arti Ornamentali (Preparatory School for the Decorative Arts), a well-known local art school. Mario enrolled in the three-year course in 1921 and excelled in the traditional draftsmanship taught there, a talent that would serve him well in his future career as a restorer.

The art school was situated near Via Margutta on Via San Giacomo. It had originally been known as Via degli Incurabili, named for the ancient hospital for incurable diseases that had once stood there. Naturally, the boys preferred the original street name that gave the school its nickname and took to calling themselves 'the incurables.' Classes were held in the evenings from seven until ten. Two courses of study were offered: industrial design and

pictorial decoration. Mario chose the latter. He wrote of his time there:

*The director was a restorer, Venturini Papari (terrible restorer!), who also taught various painting techniques such as encaustic, claiming to know the secret ingredients of this famous medium used by the ancient Romans. For the first two years, the teacher was Professor Mezzana who was a painter of modest abilities. Among my schoolmates were a few boys my age who are today considered important artists such as Scipione, Zivieri and Mafai, the founder of the so-called Scuola Romana. Among the students there was one who became a lifelong friend, Amleto De Santis. We worked together for many years and his death in 1980 was a terrible loss. He was gifted and showed great talent as a painter. In fact, I considered him superior to Mafai, who later became famous. Another friend was Angelo Della Torre, about two years older than we, who was also gifted but, in time, lost his way and today is unknown.*

*[There was another boy in my class] whom we called the Messiah. The reason for this nickname was due to the fact that, as he came from a rich Roman family, he always had money in his pockets. I think his father was a developer. When school let out in the evening we used to go to a bar on Via del Traforo that, after ten in the evening, sold the day's pastries for half price (two soldi) and he would buy three or four for each of us and naturally the group grew because other students heard about this largesse.*

*The Messiah's father had a black Chrysler New Yorker. Sometimes our rich friend would pick us up from school and five or six of us would drive around Rome in this fantastic automobile. At that time, there were many ladies of the night in the center of Rome near Piazza di Spagna, especially along Via Babuino and Via Condotti. As we passed them we would slow down and when they saw this big shiny car they all came around to inspect the occupants. When they saw that we were just a bunch of kids, they would move off again, disappointed. Often, especially when the moon was full, we gathered in the squares of ancient Rome and marveled at the beauties of the city.*

*During the four years that I attended school, I always won first prize in the final examinations. This consisted of one hundred lire. I guess this was because my way of drawing and painting was realistic and academic and I could draw quickly and correctly. In fact, when an exercise had been set, I always completed it before anyone else, no matter what the medium. Zivieri would always ask me, sotto voce, if I would come and finish his study before the professor came back.*

The Scuola Romana was a modern school of figurative painting that enjoyed considerable success in Italy although the movement did not have an international impact. Mario was always a bit skeptical about Mafai and Scipione, and I had the distinct impression that he felt they had turned to modern art simply because they were not able to master traditional academic technique. He didn't think much of popular painters such as Mario Sironi (1885–1961) or Filippo De Pisis (1896–1956) and regarded the work of the highly-fêted Renato Guttuso (1912–1987) with complete disgust. Guttuso was a Fascist out of convenience, who became a Communist after 1943, and Mario considered him to be an utter sham, politically and artistically.

In 1923, during his third and final year at the 'Incurabili', Mario studied under Antonino Calcagnadoro (1876–1935). Calcagnadoro worked on public projects, such as the lunettes in the monument to Vittorio Emanuele II, and Mario adored him. The students worked in both charcoal and glue tempera painting on paper, both of which required good draftsmanship and an understanding of the chiaroscuro techniques employed in creating illusionistic trompe l'oeil decorative paintings. Calcagnadoro was exacting and insisted that his pupils work within the method he was teaching. He wanted nothing to do with modernism. Mario loved to tell the story of the time Calcagnadoro threw Mario Mafai out of the class in a rage. To my surprise, I came across Mafai's version of the incident in the catalogue of an exhibition in Rieti in honor of Calcagnadoro, a native son. Mafai wrote:

> I have no recollection of how I ended up in that industrial school of the 'Incurables' … The teacher was an old-school decorative painter with a changeable temperament, at times good-natured and at other times in a black mood … He taught his system conscientiously and with dedication … On large sheets of thick gray paper that the custodian had fixed onto stretchers, we copied casts of figures, baroque fruit, and classical fragments, against backgrounds of beautifully colored

drapes to which were added objects such as fruit, musical instruments or stuffed birds. The exercise required filling up the entire sheet with exactitude, rendering all the relationships correctly, using gesso and charcoal to make a perfect copy so that there were no distortions or interpretations of any sort. When this was finished, the drawing was fixed to the wall and filled in with color. One used so-called pastels: taking brown, and adding more or less white lead to obtain a certain number of gradations. We ground them in water on a slate palette with a little jar of glue on the side. … One evening, in front of a lovely plaster cast, dusted with the reflections of warm, provocative tones from the colorful drapery, I broke the rules. The jars full of beautiful cadmiums, red lead, and ultramarine tempted me. Instead of grinding up the usual tones of brown I made myself a nice palette of forbidden color. … That was my last evening because I never had the courage to present myself again to Calcagnadoro.[1]

9. Mario at around age 20.

These relatively carefree days ended abruptly in September 1924, with both the building turmoil in Italy's political and economic fortunes and his father Antonio's sudden and shattering death. Antonio died after a brief illness not long after Mario had completed his course. Only seventeen, he had to take over the *bottega*, where he was responsible for several employees, as well as assume the support of his mother and sister. His brother, Luigi, was married and had his own responsibilities.

For a time, Mario tried to keep the business going and took on some painting projects, assisted by his father's workmen. For example, he painted the still-extant decorations in the dining room of the Albergo Roma (now the Grand Hotel Plaza) on the Corso. He described how boring and uncomfortable it was to stand for hours on the scaffold, paint dripping down his arm. As a source of amusement on this project, the men would paint the shoes of the person standing above them. Eventually, however, Mario lost the business, and it was a period he never discussed. He would later remind his children that he'd had to become a man by the time he was seventeen. During that difficult period, he spent a lost year at the billiard parlor in Via del Babuino, where he specialized in *Parigina*, a version of the game that is played with three balls on a table without pockets, using only the right hand. Evidently, he was a bit of a hustler and earned money from people placing bets on him. He also boxed for a time, until he got his nose broken. His friends called him Lionello d'Este, after the famous portrait by Pisanello, which Mario might well have resembled at that age.

## Political Changes and Becoming a Restorer

The year 1924 was significant for Mario not only because of his father's death, but also because of the change in the political climate. In June of 1924, Giacomo Matteotti, a deputy in the parliament and a leading Socialist intellectual, was assassinated by Fascist thugs. His body was found two months later, not far

from Rome. During the ensuing uproar, the Fascists (PNF) faced expulsion from the coalition government. Mussolini succeeded not only in salvaging his party but also used the opportunity to crack down on the free press, and thus the real dictatorship began. It was then that he became known as *Il Duce*.

Mario had Socialist leanings, and besides, he was not disposed to joining organizations, so he never enrolled in the PNF. After 1925, it became nearly impossible to work without a party card. Most Italians chose to sign an oath of allegiance to *Il Duce* rather than risk their jobs, but since Mario didn't work for an official employer,

10. Mario and friends in Rome, ca. 1930, perhaps making preparations for *Carnevale*. Back row, from left: Alberto Rosati, painter; Ezio Chirici, painter; Mario Modestini. Front row, from left: Alberto Montori, architect; Vincenzo Fiordigiglio, sculptor; Arnaldo Foresti, painter.

his circumstances weren't really affected by the new regulations. However, he found himself barred from most opportunities for professional advancement. Fortunately, the anarchic traditions of the colony of artists on the Via Margutta enabled him to earn a living working for private clients without having to deal with the regime.

Mario had easily passed the entrance exams for the Scuola Libera del Nudo and the British Academy of Arts, known as the Accademia Inglese to Italians, when both were still located on Via Margutta. These memberships gave him a foothold into the world of professional artists and must have distracted him from his many problems during this period. He found friends among a group of somewhat older artists he met in the drawing schools and the studios of the Via Margutta.

Alberto Rosati (1893–1971) was one of the painting teachers at the Accademia Inglese. He and Mario became friends. Mario's written memories of him evoke the hardship of those times:

*[Rosati] was about ten years older than I was, but at eighteen, I seemed at least five years older than my chronological age, perhaps because of the responsibilities I had assumed. He was a true Bohemian. He lived in a studio at 51 Via Margutta and was a passionate devotee of classical music. He knew all the musicians and could recognize the composer of any piece of music from the first note. He was a good painter, very poetic, in the way Morandi's work is poetic. He rarely was able to sell a painting. He was terribly poor; in the winter, his studio was freezing and his meals were frugal, generally consisting of a tomato and a piece of bread. This was his lunch. A few times I invited him to the local restaurant, Trattoria del Lupone, on the Vicolo del Babuino, and how we celebrated! Eventually he met a Dutch girl whom he married, and they moved to Florence.*

Mario always had many girlfriends and was attracted to the models he met in the drawing classes. In his book about the Via Margutta, Augusto Jandolo, a famous denizen of the street during the time Mario lived there, commemorates some of the most famous models of the era.[2] Mario treasured this record of

the painters, models, and studios he knew, and he penciled in many annotations in his copy. Under the photograph of one of the models, he noted in red pencil, "Vanda! 1927–28. Fiordigiglio played an incredible trick on us!" I was very curious about this trick, but he absolutely did not want to tell me the story. Mario's friends, it seems, were always teasing him about women. Almost all Italian artists have nicknames, for example Sandro Filipepi, known in art as Botticelli (little barrels); Mario was known as *Il Gattaccio,* the alley cat. He didn't wish to elaborate on the reasons for that but, shrugging, he did admit that once two girls got into a fight over him in front of his father's shop.

Not long after his father's death, Mario had his first experience with the restoration of antique paintings. His client was Kurt Cassirer (1883-1975), a member of the distinguished German Jewish family that included the Berlin art dealer, Paul Cassirer, who was among the early supporters of both Cézanne and Vincent van Gogh. Kurt Cassirer was a scholar of French and Italian baroque architecture[3] and travelled extensively in Italy. One day, he brought Mario a small gold-ground painting, Tuscan school, dated in the early 1400s. The gold background was ruined, and Cassirer wanted Mario, with his training in gilding, to recreate it and put the painting in order. Mario was intrigued by this idea. There were no schools of restoration at that time, and the skills required were generally learned through an apprenticeship with an experienced restorer. Mario's passion for antique paintings had inspired him to study all of the great works in Rome and other Italian art centers. In our discussions, he was critical of many of the successful restorers of those days, and he told me he would not have wanted to work for them. "Dogs!" he would exclaim, and point out examples of paintings in the Vatican or some other museum in Rome that they had ruined.

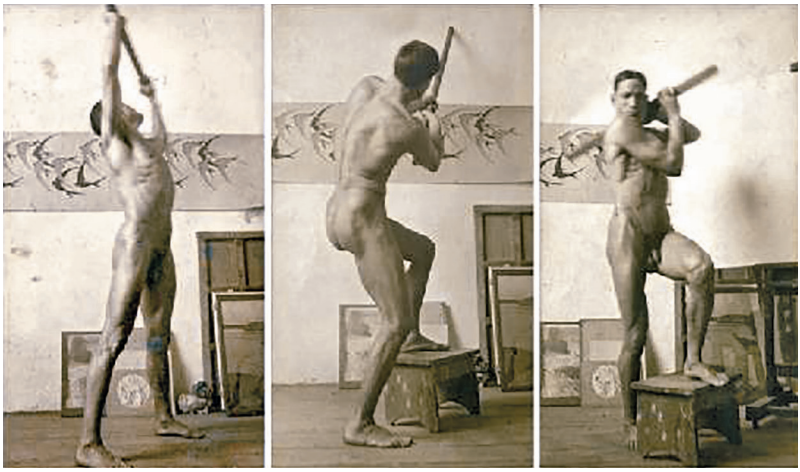
So, bringing all his sensitivity and intelligence to the task, he decided to teach himself how to restore old master paintings. He borrowed a book from his friend, Alberto Rosati, the manual by Count Giovanni Secco Suardo (1798–1873), *Il restauratore dei dipinti,*[4]

which contained detailed descriptions, as well as illustrations of materials and procedures. This book, together with the many things he had learned from his father about gilding and polychrome sculpture, as well as his own study and practice in drawing and painting, formed the basis of his knowledge. Cassirer was pleased with the result of the restoration of his little painting, and Mario embarked on this new career path.

## The Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna

Mario also continued his father's work as a frame restorer for the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna in Valle Giulia, which at that time showcased nineteenth-century Italian works by many of the painters he most admired. This museum was one of the first places Mario wanted to take me in Rome and, as I had heard so much about it, we were both eagerly looking forward to our visit. However, when we arrived, we were shocked to see only a handful of nineteenth-century paintings installed in a poorly lit space, not even a proper gallery. Elsewhere, post-war works dominated. Mario was furious. It was the first time I would hear him cynically refer to the triumvirate he called, "burro, manzo, e pomodoro"—literally "butter, beef, and tomatoes"—a reference to three famous Italian modern artists: Alberto Burri (1915–1995), Piero Manzoni (1933–1963), and Arnaldo Pomodoro (b. 1926).

The Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna was founded in 1883 and was initially housed in the Palazzo delle Esposizioni. In 1911, a dedicated building was constructed on the Valle Giulia. The National Gallery had a history of distinguished directors; the first was the history painter Francesco Jacovacci (1838–1908), an esteemed figure of the period. He was succeeded by Ugo Fleres (1858–1939) who came from an aristocratic Sicilian family and had innate fine taste and sophistication. His salon in Rome included fellow Sicilian realists Luigi Pirandello and Giovanni Verga, all opponents of the florid decadence of Gabriele D'Annunzio.



11. A model striking the heroic poses popular with the Fascist regime in a Roman studio in the late 1920s or early 1930s. I came across this image entirely by chance on the website of Anticoli Corrado, a town from which many models hailed. Mario often talked about a frieze of swallows he painted for the officer's club of the Aeronautica (Air Force) during the period when he shared a studio with the sculptor, Vincenzo Fiordigiglio. Improbable as it seems, this could be their studio.

His interests led him to become a prolific critic of both literature and art, the latter associated particularly with the studios in and around Via Margutta.

His hanging of the galleries, arranged chronologically and by school, was, in Mario's opinion, exemplary and in impeccable taste. During the 1920s the gallery did not have a restorer and, recognizing Mario's skills and potential, Fleres proposed that he should work on the collection. Thus, a workspace was created on the ground floor, where there was good natural light, and Mario, cautious because of his limited experience, began to work on some paintings.

After Fleres retired, Roberto Papini (1883–1957), professor of the history of architecture at the University of Florence, was appointed to the role in 1933. Papini wanted to get to know the staff, and he became interested in Mario's work:

*Although I was much younger than he was, a friendship soon grew between us. He often visited the gallery with groups of art history students, who were very interested in restoration. At that time, unlike today, there were no specialized courses in restoration. Papini was married to a Hungarian sculptress, Livia De Kuzmik, much younger than he, a beautiful woman who was also charming. She managed to communicate well in her not very good Italian and we also became friends. It was she who introduced me to one of her model makers, Vincenzo Fiordigiglio, himself a sculptor, and we too became friends. In fact, his studio was at number 51 Via Margutta so we saw each other often. He was not a gifted sculptor but he was an excellent craftsman, which made up for his artistic deficiencies. I began to spend much of my time with him and he encouraged me to continue to paint, which is what I had always really wanted to do. We worked together, he on his sculptures while I painted nudes or still lives. As a result, I neglected my father's business and one day I decided to close the shop and spend all my time painting in Vincenzo's studio.*

Many people were kind to Mario at this time, and I believe this was not only because of his tough circumstances. He attracted people throughout his life with his intelligence, innate courtesy, discretion, and that special Italian distinction of being 'simpatico'.

## Fascism and the Arts

While Mario and his friends remained marginally employed throughout the thirties, Rome was buzzing with artistic activity. As a young man, Mussolini had been instructed in the arts by his mistress and patron, Margherita Sarfatti, an independently wealthy Jewish Socialist and art critic who wrote widely about contemporary art and had an active salon in Milan that Mussolini frequented. The two fell passionately in love and had a close relationship for many years. Mussolini was convinced that the new, contemporary styles were well-suited to expressing the dynamism of the Fascist Party. In fact, Italian Futurism, which exalted speed, the machine age, masculinity, war, and violence, was also a proto-Fascist political movement.

Truth be told, art seems to have bored Mussolini, but he found it useful in the creation of Fascist propaganda and ritual. There is no question that on the face of it the regime was very good for the arts—at least, in so far as it created employment opportunities, though most of the content was pure propaganda. Making art to celebrate the heroic new spirit of Fascist Italy became a small industry, employing hundreds, if not thousands, of painters, sculptors, architects, and craftsmen of all sorts. Artists and architects produced settings for Fascist pomp and festivals, and constructed and decorated thousands of new buildings, sports complexes, monuments, even entire towns that were being erected all over Italy, as well as in the African colonies. There was so much work that some crumbs fell even to artists who were not members of the party. Rome was at the center of this frenzy, and it was filled with contemporary art galleries to satisfy the desires of the innumerable collectors flocking to the capital.

The new architecture was eclectic, and many cutting-edge examples of modernism were produced. These have only recently


12. Petrol station in Asmara, Eritrea, by Giuseppe Pettazzi.

begun to be differentiated from the overwhelming number of tedious buildings typically associated with Imperial Fascism and produced under the direction of the formerly avant-garde architect of the Cinema Corso, Marcello Piacentini. The city of Asmara in Eritrea, an Italian colony until 1947, became a laboratory for cutting-edge design and has recently been listed as a UNESCO world heritage site.

The exhibition held in 1932 to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the March on Rome (Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista), was an extraordinary manifestation of modern art in the service of the regime. Giuseppe Terragni and Adalberto Libera, both protagonists in the innovative Rational Architecture Movement, transformed the old-fashioned Palazzo delle Esposizioni into an immense red cube with giant, stylized fasces and axes protruding from the facade. Inside, huge panels quoted the many ridiculous slogans of the Duce that had become part of daily life—such as "*Meglio vivere un giorno da leone, che cento anni da pecora*" ("Better to live one day as a lion than one hundred years as a sheep") and the ubiquitous "*Mussolini ha sempre ragione*" or "Mussolini is always right." It amused Mario to make fun of these mottoes, and he would sometimes tease me when I made a suggestion saying, "*Baby ha sempre ragione*." Apart from the propaganda purpose of the enterprise, the installations must have been visually compelling, at least to the degree that they can be judged by the poor illustrations available. Most rooms contained massive cubist panoramas, innovative in their design, each with a different, grandiose theme. One by Adalberto Libera called the *Sacrarium*, a shrine to Fascist "martyrs"—that is, the thugs who were killed during the civil disturbances of the period post World War I—brings to mind a neo-conceptual style, similar to the work of Jenny Holzer, *avant la lettre.* Artists rarely have the luxury of choosing their patrons.

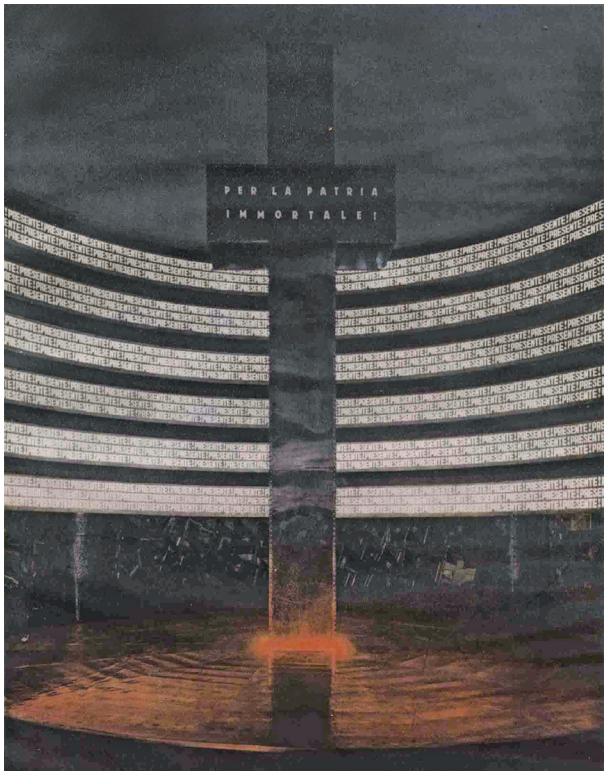
The exhibition remained open for two years and, boosted by government subsidies, was widely attended. Mussolini was enthusiastic about it, which is somewhat surprising given that other totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century were uncomfortable

with radical contemporary art. Lenin crushed the Russian avant-garde shortly after he came into power, and Hitler's hatred of "degenerate" art is well-known.

Many of the artists themselves were far from being convinced Fascists. There is an inherent contradiction in this situation, which has made it difficult to judge Italian modernism between the wars. Some of the finest public buildings and spaces associated with the regime have deteriorated due to neglect. Italians have largely ignored much of the architectural legacy of Fascism, not wanting any reminders of the period they refer to simply as the *ventennio* or two decades.


13. *Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista,* 1932, Giuseppe Terragni, Sala "O", an interpretation of events between January and October 1922.

In this period, Mario made the acquaintance of Prince Piero Colonna (1891–1939), a scion of one of the greatest Roman families, when the prince commissioned a sculpture from Vincenzo Fiordigiglio. Don Piero, as he was known, was an ardent Fascist and one of the earliest members of the PNF. He wanted his office in the headquarters of the provincial government, Palazzo Valentini, to have an appropriately Fascist theme, and asked Fiordigiglio to create a decorative scheme for the vast room. Fiordigiglio brought Mario into the project to design maps of Rome during its various historical periods for the walls, and the requisite symbols of fasci, laurel wreaths, and profiles of Mussolini for the ceiling coffers.[5]




14. *Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista*, 1932, Adalberto Libera, The "Sacrarium", dedicated to Fascist martyrs.

Such things were, of course, destroyed after Rome was liberated from the Nazis in 1944, although there were many that could not be removed because they were part of the architecture itself. Fascist images and inscriptions can still be seen all around Rome. If you look carefully, you can even spot *Il Duce*'s helmeted head and unmistakable profile.

While Mario's views on contemporary art were mixed, he was unequivocally critical of Mussolini's aspirations to turn Rome into a world capital through the destruction of many of the old neighborhoods. Mussolini effectively changed the face of Rome with his projects. For instance, he created wide avenues that highlighted the ruins of classical antiquity at the cost of the *sventramento* (or "the gutting") of the historic center. He tore down


15. Marcello Piacentini striding through Rome, pulling out its guts, in a print by Mino Maccari, *Mors tua vita mea.* Cover of *Il Selvaggio*, March 15, 1942.

the medieval and Renaissance quarters, and while they may have reeked of squalor by modern standards (as Mussolini never failed to point out), they contained many important buildings, the loss of which was lamented even at the time.

Of all these "urban renewal" projects, what upset Mario most was the loss of the Augusteo Theater, where he had gone to hear music since he was a child. His father took him to the Augusteo to see his first opera, which became a lifelong passion. Mario said, and many critics agree, that the acoustics of the Augusteo were perfect. It had been erected on the site of the great circular tomb Emperor Augustus built in 29 BC for himself and his family. With the exception of Nero, all the Roman emperors until Nerva (96–98 AD) were buried in this mausoleum. The masonry was massive and, even after it was sacked by the Goths in the seventh century, enough of it still stood to serve as a fortress for the Colonna family. After that clan was expelled in 1241 AD, Pope Gregory IX stripped the site of all useable materials. It then went through a series of owners and transformations until the city of Rome built an auditorium of circular shape on top of the original foundations of the mausoleum. Mario recalled that everyone went to the Augusteo. The cheapest tickets cost twenty-five centesimi, which practically anyone could afford, and, in fact, these were the most exciting seats, because here there were boos and whistles, as well as cheers and calls for encores.

Mario never ceased to mourn the Augusteo's destruction and, whenever he recollected his childhood there, his anger against Mussolini surfaced and raged all over again. The last performance was on May 13, 1936. Mussolini's intention was to excavate the imperial tombs, liberate a zone for traffic, and, as he put it, create hygiene. This project lead to the sacrifice of 120 medieval and Renaissance buildings which were replaced by the particularly ugly buildings of the newly created Piazza Augusto Imperatore, where, ironically, Mario would later have a studio.

As much as Mario disdained certain modern artists, there were others that he worshipped. He loved Giorgio Morandi as well as

Umberto Boccioni, a great painter and sculptor who worked with the Futurists and died tragically young during the First World War. When Mario had a chance to work with one of Boccioni's friends, the painter Emilio Notte, he was ecstatic:

*The treasurer of the Gallery of Modern Art, Commendatore Alberto Rosa, was a bon vivant, he loved food, wine, and, above all, women. His wife, a wonderful woman and an excellent cook, was ugly, fat and had a lot of facial hair. He was a Fascist, the podestà [chief official] of San Polo dei Cavalieri, a small town near Tivoli. He was also the treasurer and curator of Villa d'Este. In the villa, there is a small collection of paintings and I began to restore some of these. While I was working there I got to know the painter Emilio Notte who had been engaged by Commendatore Rosa to paint a frieze in one of the rooms. He was a wonderful painter, a friend and admirer of Boccioni; in fact, Calvesi mistakenly published one of his paintings as a Boccioni. Emilio Notte asked me to help him knowing that I was studying painting. My 'help' consisted of pricking the paper designs for transfer to the wall and grinding colors but I admired Notte enormously and loved being with him, watching him work. We often had lunch together.*

*One day in early October some of the guards invited us for lunch in a country restaurant. They all were natives of Tivoli and had small vineyards. After lunch, they invited us to visit the cantinas and taste their wines. We began to make the rounds. At each cantina, we tasted various wines made from the new harvest. After the third or fourth cantina, we were no longer thinking very clearly. There was one cantina left to visit, where, as I recall, we had to go down a steep stair. The owner insisted that we taste the various wines so we continued drinking. Finally, we decided to re-ascend the stairs. As soon as we got into the open air my legs collapsed under me and I lost consciousness. I had to be carried back to the villa and they put me to bed where I remained for many hours. Emilio Notte, who was about sixteen years older than I, was accustomed to these midday libations, and, after a short nap, he went back to work. I was under the weather for a couple of days.*

*One morning Emilio asked me if I knew a certain model, rather famous, a Sicilian called Iside Corsetti. In fact, the painter, Antonio Guarino, had introduced me to her only a short time before. She was a beautiful girl about twenty-seven years old. I asked her if she might like to come to Tivoli to work for Emilio Notte and she agreed. Notte was completely taken by her Rubensian figure; she was just his type.*

*He made a lot of drawings of her and finally she was immortalized in fresco in the frieze of the room at Villa d'Este. Notte introduced the young Iside to his great friend, Amleto De Santis, my classmate in school and at the painting academy who shared his taste for women on a large scale. He too painted various nudes of her, one of which is in the collection of the Gallery of Modern Art. Some years later poor Iside lost her mind and we never heard anything more about her.*

Mario recalled having a number of different studios in the Via Margutta: number 50; number 51A; number 33, where he is listed as a resident in records from 1940. For a time, he lived in 2A, a broken-down structure at the end of the street near the Piazza del Popolo, where the great painter, Antonio Mancini, one of Mario's idols, spent his last years.[6] Living conditions were primitive, with only an iron stove that served for both heating and cooking, not unlike the opening scene of *La bohème,* coincidentally Mario's favorite opera. He was very poor in the late twenties and early thirties, when the effects of the Wall Street crash began to ripple towards Italy. In Jandolo's book about Via Margutta, Mario made a note that he had slept for many months in a cupboard under the stairs—a *sottoscala*—at number 48. This impoverished arrangement must have represented a low point in his already precarious circumstances after the death of his father.

In 1931, Mario married Fernanda De Mutiis, who worked as a model at the stylish fashion house, Le Sorelle Fontana, in Piazza di Spagna. They managed to make ends meet until Mario fell seriously ill. Mario had an adored cocker spaniel named Lila, who sat at his feet while he worked at his easel. One day, she fell ill, writhing and foaming at the mouth, and died. Mario was heartbroken. The doctors were concerned that she might have been rabid, so they gave Mario a precautionary injection. After some weeks had passed, he felt tired and weak, and a friend pointed out that his eyeballs had turned yellow. Mario had contracted hepatitis C from the rabies shot. Unable to work and having already sold or pawned everything of value, he was in desperate circumstances. An older friend came to visit and evidently wanted to help but was afraid

of offending Mario with an offer of a handout. While seated at his bedside, this friend noticed a model ship and asked, "Mario, how much do you want for that beautiful ship?" They agreed on a price and he paid immediately, which kept the wolf from the door that month. Mario never forgot his generosity. However, Mario's fortunes were soon to improve, when he was hired to work on the Rospigliosi Collection.

CHAPTER 3

# The Rospigliosi Collection

## The Rospigliosi Sales (1931 and 1932)

In the late 1920s, Mario forged one of his most important associations. It was with the three Sestieri brothers, who were key players in Rome's art market. Two were dealers, and the third, Dr. Ettore Sestieri, was a prominent art historian, at that time involved with the sale of the property of Prince Girolamo Rospigliosi (1907–1959). The prince's apartment occupied several floors of the vast Palazzo Pallavicini-Rospigliosi on the Quirinal Hill. Knowing that Mario did decorative painting, Sestieri asked him to continue an existing frieze on either side of a new dividing wall in one of the rooms. Mario painted the frieze in tempera on canvas, which he then applied to the two new walls. It must have looked convincing because Sestieri was satisfied with the result. Over the course of this project, Sestieri came several times to Mario's studio where he noticed his work on a painting by Solimena. So

impressed was he, that he asked Mario if he would undertake the restoration of the Rospigliosi Collection, which included not only the paintings in the palace itself, but many others from the family's country estates of Palestrina and Zagarolo.

The Rospigliosi title was bestowed by Pope Clement IX (1667–69), formerly Cardinal Giulio Rospigliosi, who, before ascending to the Papacy, was a noted intellectual, poet, librettist and art connoisseur. He had close ties to the Barberini family and was a patron of Bernini and Poussin, from whom he commissioned a number of paintings including *The Arcadian Shepherds*, now in the Louvre, and *A Dance to the Music of Time* in the Wallace Collection for which he also devised the iconography. The family fortune increased when Giambattista Rospigliosi, the nephew of Clement IX, married Camilla Pallavicini, the last member of the wealthy Genoese family. The Rospigliosi princes acquired the titles of the duchy of Zagarolo, the principalities of Castiglione and Gallicano, and the marquisate of Colonna, among others, thus attaining one of the highest ranks among the Roman nobility in prestige, power, and riches.[1]

In 1930 Prince Rospigliosi was a young man—the same age as Mario—and was heavily in debt to a certain Commendatore Ferraguti, to whom he had pledged his property and belongings as a guarantee against his loans. Mario supposed the prince had gambling debts, but his obligations may have been due to the expenses incurred during the many years he and his mother lived in an apartment in Paris's Plaza Athénée (an entire floor, according to Mario), or possibly to losses in the New York stock market crash of 1929. The prince's mother, the former Mary Jennings Reid Parkhurst (1870–1930), was a beautiful American divorcée, who was ostentatiously snubbed by Roman society after her marriage to Prince Giuseppe Rospigliosi (1848–1913), the head of the family. Prince Giuseppe was much older than his bride and, unlike many Italian nobles, also possessed a great fortune. The couple's many failed efforts to convince the Holy See to recognize their marriage were widely reported in the international society

pages. Prince Giuseppe died in 1913, when his son and sole heir was only six years old.

At the time the sale was being organized, in November 1931, Prince Girolamo eloped with a pretty nineteen-year-old American society girl, Marian Snowden, a Standard Oil heiress. Newspapers reported that the girl's mother tried to have the marriage annulled and that the prince's creditors sought $500,000 dollars from the Snowden family, whom the press estimated to be worth $4 million.[2]

The Rospigliosi owned the right wing of the vast palace, while the left wing belonged to another branch of the family: the Princes Pallavicini-Rospigliosi. They were not affected by the financial debacle and have retained their part of the collection and the palace, which incorporates the earlier pavilion built by Scipione

16. Prince Girolamo Rospigliosi, ca. 1930, looking debauched at age twenty-three.

Borghese known as the Casino dell'Aurora with its great ceiling fresco by Guido Reni. Mario and I once went to a dinner there, and we explored the adjacent rooms, which were hung with paintings in a similar taste and condition to those of the collection he had worked on sixty years earlier.

The restoration commission was offered to Mario at a critical time when money was tight and work was scarce, and it provided him with the first real financial security he'd ever had. The salary was three hundred lire a week, an enormous sum at the time. When Mario told me this, he would sing bits of a popular song of the era, which began, *"Se potessi avere, mille lire al mese. . ."* ("If only I had a thousand lire a month. . ." which was perhaps equivalent to the $10,000 a year that Americans aspired to in the early 1950s).

Mario organized a studio in the attic, where the Rospigliosi family archive was housed in eighteenth-century cabinets with wire mesh doors painted pale blue with gold leaf. According to Mario, the archive was in disarray, with inventories, correspondence, and receipts scattered everywhere.

Mario wrote of living in the palace so that he could work more efficiently against the tight deadline:

*Ferraguti gave me the use of the apartment of the Prince, who was living in Paris at that time. Thus, for a year I slept in the magnificent bedroom of Don Girolamo which contained an enormous seventeenth-century bed, gilded Roman baroque. The walls were covered with eighteenth-century red silk damask. All the furniture was seventeenth- and eighteenth-century and the walls were hung with paintings of the same period. It was a truly regal room. The only problem was that there were many mice that, during the night, raced back and forth across the wood flooring, often awakening me with their noisy scampering. It was difficult to go back to sleep. Stories of the past came back to me, about the palace and the princes that a former Russian ballerina had told me. This ballerina had once been a great love of the Prince and had stayed with him in Paris in better days. The Prince, Don Girolamo, had allowed the ballerina to stay on as his guest in the palace in Rome living in one of the rooms that formerly were used by the servants. When I knew the ballerina, she was about forty years old, but it was obvious that she had been a great beauty. She walked with*

*ethereal lightness, as if she were dancing. She had an extraordinary imagination. She told me that she was the descendent of Russian princes. I had some doubts about her noble lineage since at that time every white Russian refugee claimed to be of blue blood.*

The collection had, at one time, consisted of over seven hundred paintings, acquired in the course of three centuries by purchase or inheritance, including works from the Colonna family which came to the Rospigliosi through the marriage in 1803 of Margarita Colonna Gioeni to Giulio Cesare Rospigliosi. The collection had subsequently been divided between two branches of the family: the Rospigliosi and the Pallavicini-Rospigliosi.[3] Most of the paintings were typical of Roman princely taste with many examples of works by eighteenth-century painters that were considered of little importance at the time of the sale: paintings by the Van Bloemen brothers, Andrea Locatelli, Adrien Manglard, Paolo Anesi, Pompeo Batoni, and Vanvitelli. Some earlier works considered of greater interest were notified by the Italian state such as the sensitive portrait by Baciccio of Clement IX, Pinturicchio's *Saint Francis,* two allegories by Salvator Rosa, and the late seventeenth-century Rospigliosi spinet, painted by Ludovico Gimignani, one of the finest examples in existence of that instrument.[4]

Two sales were held. There were over 1,300 lots in all. The first took place from April 23–March 5, 1931, at the Tavazzi auction house. The second, more important, sale was held between December 12 and December 24, 1932, in the rooms of the Palazzo Rospigliosi itself. All the possessions of the Rospigliosi princes were on the auction block, from table lamps and pieces of old lace to important paintings and eighteenth-century furniture.[5]

Mario recalled:

*[The sale was] a great success, not from the financial point of view since it took place in the terrible period following the Wall Street crash of '29, but socially the auctions were a smash hit. The entire Roman bourgoisie was present, all trying to acquire some piece, whether object or paintings, which had belonged to the great princely family. The*

*nobility of Rome and every other Italian city came to see and be seen. The views and the sales were always mobbed with people; the ladies wore their most elegant clothes and splendid jewels sparkled everywhere. The atmosphere was so sophisticated that it seemed the clock had been momentarily turned back to the grand occasions that had once taken place in those splendid rooms.*

*Art dealers came from all over Europe for this important sale but were not willing to pay high prices. It was a difficult moment to sell anything and the prices fetched were very low. Paintings, for example, went for anywhere from one thousand to ten thousand lire. I advised a sculptor friend to buy a painting by Santi di Tito for fifteen hundred lire.*[6] *Works by Vanvitelli, Locatelli, the Van Bloemens were all sold for around two or three thousand lire. I remember that the father of Amadore Porcella attended the sales every day and always acquired something for a very low price. Most of the fortunate buyers were private collectors of decorative paintings who got great bargains at the sale. Later I overheard an angry discussion between Sestieri and Ferraguti, both of whom were very disappointed with the results.*

*About a year after the sale Commendatore Ferraguti was installed in Prince Girolamo's apartment. He had spent a fortune redecorating the great rooms and decided to give a party to which he invited all the Roman nobility. Not one of them attended. Everyone knew how the apartment had fallen into Ferraguti's hands and he was snubbed by one and all. He died of cancer of the liver only a few years after he moved into the Palazzo Rospigliosi.*

Prince Girolamo moved to the United States, where his young wife soon divorced him, and he found a job in the wine industry. He eventually remarried and lived in Palm Beach until his death in 1959 at the comparatively young age of fifty-two. Mario, meanwhile, was on his way to a successful career, having done an excellent job and made many important contacts.

Of all the people he met during the Rospigliosi sales, the one who made the greatest impression on Mario was Roberto Longhi (1890–1970), the most important Italian art historian of the twentieth century. He was a tall man with piercing eyes and a fine head that Mario said looked like the portrait by El Greco of his brother, Manusso Theotokopoulos, in the Norton Simon Collection. His exceptional visual memory, scholarship, intelligence, and sensitivity

to painting allowed him to make attributions that Bernard Berenson (1865–1959), the famous and influential American connoisseur of Italian Renaissance paintings, could only have envied.

As well as art historians, Mario also got to know a number of restorers:

*Among the restorers I met at that time were such well-known figures as Mauro Pellicioli from Bergamo, Vito Mameli, Lorenzo Cecconi, Chiesarotti, Giannino Marchig, Goffredo Pavia, Luigi Grassi [uncle of Marco Grassi who became a restorer and dealer in New York], Mario Matteucci who worked for the Galleria Borghese, Giuseppe Latini who later dedicated himself to turning out fake Guardis, Passacantando, who, in his spare time, made fake drawings by Piazzetta some of which found their way into famous American collections, Amadio, who specialized in false El Grecos, and his brother who was a reliner. To the latter, I once gave an unlined painting by Coccorante to be relined. A few months passed and I asked him if the lining was finished. He put me off for a while and finally confessed, "The painting's gone". "What do you mean, it's gone?". It turned out that he had virtually destroyed it in the relining.*

There were approximately two hundred paintings in the Rospigliosi sales, so Mario had a great deal to accomplish in a limited amount of time. He learned many things about the restoration of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century paintings on canvas. Among them the cleaning of seventeenth-century paintings on dark grounds, whether this involved the removal of discolored resinous coatings, or saturating the blanched and desiccated surfaces of paintings that had never been varnished. Many of the latter had to be relined—that is, backed with new canvas using glue paste adhesive—which fixed the flaking paint and reinforced the brittle linen canvases and broken tacking edges. In the process, he learned that unlined paintings could react strongly to the moisture in the glue and shrink. To prevent this, it was necessary to coat the back with shellac or varnish.

Ideally, to make sure a painting will not shrink during relining, part of the tacking edge is tested with damp cotton because, if

things go wrong, the paint will suddenly rise up in jagged peaks as the fabric contracts and there is no longer enough room for it. If a restorer panics and begins smashing the brittle paint and ground layers down with an iron, ugly scars will result. Applying tension to the canvas in slow stages can coax it to expand again so the paint can be set down safely, but this requires a great deal of time and patience and the result is rarely perfect.

The painting Mario's reliner lost was a minor work, but other mishaps have had more serious consequences. Jonathan Harr's book, *The Lost Painting*,[7] recounts the fantastic detective story behind the 1990 discovery of a great painting by Caravaggio, *The Taking of Christ,* which was hiding in plain sight in a Jesuit convent in Dublin. Known through copies, it was recognized as the original by Sergio Benedetti, a restorer on the staff of the National Gallery of Ireland. Naturally, Mario and I had heard of this important discovery soon after it was made and published in the *Burlington Magazine.* Our first opportunity to see it came a few years later at an exhibition in the Palazzo Barberini, which brought together paintings from the dispersed collections of the Roman bankers, Asdrubale and his brother Ciriaco Mattei, who commissioned the painting directly from Caravaggio in 1602. When we got to the exhibition we went straight to the Dublin painting and, as we stuck our noses on it, as restorers do, we saw hundreds of fine cracks along which the paint overlapped. It was obvious that the canvas had shrunk and the lifted paint had been crushed. The damage seemed to be recent. None of the many experts who had been to Dublin, including some close friends, had mentioned this, and they presented a wall of silence when we asked what had happened.

A few years later, Harr's book confirmed our suspicions: the disaster had, in fact, occurred during the relining. A colleague of Sergio Benedetti, Andrew O'Connor, had been in the studio while the painting was being restored and, evidently having little love for his secretive colleague, told the author what had happened. Benedetti, he said, was impatient to line the painting. Normally, he used an open-weave hemp canvas for relining, a traditional Roman

17. Caravaggio, *The Taking of Christ*, 1602, oil on canvas, on loan to the National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin, 133.5 × 169.5 cm.

method; however, the studio was out of it, and it would take at least two weeks for a new supply to arrive from Italy. He did not want to wait. The available canvas was a thick, closely woven Irish linen with which he had no experience. According to O'Connor, unfamiliar with the properties of the fabric, Benedetti miscalculated how much time was needed to iron the reverse of the lining canvas in order to make sure that the glue paste adhesive was sufficiently dry. The lining canvas still contained too much moisture when he re-stretched the painting, put it on an easel, and went home. When he came into the studio the next morning, he found the entire surface shattered by a web of sharp cracks. Benedetti quickly did his best to lay down the paint that had lifted and the lining was done over again, but the damage caused when he pressed the fractured paint down is still obvious.

Harr goes on to recount a sequel to this horror story. Many months later, after the painting had been published and was hanging on the walls at the National Gallery of Ireland, on loan from the Jesuits, a security guard happened to notice maggots squirming on the floor beneath it. Insects had been feeding on the rich material of the lining adhesive and laying their eggs. The lining had to be replaced.

CHAPTER 4

# Caveat Emptor

Mario was always fascinated by forgers. Though as a young man he was an outsider in the official art establishment, he had an inside track on the shadowy world of the forgers flourishing in Italy at the time.

## Icilio Federico Joni

The most prominent among the forgers who featured in Mario's stories was the Sienese restorer and gilder Icilio Federico Joni (1866–1946). In the early part of the twentieth century, Joni successfully hoodwinked many of the most eminent experts in the field of early Italian painting. In 1932, his memoir, *Memorie di un pittore di quadri antichi,* was published and it has subsequently been reprinted several times. A bowdlerized English edition entitled *Affairs of a Painter* appeared in 1936 and quickly sold out, though it was said

that the edition was bought up by art dealers, primarily the famous Sir Joseph Duveen (1869–1939), who did not wish to be publicly embarrassed by Joni's revelations.

After the Second World War, Joni was nearly forgotten. His rediscovery in recent years was due in part to Mario's identification, in the early 1950s, of several of his forgeries in American museums and to the research done by Sienese art historian Gianni Mazzoni, who spent years documenting Joni's activities. Mazzoni's work culminated in an exhibition in 2004 in Siena called *Falsi d'autore*,[1] a phrase used to describe paintings that were honest reproductions in the style of the master and not intended to deceive. Joni liked to claim, disingenuously, that he made his paintings 'in the style of' for his own gratification and did not try to pass them off as originals.

A small man with a large ego and a prickly nature, Joni came into frequent conflict with the art historians of his day, notably Bernard Berenson, on whose word American collectors relied. Berenson and his wife and fellow critic, Mary (1864–1945), lived in a villa in the Florentine hills, I Tatti, in sumptuous style financed by the profits they made from advising such collectors as Isabella Stewart Gardner, and from providing expertises on paintings submitted for their review. The Berensons had bought a number of paintings by Sienese and Umbrian masters of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries at a very good price and later discovered that they were forgeries. After realizing their mistake and hearing that the pieces originated with Joni, they set off to Siena to find him. Mary Berenson took it in good humor and in her diary entry of October 4, 1899, wrote:

> We have run our forger to earth—but a very easy matter it was—for "he" is a rollicking band of young men, cousins and friends, who turn out these works in cooperation, one drawing, one laying in the color, another putting on the dirt, another making the frames… Their chief is Federigo Ioni [sic], a rakish-looking man of 30, very free and easy—a good fellow. They hide nothing.[2]

Mario's meeting with Joni occurred about thirty years after Mary Berenson's. Here is how Mario remembered the events that led him to the forger:

*One of my clients and friends in the early 1930s was a dealer by the name of Armando Sabatello.*[3] *He was Jewish, like many of the dealers, and nicknamed the 'Prince of the Israelites' by his colleagues because of his sophistication and dandified manner; he was tall, cultivated, elegant, everything that at that time distinguished a*

18. Federico Icilio Joni, *Madonna and Child with Saints Mary Magdalen and Sebastian*, 1913, tempera on panel, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 109.2 × 72.3 cm. One of the most successful forgeries by Joni, it was catalogued as a work by Neroccio de' Landi until 1980. See also Plate 1.

*man of the world. He often asked my advice and opinion about paintings that he was buying or selling. One day he telephoned to say that he had seen a painting by Neroccio de' Landi (1447–1500), a Madonna and Child, in a convent on Monte Mario in Rome. [Neroccio is one of the most highly regarded Sienese painters of the fifteenth century, and his work was much sought after at the time.] He asked if I would accompany him to look at the painting to make sure it was in good state and that the attribution was correct. We went to the convent and, through a slot in the door, asked to see the Mother Superior. After a while, a revolving barrel turned bearing a small painting that I picked up and began to examine.*

*The painting was on panel, with a gold ground, well preserved, and from the technical point of view it was perfect: the cracks, the gold, the punch work, the patina, the enamel-like quality of the paint was all that one would expect from a painting of the period. It looked antique. However, the artistic and the painterly aspects were somehow not convincing. The Child's head made him look like a tiny old man, and the hands of the Madonna were disproportionately small in comparison to her head. Armando asked me what I thought, and I told him that I was not convinced of its authenticity. To which he replied that I was crazy. For him, the provenance of the painting was its own guaranty and from this point of view it was difficult to disagree, since it came from a cloistered nun. I said, "Listen, if you want to buy it, go ahead, but I'm doubtful." In the end, he decided not to buy it. After I left the convent and said good-bye to Armando, I wondered how the painting had been faked, because technically it was so perfect. As a restorer, I knew the tricks of the forger, and I had never seen anything like this painting.*

*Some months passed, and one morning Sabatello called me: "You know something, Mario? You were right about that Neroccio. It's a fake." The painting had been bought from the nun by the Roman dealer, Augusto Jandolo, and had eventually ended up in the hands of Count Alessandro Contini Bonacossi, an important dealer. Contini showed it to his expert, the great connoisseur Roberto Longhi, who promptly pronounced it a forgery. When the count went to the mother superior to ask for his money back, she told him that the painting belonged to her nephew, who had got it from a certain person in Siena. The affair ended up in a messy lawsuit.*[4]

Impressed by the extraordinary material and technical properties of this forgery, Mario became determined to meet Joni. He continued his story:

*After this interesting phone call from Armando, who had learned the name of the forger, I was determined to meet this person who had succeeded in creating material that was so convincing as fifteenth-century paint, so I went to Siena, looked up the address, and knocked on Joni's door without an introduction or preliminaries of any sort. Joni lived in one of the tower houses around the Piazza del Campo of Siena, where the famous horse race, the Palio, is run. He answered the door himself. He was a small man of about sixty-five with a very intelligent face. He asked me what I wanted; I explained to him who I was and that I had come to Siena just to meet him. He was flattered by this and allowed me to come inside. He asked me a lot of questions about paintings that I had restored and what sort of pictures I preferred. We talked for about an hour until it was finally past noon, and I asked him if he would join me for lunch. He accepted and led me to a restaurant called 'da Guido', where the specialty of the house was bollito misto (mixed boiled meats), which we ordered after the exquisite pasta course.*

*As we imbibed the local wine, the conversation became quite friendly, and I noticed that Joni had a great sense of humor, sharp and biting. He told me that he himself never sold his fakes, that he made them on order for various dealers. After lunch, we went back to his house, and I asked him if he would allow me to come and take some lessons from him about some of the technical aspects of making forgeries. He said no, it was not possible, because his position as restorer of the Pinacoteca of Siena left him with little time at his disposal. He added that, if I wished, I could come and watch him work while I was in Siena, an offer that overjoyed me and that I quickly accepted. I visited Joni's studio for a few weeks and saw first-hand how he made his false paintings. He painted in egg tempera, just as was done in the past. When possible, he used an original painting of the period, some mediocre work from which he had removed the paint, leaving the gesso—that is, the original preparation of gypsum and glue that preserved all the original craquelure. On this preparation, he painted his picture and, when he had finished, put it out on the terrace of his tower house, leaving it there day and night for months until finally the craquelure of the gesso appeared. Then he would patinate and distress the surface by wearing away the paint here and there. Finally, he poured boiling linseed oil over it and left it to age again in the sun of his terrace.*

*After I had got to know Joni, a client of mine, Borghesani, brought me a small Sienese school crucifixion. It was a minor master but the curious thing was that the background had never been gilded, there was just the original gesso. We took it to Joni*

*to ask him if he would gild the background, but he refused. He explained to me that it wasn't possible to get a good result by gilding over the original mestica and that, when he made a fake, either he used a genuine gold ground [see above]and reworked the painted passages or he began from scratch. [For the latter] he first would prepare an old piece of poplar with a ground made from lime casein. Over this caseato di calcio, he put a thin layer of regular gesso, made of whiting and rabbit skin glue, followed by the bole preparation, the gold ground, and the painting itself, which was also done with casein. The panel, again, was left out on the roof where the hot sun of the day and the cool air of the night made the new preparation develop a convincing craquelure.*

*Many years later, when I was working in Washington for the Kress Foundation, the director of the National Gallery, David Finley, told me a story that had happened to him on a trip to Siena. He had heard about this forger from an art dealer and Finley was curious to meet him. He was with his wife and a few friends. They rang the doorbell of the tower house and there was no answer. The door was open and they decided to go in. They went up the stairs; there was no sign of life in the entire house. They continued up until they got to the terrace where they were amazed to see gold ground paintings lying all over the floor: works by Duccio, Simone Martini, Lorenzetti and so on. While they were gazing at these paintings Joni suddenly appeared from nowhere as if by magic. He had been napping, as all Italians do after lunch in the summer. He was furious and began screaming like a madman. They naturally didn't understand a word he was saying and tried to explain how it was that they were on the terrace, but Joni didn't understand a word of English and continued to yell loudly, "get out of here, get out of here" until they realized that it was useless to try to explain why they were there and left. Knowing the man well, I was terribly amused by this story and I told Finley of my experiences with Joni.*

## Giuseppe Latini

The demand of the market for early Italian and Renaissance paintings was so great that the forgeries by Joni and his fellow Sienese, Umberto Giunti (1886–1970, see Plate 11), a professor at the Academy of Fine Arts in Siena, found ready buyers. The business was so lucrative that several other forgers followed their lead, and Siena was not the only place where fakes were made.

Mario wrote:

*Another forger I came to know well was Giuseppe Latini (1903–1972), known as Beppe, who came from Ascoli Piceno and specialized in fake Guardis [Francesco Guardi (1712–1793) was, with Canaletto (1697–1768), the most highly regarded of the artists known for their views of Venice]. I met him while I was working on the Rospigliosi Collection. He was a tall, slender man who worked as a sort of dealer. Very gifted, he could make all sorts of fakes, not only Guardis. He was able to produce certain kinds of paintings very quickly; for example, in one night he would paint a big decorative landscape in tempera that was supposed to be eighteenth-century. You could see that it was modern, partly because he used a flat brush. [Brushes with metal ferrules that held the bristles flat weren't invented until the nineteenth century. Before that all brushes were round and tied by hand.]*

*Once we [Latini and Mario] decided to make a trip to Siena to see if we could find something interesting to sell. The road at that time was a disaster, full of big stones. At Radicofani, the oil pan broke, and we were stuck until five in the morning when a cart came by, hauled by two white Chianti bulls. We asked the driver if he would take us to Siena, and that's how we arrived there, with the bulls! We first went to Joni and then to Umberto Giunti, who was a professor of drawing and painting at the Academy. Like Joni, he was initially trained as a gilder in the neighborhood around the Porta Camollia. He was a good painter, which Joni was not. Joni was better at imitating antique material, but Giunti was a better faker.*

One of the most amusing anecdotes about Latini's inventiveness in procuring art for his dealership involves a sculpture, rather than a painting. As Mario remembered it:

*Once, Latini was arrested because he was caught trying to substitute a plaster sculpture for an antique polychrome wooden one in a church in the Marche. He had paid the priest to look the other way and commissioned a mold maker to go into the church one night, take the mold, and then make a plaster cast in his studio in Rome. Beppe himself did all the polychromy and gilding. One night he made the switch, and everything went well. Unfortunately, the sacristan didn't know about the agreement between Latini and the priest. He was used to hanging his coat on a nail that protruded from the back of the original sculpture. When he came the next morning,*

*he couldn't find the nail, and then he noticed that the sculpture was gesso and began screaming, "Thief! Thief!" When the police came, the priest pretended not to know anything about it.*

*Latini loved fast cars and drove a Bugatti. One morning [in 1972], I opened the newspaper and there was a photograph of a wrecked car. He had driven into a tunnel at high speed and hit a slow-moving truck. He died instantly.*

## Teodoro Riccardi

There were many other types of forgers who faked ancient and medieval art: jewelry, ivories, terracotta objects of all sorts, and even large pieces of marble sculpture. Fiano Romano, just north of Rome and situated in an area of numerous Etruscan tombs, was the center of a brisk forgery trade, as was Orvieto.

Mario knew one of these forgers quite well:

*One who had a studio at 17 Via Margutta was Teodoro Riccardi. Today he is nearly forgotten but he was one of the greatest forgers of Greek and Roman gold jewelry. He came from Orvieto from a large family of antique dealers, forgers and tomb robbers. He was quite short and rotund and completely bald with strongly delineated features that gave him the appearance of an ancient Roman consul. He lived with a woman who was nearly twice his height and they made a comical couple. I will never forget a morning when he stopped by my studio and said, "Mario, a terrible thing has happened." In fact, he seemed very upset and I asked him what was wrong. He was holding a sheet of the 24-carat gold foil with which he worked and on which he had designed an Etruscan bas-relief. It was an exceptional piece. He said, "This morning I started out to make a small object that I could sell for a few thousand lire and instead, look what happened! I ended up making this, which should be valued at a million lire, and now I can't sell it!" He said this in strict Orvietan dialect that made his despair really humorous.*

The Riccardis became famous in the world of antiquities because of three important 'Etruscan' sculptures acquired by the Metropolitan Museum of Art between 1915 and 1921. Two were standing warriors and

the third was a colossal head measuring more than four feet high, made from polychromed terracotta in a remarkable state of preservation. They were among the most popular objects in the museum and much admired by its curator of ancient art, Gisela Richter (1882–1972), who released a publication about them in 1937,[5] despite the doubts experts in Europe had raised about their authenticity.

Mario knew these sculptures were the work of Teodoro Riccardi, his brother Amedeo, and their cousin, Alfredo Fioravanti (1886–1963),[6] and thus he was greatly surprised to see they were still on display when he arrived in New York in 1949. Finally, in 1958, Harold Parsons, a buying agent for a number of American museums who had long believed the warriors to be forgeries,


19. The 'Etruscan' statues, *Big Warrior* and *Colossal Head* on display at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

obtained a signed confession from Fioravanti, who provided proof in the form of a missing thumb, which he had kept all those years since the sculptures' creation.

The museum then did scientific testing, which identified manganese in one of the glazes, a material the Etruscans did not use. How the warriors were actually made was more difficult to understand. Their enormous size dictated the use of a huge kiln to fire the clay, and this was problematic. Since the forgers did not have access to such an oven, they invented a clever system. They made the sculptures in the usual way, using unfired clay, on which they painted the glazes. Once the clay had dried, the sculpture was toppled to the floor and broke into shards. Those pieces were then fired in a small kiln and re-assembled.

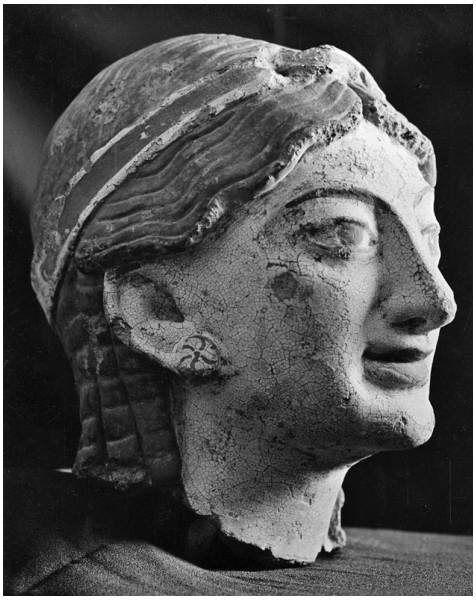
There is something strikingly modern about the warriors, reminiscent of the pre-cubist Picasso *Demoiselles d'Avignon,* which had been exhibited for the first time in 1916 in Paris. The similarity is presumably only a coincidence, but, as mentioned before, one of the reasons forgeries ultimately fail is because they unconsciously reflect the tastes of the time in which they were made.

## Elena Gobbi's *Diana*

Alceo Dossena (1878–1937) was the most famous forger of marble sculptures. Some of these masqueraded as rare examples of classical antiquities while others imitated masterpieces of the Italian Renaissance. Mario did not know him directly but became familiar with his work through an Etruscan sculpture owned by Elena Gobbi, one of Mario's assistants in Rome during the late 1940s, and sister of the famous baritone, Tito Gobbi. After Mario's move to New York in 1949, he and Elena stayed in touch, and in June 1952, she wrote that she had inherited an Etruscan statue of the goddess Diana made from polychromed terracotta. It had come to her in a packing crate, the statue in pieces and still covered with earth. Elena had taken the fragments to Angelo

Del Vecchio, the chief restorer at the Etruscan Museum in Villa Giulia, who cleaned and reassembled them and certified that the sculpture dated from the third century BC. Elena enclosed several photographs of the restored statue, which caused Mario to doubt the object's authenticity, but it was not until the following year that he had a chance to see it in person.

Elena was an old friend and he hated to disappoint her, but he believed her statue was a modern forgery and he told her so. Unconvinced, she sent it for technical analysis to the Istituto Centrale per il Restauro (ICR), Italy's official center for art restoration and research, founded in Rome in 1941. Their experts performed a number of tests and concluded that the sculpture was genuine. Mario still remained dubious and inquired among his old connections in the Via Margutta to see if anyone knew where the sculpture originated. One of his sources told him it had been made by Dossena's assistant, Gildo Pedrazzoni (1902–1963).



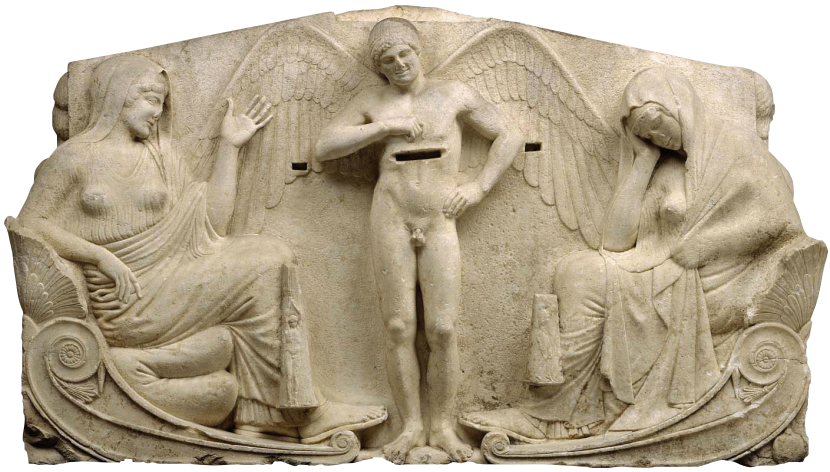
20. Elena Gobbi's 'Etruscan' statue.

He was apparently an apt student, because the statue of Diana was very skillfully done.

Mario learned that the clever Gildo had taken the clay for his sculptures from a riverbed in Vulci, an important Etruscan site. The clay contained minute particles of gold, which had also been identified in authentic Etruscan terracotta sculptures from this area, and explains why the ICR considered it antique. To be convincing, forgeries must have a provenance, even if it is mythical. This statue, broken into pieces, had been deposited in a collapsed Etruscan tomb in the necropolis of Vulci. Mario said that the eventual buyer was present when it was excavated and had no reason to doubt the discovery. Several years later, Mario received his weekly issue of *Art News,* and there on the cover was Elena Gobbi's sculpture, accompanied by an article by Alfred Frankfurter, the magazine's publisher, extolling its beauty and importance. Mario couldn't let the story go any further, so he telephoned Frankfurter, whom he knew well, and told him what he had learned in Rome.

Mario had heard an amusing variant of the tomb caper from Teodoro Riccardi.

*Together with a fellow forger, he [Riccardi] had assembled a group of forgeries of important objects mixed together with some originals of minor importance. Their idea was to put them into an Etruscan tomb and close it as if it had never before been opened. Through a Florentine dealer, they made the acquaintance of an American museum director and invited this man to accompany them when they opened this "intact" Etruscan tomb. The American was naturally interested in acquiring something from the excavation. The appointment was at night, at the entrance to the tomb, where, by the light of acetylene lamps, they began to dig until they reached the door, which was made of rectangular blocks of tufa placed one on top of the other. Inside the tomb, the ceiling was partly collapsed, burying the objects that the forgers had carefully concealed. The tomb had been broken into in the past by grave robbers, who entered by simply punching a hole in the top of the mound—much faster than digging out the entrance—and this was also how the forgers had entered to plant their loot. As they dug, shards began to emerge. The American was extremely excited. He had never done anything like this before in his life. Finally, they arrived at the concealed objects, and*



21. Roman antiquity or Alceo Dossena? The *Boston Throne*, marble, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 82 × 161 cm.

*the American examined them carefully, emptying each vase of earth and cleaning it with water so that he could see the painted decoration. Suddenly the drama occurred: while emptying one of the vases, a lead pencil fell out. Evidently, one of the forgers had let it fall from his pocket while they were burying the vases. The infuriated American began to scream and beat them with a stick. "I'll have you all arrested," he threatened, emptily, since he had been a party to this illegal excavation. The forgers fled, cursing their bad luck and, as for the American, it would have been far worse for him if he had ended up buying all those fakes.*

Not all the forgeries made in the early twentieth century have yet been proven to be false. For example, the authorship of one famous sculpture, the Boston Throne, is still the subject of debate. Some experts have attributed it to Dossena, while others believe it to be genuine. The problem is complicated by the fact that the Boston piece is related to another work that was excavated in Rome near the present Ludovisi Palace, known as the Ludovisi Throne. The Boston Throne was supposedly found in the same area. Mario and I once saw them exhibited together and thought the Ludovisi

Throne much finer, but we were not experts and the two sculptures presented a purely formal problem, since there was no technical proof. Mario's friend, the great art historian Federico Zeri (1921–1998), knew a great deal about sculptures from antiquity and accepted both objects.

## The Getty Kouros and Armando Pacifici

Some forgers were highly specialized. Mario said that Armando Pacifici, for example, was known for his skill in patination—that is, applying materials to freshly carved marble in order to make it look antique. He used various methods including wearing away the surface with acids, burying the piece in the ground and then pouring all sorts of noxious liquids over the site. Mario recalled that he once stopped by Pacifici's studio and, along with all the others who visited, was asked to urinate on an area in the garden where a new forgery was being treated.

Pacifici's name came up in relation to an important Archaic Greek kouros statue that had been purchased by the J. Paul Getty Museum. Federico Zeri was one of J. Paul Getty's consultants, and the collector had made him a trustee of the museum. Zeri often went to the board meetings in Malibu, especially when important acquisitions were being proposed. Aside from his extensive knowledge of Italian paintings, Zeri was an expert in antique sculpture, one of the areas in which the Getty collection was strongest. When Jiří Frel, the curator of the Greek and Roman Department, presented the kouros, Zeri examined the object closely and came to the conclusion that it was a modern forgery. The surface of the sculpture was characterized by a mottled, yellow-orange patina. Mario and Federico agreed that this was very like the effects produced by Pacifici. The acquisition was not approved, but Frel persisted and re-proposed the statue at a subsequent meeting, at a reduced price, and this time, the museum bought it, against Zeri's advice, for $7 million.

In the meantime, there was great excitement in Italy over the discovery of some carved stone heads by Amedeo Modigliani in a canal in Livorno. Legend had it that the artist had tossed them into the canal when he left his home town for Paris in 1909. In the summer of 1984, the canal was dredged and the heads were revealed. As it later turned out, however, four art students, bored by the monotony of the summer, had carved them with Black and Decker power tools and planted them as hoax. In the meantime, the Italian art establishment went wild with joy and the news was widely reported in the international media.

In a television interview, Zeri dismissed the sculptures as forgeries, and indiscreetly referred to a certain American museum's purchase of a fake kouros, declaring that this too would eventually

22. The Getty kouros, n.d., marble, J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, California, h. 206 cm.

23. The Anavysos kouros, ca. 530 BC, marble, National Archaeological Museum, Athens, h. 194 cm.

be revealed for what it was. He was obviously referring to the Getty. The museum was furious and quickly removed him as trustee, despite the fact that he had been appointed by Getty himself. This nasty episode rankled greatly with Federico even into his later years. As time went by, the curator was discovered to be dishonest and was dismissed, and the kouros is now considered to be a forgery by most of the experts in the field, including the Getty itself—even though the museum's scientists couldn't find any technical evidence to prove it. It is now catalogued as "unknown maker, Greek, about 530 BC or modern."

## An Accidental Forgery

The fake Modigliani heads were far from unique, and on one remarkable occasion Mario himself quite unwittingly (perhaps) made a forgery of his own. One of Mario's friends in the late 1930s was a dealer called Enrico Scafetti. Scafetti was part of the Giosi clan, a family of successful dealers established in both Rome and Naples. Neither Mario nor Enrico had been to Paris, and they decided to make a trip, just the two of them, without any wives or girlfriends.

Mario wrote:

*We went to Paris not only for our own edification but also to try to do some business. In Italy in those last years of Fascism the situation had become very difficult, there was very little restoration work and commercial activity was also greatly diminished. Only those with ties to the regime or who belonged to the Fascist Party found employment. My small group of friends were often hungry and didn't have enough money to buy a meal. Three of us usually got together at noontime. One of my friends had a dog. We would count the money we had between us, which usually didn't suffice for three meals, so we bought something for the dog instead. One time in desperation I made a fake Mancini, framed it and put it under glass because the paint was still wet, a dead give-away. I showed it to a dealer, Pietrangeli, who immediately took it to show to a client. The client liked it and bought it right away. Pietrangeli brought me the money*

*and I was saved. Unfortunately, a few days later he came to me and told me that the client had brought the painting back when he discovered wet paint stuck to the glass! The times were very bad.*

*[Regarding the trip to Paris.] We had brought with us a few small eighteenth-century French paintings that we hoped to sell but they weren't important enough for*

24. Edgar Degas, *Stefanina Primicile Carafa, Marchioness of Cicerale and Duchess of Montejasi*, ca. 1875, oil on canvas, Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland, Ohio, 49 × 39.4 cm.

*the market in Paris at that time. A friend of ours, Ciccillo Giosi, a cousin of Enrico, had come to Paris from Naples with a portrait by Degas of one his Neapolitan relatives, the Duchessa di Montejasi, which he sold immediately to the dealer Paul Rosenberg. [It is now in the Cleveland Museum of Art.]*[7] *We were staying with our friend, Levi de Léon, who was an art dealer and a painter in his spare time. We were running out of money and had not been able to sell any of the paintings we had brought with us. Ciccillo had left with us a photograph of this Degas portrait, and one morning, I took a piece of blue-gray paper and made a portrait sketch in charcoal, copying from this photograph. A few days passed and I realized that the drawing had disappeared. I asked Levi de Léon's companion, who looked after the house, if she had seen the drawing lying around anywhere. She replied, I have a surprise for you, and gave me ten thousand francs. Levi de Léon had sold my drawing to Paul Rosenberg, I don't know for how much, certainly for more than ten thousand francs. That evening we all went to Maxim's to celebrate our good fortune. Many years later, in New York, I happened to see a Degas drawings exhibition at the Knoedler gallery. To my embarrassment, there was my drawing and, according to the catalogue, it had been shown at various other exhibitions. I don't think it's any longer accepted, at least I haven't seen it for many years.*[8]

*There was tragic sequel to the story of our friend Levi de Léon that I learned some years later from Robert Manning who worked with me at the Kress Foundation and had accompanied me to the exhibition at Knoedlers. When I confessed to him the story of the Degas drawing, he told me that by chance he had heard about Levi de Léon and his arrest by the Nazis. What had happened was this: he was in hiding in the country in the house of friends. Before leaving Paris he and his companion, Louise, had separated after a terrible fight, however she remained in the apartment they had shared. One day the SS came to the building where he and many other Jews had apartments, and Louise told them where Levi de Léon was hiding. He was arrested and died in the camps. She must have been a horrible person, although I didn't realize it at the time.*

## Giosi, Pulvirenti and the Musketeer

Paintings can sometimes be made—and sold—as fakes, inspired by a sheer sense of fun and as a challenge to public and dealers alike. In this case, Mario knew all the participants, not all of whom were aware of their roles, perhaps: the dealer (Giosi), the artist (Pulvirenti), and the model (Prati).

*Giosi had discovered a young painter, Rosario Pulvirenti, a native of Catania, Sicily, thirty years old and very gifted. His work looked like that of Antonio Mancini in his late period when he painted thickly with great quantities of paint as in the portrait of Signora Pantaleone in the National Gallery of Modern Art [Rome] or the portraits of the Barons Fassini. On the other hand, Pulvirenti's landscapes were influenced by Armando Spadini. In other words he was an eclectic, without a strong artistic personality of his own, but a marvelous painter. An irresistible idea came to Giosi: to make a false Mancini. Via Margutta 33 was the home of a painter called Prati and his girlfriend, not a beauty. Her face was slightly oriental, her figure magnificent with very white skin. Prati himself looked like one of the three musketeers, tall, long hair, mustachioed with a beard. His face was artistic and he resembled Courbet. Giosi asked Pulvirenti to paint Prati's portrait dressed as a Musketeer. He found a seventeenth-century costume of a beautiful shade of pink. Pulvirenti did this two-meter tall portrait in a week. Giosi's maid showed me the painting in secret. It was a wonderful figure with a huge plumed hat on his head against a dark background like a Van Dyck. It seemed absolutely to be by Antonio Mancini. Giosi waited several months for the paint to dry and then, I heard, sold it for a large sum as a Mancini.*

*I became friends with Pulvirenti who was a very strange man. Like many of the great nineteenth century French painters, such as Toulouse-Lautrec and Degas, he loved to go to brothels but was embarrassed to go alone. In the evening after dinner he would stop by my apartment on Via della Croce, which happened to be the neighborhood with the highest concentration of brothels, and ask me to come for a walk with him. I knew very well what he meant by this. Some evenings he would bring a small drawing pad and would make rapid sketches. After a few years he wanted to change his style and he began to paint female nudes, in a bluish tonality, very decorative, with landscape backgrounds in the manner of El Greco. I still have a painting of his from*

*this period representing the Madonna in a landscape copied from an El Greco. Today his name is unknown. In the dictionary of nineteenth-century Italian artists compiled by Comanducci there is a self-portrait that looks exactly like a Mancini.*

## Pietro Toesca, Forgeries, and Expertises

As Mario's reputation grew, collectors began to seek his advice on the attributions and authenticity of paintings for sale on the market. This brought him into contact with many prominent experts. Mario recounted an experience with one of the most notable of these, Pietro Toesca (1877–1962), professor of art history at La Sapienza, the University of Rome.

*One of my clients at this time was a certain Sig. Bianchettini who was looking for important pictures to add to his collection. I told him that such works were extremely difficult to find and, when one did emerge, the price was colossal. One day he called me and said, "Mario, I have just bought three paintings, very important gold ground pictures, and I would like to show them to you." My studio was in Via Margutta and he lived in Via della Croce, quite nearby. I went to his house and he showed me his three acquisitions, all of which were fakes. Two were by Joni and one was by Vannoni. I immediately recognized the forgers from the quality of the gold backgrounds and the manner in which they were worked; both the gilding and the punching were perfect.*

*When I told Sig. Bianchettini that his panels were fakes he brought out three large photographs with detailed expertises on the back written by Pietro Toesca attributing them, one to Neroccio de' Landi, one to Sano di Pietro and one to Matteo di Giovanni. Bianchettini asked me if I was absolutely certain of my opinion. I told him I was completely sure. He immediately went to the telephone and called the dealer from whom he had bought the paintings. He was furious and threatened to denounce the man to the police if he didn't return his money instantly. Then he called Professor Toesca saying that he wanted to denounce him for fraud as well.*

*The next day I received a visit from Professor Toesca who knew my habits and when and where he could find me. He said, "Mario, are you sure that those three paintings are fakes?" I told him that I had not the slightest doubt and that I actually knew the forgers. I apologized to him for the difficult position in which he now found*

*himself, for which I was truly sorry. Poor Toesca began to cry. He said, "Mario, you know that when I attended the university no one taught us these things. The style of those paintings was right for the artists to whom I attributed them, as was the gold, the craquelure, in other words, I was completely fooled by them." I felt so sorry for Toesca that I really didn't know what to say to comfort him and we both cried. He was already in his eighties at that time and it was extremely distressing for me to see him in such a state. He was a great art historian and an even greater teacher as every expert in our field can attest. Most of the art historians of this past century had been his pupils.*

At that time, when a dealer presented a painting to a prospective buyer, it was expected that the piece would be accompanied by expertises, expert opinions attesting to the approximate date, the quality of the work in the context of the artist's oeuvre, and the correctness of the attribution. All the most important art historians offered such expertises, often written on the back of a photograph along with their signature. These authorities were sometimes compensated in a straightforward manner in fees for services, but on some occasions the payment took other forms. Bernard Berenson, for instance, had a secret partnership agreement with the art dealers, Duveen Brothers, of whom Joseph Duveen became the principal partner;[9] he would provide expertises for certain paintings and was paid a percentage of the net profit after they were sold. Most art historians, however, were paid a previously agreed sum of money. Over time, as knowledge has grown, many of these endorsements have proved to be mistaken, sometimes spectacularly so. More often, though, these expert opinions simply inflated the attribution, promoting a work from 'studio' or 'school of' to the master himself, accompanied by hyperbolic praise. Today, this practice is frowned upon, due to the obvious conflict of interest. Most museums do not allow their staff to be involved with the marketplace, although it is inevitably something of a gray area, since good curators are always keen to see new works of art.

Toesca was a distinguished scholar. These facts prompt hard questions about how the art and skill of connoisseurship develop. To a great extent, this ability is a gift, much like having perfect pitch

or a photographic memory. It explains Mario's frustration whenever someone misattributed or failed to recognize a painting for what it truly was. He would exclaim, "He is completely blind!"—as if the proper identification were simply a matter of using one's inborn senses. Over the years, Mario dismissed scores of art historians and experts with this phrase. His opinion was usually right and would eventually be accepted. To a somewhat lesser degree, this skill can be cultivated by looking at and studying as many physical works of art as possible (as opposed to photographs and other secondary material), something Mario did in great depth, propelled by his quick intelligence and desire for understanding.

Indeed, it is quite remarkable that, even as a young man and despite his rudimentary formal education, Mario had already absorbed enough to be able to judge a painting on the basis of both historical knowledge and style, backed by his extensive knowledge of technique.

CHAPTER 5

# The Istituto Centrale per il Restauro

The Istituto Centrale per il Restauro (ICR) opened its doors to the first students in 1941. Its mission was to train restorers, carry out research, experiment with new methods and materials, and restore works of art. A set of guidelines had been formulated over the course of several years by a committee whose members were Roberto Longhi, Giulio Carlo Argan (1909–1992), an architectural historian from the Fine Arts and Antiquities department of the government, and Cesare Brandi (1906–1988), a specialist in early Sienese painting who had been Argan's classmate at university. Argan was a convinced Fascist, who had joined the movement at an early date, and Longhi's brilliance and fame as an art historian gave him influence over the regime, although he did not have an official post. Brandi was appointed director and Mauro Pellicioli, a highly-regarded professional from Bergamo with close ties to Roberto Longhi and vast experience—for decades he had been entrusted with the restoration of all the most important masterpieces in Italy—was named chief restorer.

## Cesare Brandi and Mauro Pellicioli

Since the ICR was a state institution, it was necessary to be enrolled in the Fascist party to be taken on the staff. By this time, Mario had become an expert restorer, however his work was confined to privately owned paintings since he never joined the PNF. Mario was very critical of Cesare Brandi as a restorer and, after the fall of the regime, his resort to what Mario regarded as political expediency. Mario believed that he actually damaged paintings. He recorded his opinion of the staff of the new ICR in his memoirs:

*Cesare Brandi was the director of the Istituto Centrale. At that time both he and Carlo Argan were Fascists. Later they became ardent Communists. I had no use for such men and there were many of them in Italy at that time. In any case, he was a famous art historian and a theoretician of restoration philosophy and aesthetics about which he wrote well if somewhat hermetically. When the Istituto Centrale was started, they hired the famous Bergamasque restorer, Mauro Pellicioli. I had known him for many years. He was an excellent restorer, considered the best at that time. He restored Leonardo's Last Supper in Milan where BB [Bernard Berenson] visited him on the scaffold and published his high opinion of the work in the Corriere della Sera. One of Pellicioli's most famous restorations was of the great Mantegna frescoes in the Camera degli Sposi in Mantova.*

Pellicioli often visited Mario in his studio and they exchanged views and confidences. On one occasion Mario was carrying out an unusual treatment, no longer used today, that is worth recording.

*Once [when Pellicioli came] I was working on a small altarpiece of a Madonna and Child with Saints, very close to Lorenzo Lotto. I don't know where the painting is now. It belonged to Ilo Nunes, a marchand amateur who lived in Rome in a beautiful old tower in Piazza in Piscinula. He had bought it in Venice and while being transported it fell off the barge into the canal. Instead of immediately putting it upright [the boatmen] left it flat so the surface stayed wet for a long time. Fortunately, it was face up. Nunes sent it to me in Rome at the Galleria Palma and I secured*

25. Jacopo Tintoretto, *La Piscina Probatica*, 1559, oil on canvas, church of S. Rocco, Venice, 533 × 529 cm. Shown in a photo by Anderson before the Brandi intervention.

26. The painting today. Additions were removed not only at the bottom but also on the right and left sides. Unlike the other paintings in the church, it is now smaller than the architectural surround.

27. Carlo Crivelli, *Pietà*, c. 1475, tempera on panel transferred to canvas, Harvard University Art Museums, Fogg Art Museum, Cambridge, MA, 66.4 × 64 cm. Before Cavenaghi's restoration.

28. As it looks today. It is catalogued as Carlo Crivelli, restored by Luigi Cavenaghi.

*the paint to the canvas. The paint had become completely white. Pellicioli came to see it and said that it was easy to remove the white and took a big ball of cotton soaked with alcohol and wiped over the painting. Nothing happened. My system was to burn the surface. The picture was vertical on an easel. Little piece by little piece, in 10 cm squares, I wet [the paint] with alcohol and set it on fire with a match. The flame lasted just a second, and the color returned. This was the first time I tried this system on a painting that was blanched. I don't remember if I came up with this technique out of desperation or if someone suggested it. In any case, it is not in Secco Suardo. Pellicioli was amazed. He told me that [at the ICR] "they even had a scale to weigh farts" but that no one knew how to work on paintings. He was shocked to find on his arrival a fifteenth-century painting [a Filippo Lippi from the Galleria Nazionale di Arte Antica] that had been partly cleaned and semi-destroyed. [Essentially only the underdrawing and the gesso preparation were left.] One fourth of the painting hadn't yet been cleaned. When Pellicioli cleaned that part, it was in perfect condition.*

Pellicioli and Brandi disagreed on a fundamental level about approaches to restoration and came to dislike each other personally as well. Pellicioli began pouring his criticisms into Longhi's ear, especially the story about the Lippi. Longhi, no stranger to controversy, published an incendiary article in 1948 after Pellicioli had resigned from the ICR, claiming that paintings were being ruined under Brandi's direction, with the Lippi cited as crime number one. Brandi responded in kind. The case went all the way to the Ministry of Fine Arts which, after hearing a number of experts express differing views, ruled in favor of Brandi and changed the board of directors of the ICR, leaving Longhi out.[1]

Mario had further criticisms of Brandi:

*While his theoretical writings are admirable, he was a terrible restorer and, although he did not do the work himself, he was responsible for a great deal of damage. I remember his restoration of a masterpiece by Tintoretto, the Piscina Probatica.[2] The canvas, as was usual in Venice, was made up of several pieces of canvas seamed together horizontally. [Looms in that period could not produce cloth more than approximately a meter wide.] The composition shows figures seated at the edge of a pool. Some of them have their legs dangling down into the water. The seam happened to coincide with the*

*edge of the water. Brandi, convinced it was a later addition, removed it. When I saw the painting reinstalled in the Church of San Rocco, I was aghast to see that it had been mutilated in this fashion. The missing piece had a stone wall, a bit of water and the dangling legs. Old copies and etchings of the painting show it with this part of the composition, which I thought was original. Since it is gone, there is no way to be sure, but even if it was a seventeenth-century addition it was essential to the meaning of the painting and a daring concept at that time. [There is a suggestion in the literature that it was by Jacopo's son Domenico, done not long after the painting was completed.]*

*Brandi was also a proponent of 'tratteggio', that is replacing missing areas of paint with neutral strokes of color. This was a new idea in this period and was promoted by art historians who were tired of being made fools of by clever restorers. I myself am in favor of neutral zones of some sort in cases when a large part of the painting is missing, but Brandi wanted the restorer's work to be completely scientific so that even small losses were compensated with hatching, an effect I find very disturbing.*[3]

Mario was right that experts, quite understandably, did not want to be misled by the work of a restorer. A restoration by the famous Milanese restorer, Luigi Cavenaghi (1844–1918), illustrated what a real master could achieve. In 1924, the Fogg Museum of Harvard University accepted the gift of a *Pietà* by Carlo Crivelli that had been included the previous year in an exhibition at the Burlington Fine Arts Club in London, *Counterfeits, Imitations, and Copies of Works of Art*. The surviving original passages were beautiful and the missing central figure of Christ had been reconstructed with great skill. The museum acquired the painting as "an instructive object lesson to the students who in the future will be museum officials and collectors."[4]

## A Brief History of Italian Restoration

Mario was one of the last, and among the greatest, representatives of the traditional approach to the restoration of paintings, known as 'pictorial' restoration. This had produced many distinguished practitioners in the past, particularly the renowned nineteenth-

century school of Italian restoration in Milan and Bergamo, which centered around two men: the art historian and former physician Giovanni Morelli (1816–1891), the originator of the "scientific" approach to connoisseurship, and the chief restorer of the Brera Museum, Giuseppe Molteni (1800–1867).

Both Morelli and Molteni were keenly interested in the first-hand study of old master paintings, including their materials and techniques, as an important element in discovering the identity of the artist and the quality of the work. Molteni's studio became the center of this developing approach to connoisseurship. The National Gallery of London had only recently begun to build their collection. The keeper and, later, director, Sir Charles Eastlake (1793–1865), his traveling agent, Otto Mündler (1811–1870), and the collector, Austen Layard (1817–1894), formed close friendships with Morelli and Molteni. This group had a decisive influence on international taste in old master paintings and how they should look.

Luigi Cavenaghi was Molteni's successor. Recognized early on for his talent as a refined draughtsman and gifted painter, he was sent to the Brera from his hometown of Caravaggio when he was twelve years old and became a pupil of Molteni, whose lucrative practice he inherited in 1867. Along with restoring pictures, he continued to paint, and created settings for the collections of his private clients. He acted as a consultant for the Poldi Pezzoli Collection, the Ambrosiana, and the Accademia Carrara, and oversaw the reinstallation of the picture galleries of the Vatican Museum. He was careful about his materials and methods, and his restoration reports are still models of their kind.[5] His expert restorations embraced both Molteni's pictorial methods, which he seems to have employed for paintings that were privately owned or on the market, along with a more conservative style for badly damaged works in public collections such as Leonardo's *Last Supper,* which he spent five years cleaning and carefully consolidating without doing any imitative retouching but only toning down the losses. Like Molteni, Cavenaghi enjoyed international fame and

was revered by a succession of Italian government ministers until his death. Cavenaghi's role at the Brera and as principal advisor to the state was inherited by his pupil, Mauro Pellicioli.

A different approach was advocated by Giovanni Cavalcaselle (1819–1897), a contemporary of Morelli and, like him, one of the founders of Italian art history, who in 1863 published an open letter to the recently established government of Italy, in which he argued that conservation rather than restoration should be the primary objective in caring for the artistic patrimony of the state—that is, that the material remains of works of art should be stabilized and preserved as documents of a certain time and place, and the damages should not be retouched for aesthetic purposes.[6] Morelli strongly disagreed with Cavalcaselle, and the two vied to impose their divergent views, a rivalry that sometimes resulted in public quarrels. In 1882, Cavalcaselle criticized Molteni's deliberately balanced cleaning of Raphael's early masterpiece, *The Marriage of the Virgin*, in the Brera, finding fault with the new relationship between the figures and the foreground, while in 1890, Morelli expressed horror at the radical cleaning of Filippino Lippi's frescos in Santa Maria sopra Minerva, carried out under Cavalcaselle's supervision.[7]

These two philosophies coexisted in Italy throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Even though Cavalcaselle's views became official policy in the 1880's,[8] a succession of ministers and superintendents continued to favor the work of restorers like Cavenaghi and Pellicioli until the establishment of the ICR.

Towards the end of his life, Cavenaghi defined restoration as, in essence, its own art form, "… an artistic elaboration whose purpose is the integration of a degraded work of art. … Restoration must be guided by a deep knowledge of the stylistic characteristics of the various schools, of the calligraphy of the master; it must be thought about and studied at length, doing the least possible and meticulously imitating the original",[9] a description which exemplified Mario's thinking.

The nature of restoration and the relationship of the restorer to the work of art changed under Brandi and Argan whose defi-

nition of restoration was "philological investigation with the aim of recovering and making visible the original text of the work … carried out by specialized technicians who will be continuously under the control and guidance of scholars."[10] There was no possibility that restorers would be able to exercise their own judgment. The role of the restorer exemplified by Luigi Cavenaghi was banished in Italy. More than half a century later, Italian restorers have still not recovered their lost status as professionals among the higher castes of art historians and scientists. Restorations are "directed" by art historians and it is not unusual that the restorer remains anonymous. There was no place in this scheme for someone like Mario, with his knowledge, brilliant mind and spirit of independence.

CHAPTER 6

# War: Rome, Open City

## Via del Babuino

Italy declared war in June 1940, in the wake of Hitler's invasion of France. Nonetheless, despite the Fascists still being in power, Rome remained an active commercial center with a thriving art world. In 1942 Mario became a partner in a gallery on the Via del Babuino with Enrico Scafetti, with whom he had earlier made the trip to Paris. He described one of their important purchases in his memoir:

*My friend Enrico Scafetti opened a gallery on Via del Babuino with another partner. After a while his partner decided to abandon their activity and my friend, who was not particularly expert in paintings, asked me if I would be interested in working with him. The idea appealed to me because I could continue my restoration work in the gallery in two upstairs rooms that were small but with good light. It was during the war, just before the bombing of Rome and the fall of the Fascist regime and commerce*

*in works of art was suddenly flourishing because people who had money were buying art as an investment.*

*My partner was very good at dealing with clients. He was attractive and cultivated. Before becoming an art dealer, he had a shop on the same street that sold canvas and artist's materials. His uncles, whose family name was Giosi, were in the antiques business in Naples. Occasionally my help would be asked to explain the condition or the attribution of a painting to a potential client. One morning I was working in the studio when an intermediary by the name of Giulio Veneziani told me that he had seen a painting in a villa on Via Appia Antica that he thought was nineteenth-century English. The owner of the house had died recently and the heirs were selling everything. For this painting, they wanted ten thousand lire. He said to me, if you buy it, I expect ten percent of the purchase price. I agreed to that and we went to the villa. The painting hung over the fireplace, in the "best parlor", as it was called in those days. It was a large landscape in an elaborate frame, and it was obviously from the nineteenth-century English school. In the landscape, there were two figures and a dog. I didn't know very much about English paintings, but it was beautiful and we decided to buy it immediately. We paid for it, put it in the carriage, and brought it to my studio.*

*It was black with smoke—evidently it had been hanging over that fireplace for many years. I removed the nails that held the picture in its frame and took the canvas out. To my surprise there was a signature that had been hidden by the rebate of the frame, which was contemporary with the painting. The signature read "John Constable, 1824, R.A.". I immediately began to clean the painting, which had never been touched. This meant first removing the layer of soot and grime with a mild soap and water solution. It cleaned beautifully and underneath there was a slightly yellowed original varnish that I did not remove. I put it back in its frame and we put it in the window of the gallery. A few days later one of Enrico's uncles, Giuseppe Giosi, said he had a client for the painting and asked us to send it to his gallery.*

*I remember that early summer afternoon when we, like everyone else, were hoping to make a decent sale so that we could go away to the seaside or the mountains. Giuseppe Giosi came to the gallery and gave us three hundred thousand lire in bills, which at that time were the size of handkerchiefs. It was a huge amount of money at that time, something equivalent to six hundred million lire today ($600,000). The painting had been sold to Furmanik, a manufacturer of parachutes. I've never seen it again and have often wondered what happened to it. It was our first important sale.*

The gallery was just across the street from the billiard parlor where Mario still played on occasion, and a friendly neighborhood bar was convenient for the obligatory afternoon espresso. At the news-stand just outside his door worked Rita Venanzoni, a pretty and lively girl who was helping her mother. Rita often hung out at the bar, where she became friendly with the older, charismatic Mario. The ensuing romance lasted for several years, during which time the couple had a child. Mario left his wife, Fernanda, and rented a modern apartment in a neighborhood near the Foro Mussolini on the Via Flaminia. The baby was born in early January 1944, during the German occupation, and was named Antonio, after Mario's father. Rita and Antonio spent much of their time with Mario's mother and sister in their apartment near the Tiburtina train station.

## The Bombing of Rome

By 1943, the war was going badly. Italy's armies had been defeated on all fronts, and the conflict had expended all the country's resources. Corruption was endemic, and the enormous sums spent on new weapons had proven wasted, because most were shoddily manufactured and faulty. Soldiers froze to death in the mountains of Albania because winter uniforms had never been supplied. Families lived in hope that news of their sons might arrive from one of the various fronts in Greece, North Africa, or Russia. The citizens of Italy had lost their faith in Mussolini and the regime. The final straw was the bombing of Rome by the Allies, especially the raid that brought 150 Flying Fortresses to the skies above the city.

The morning of July 19, 1943, Mario was in his gallery when Rome was bombed:

*Around 11 or 11:30 in the morning I was chatting with a friend at the door of the gallery I had with Scafetti when we heard the sound of hundreds of airplanes*

*flying towards the city. In a few seconds, they were over us and were headed towards the Rome train station, which was their objective. There must have been about 200 planes. Immediately after this, we heard bombs exploding a short distance away. I immediately thought of my mother and my sister with her daughters, who lived in the neighborhood of the station near the railroad bridge on the Via Tiburtina, which was one of the targets of the air raid. I jumped on my Vespa which was in front of the gallery and raced at full speed towards the site of the bombing. When I got to the railroad bridge I found that it was intact and I witnessed a scene that I will never forget. Thousands of people, completely covered with white powder, were running with their household goods, mostly mattresses, carried on bicycles, on their heads, on carts, or baby strollers. It was a spectacle from the apocalypse. Everyone looked like ghosts.*

*I went under the bridge and made my way to the building where my mother lived. The apartment door was open and there was no one in the house. Fortunately, the building hadn't been hit. I went downstairs to the entrance and at exactly that moment my mother, my sister, and her five daughters walked in. We embraced each other and I asked them where they had taken refuge and they answered, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, "under the railway bridge, the safest place." God and the incompetence of the American bombardiers had saved them. Instead of hitting the bridge they had dropped the bombs over the cemetery and the nearby church of San Lorenzo. The flower vendors in the square in front of the cemetery, all poor women, had been massacred. Many buildings had been destroyed, most of them near the cemetery. Evidently the bombs were launched a few seconds late. The pope [Pius XII] came almost immediately to console the survivors and the wounded.*

Never before had a pope left the Vatican spontaneously, without guards or escorts. The act was unprecedented.

Less than a week later, on July 24, the Grand Council of the Fascist Party, which had not convened for many years, met for more than twelve hours. After much behind-the-scenes manoeuvering, late in the night, they delivered a vote of no confidence in Mussolini as the head of the government. The following afternoon, *Il Duce*, turning up at his office as usual, was summoned to the Quirinale by King Vittorio Emanuele III. He was immediately arrested and escorted to a prison in the mountain stronghold of L'Aquila. When the news of Mussolini's arrest was broadcast, overjoyed

crowds poured into the streets of the capital, thinking that the war would soon end.

When the king announced that everything would continue as before, there was great disappointment. With the powerful New York cardinal, Francis Spellman, as a go-between, the pope began negotiating with President Franklin Roosevelt to have Rome declared an 'open city'. This meant that whoever controlled the capital would not defend it, in exchange for the enemy's promise not to bomb it. As the initiative did not produce the desired results, on August 14, 1943, the Italians unilaterally declared Rome an open city, *città aperta*.

The new government prevaricated about signing an armistice with the Allies, who had already taken Sicily and were poised to land on the coast south of Naples. Italy wanted to claim neutrality, which, inevitably, turned out to be an ineffective strategy, offending both sides. Churchill demanded nothing less than unconditional surrender. Germany had already begun to move troops into Italy following the arrest of Mussolini. An armistice with the Allies was finally signed on September 3, 1943, and announced over the radio on September 8. Some Italian air force and navy commanders were forewarned, but on many fronts the news had not yet arrived. The military based in Rome had not been given any instructions regarding the defense of the city. Although they resisted the German attack, they were hamstrung, because they had been ordered to retreat to Tivoli to protect the departure of the government and the monarchy. Chaos ensued and German troops immediately occupied Rome. Thousands of Italian soldiers were massacred or taken prisoner, while the king and top officials fled to Brindisi, a port in southern Italy under the control of the Allies.

## The German Occupation

The Germans maintained that Rome was still an open city, but this was a fiction. Nazi troops constantly passed through the city under cover of night, headed for the front, and they stored military supplies in various depots near the railroads. The Allies continued to conduct air raids of strategic targets throughout the Occupation, resulting in significant civilian casualties.[1]

Even amid the chaos of war, daily life continued in occupied Rome. Mario's friend Palma Bucarelli, the director of the Galleria d'Arte Moderna, kept a diary[2] during the last six months of the German occupation. It provides some insight into the ordinary activities of Rome's professional class during this period. In it, Bucarelli recounts many visits to Mario's studio on Via del Babuino. Some were related to paintings that had been stolen from the museum and offered to Mario, who recognized them and alerted her. Other times, they exchanged even more valuable information, such as where to buy spaghetti on the black market that day.

Bucarelli describes the everyday inconveniences caused by the sporadic availability of electricity, telephone service, and hot water. Her anti-Fascist friends were in hiding, moving from one house to another, with the constant fear, shared by their friends and loved ones, that they would be arrested. Even so, they continued to engage in subversive activities whenever possible—from printing news-sheets and manifestos to performing more violent actions. It was said that there existed a list of people who were being sought by the SS and the Fascist police. Those who were arrested were brutally tortured and, if they survived, were then thrown into prison, mainly the so-called political wing of Regina Coeli in Trastevere, a former convent that had been converted into a prison in the late nineteenth century.

Food rations were continuously reduced by German decree and there was little available even on the black market. The search for food was constant, and Palma's diary often notes that someone

has told her that a certain item could be had at such-and-such a place if one got there right away. The officially rationed bread, the *pane nero,* was inedible and contained hardly any flour. One analysis described the following ingredients: elm tree pith, a little rye, dried chickpeas, maize, and mulberry leaves.[3] Romans still marvel at the shock they experienced when the American liberating troops presented them with American white bread, the infamous *pane bianco,* which bore little relationship to the bread Italians were accustomed to.

There were some enjoyments to be had: concerts at the Adriano Theater on Sundays, and musical afternoons. Because there was no electricity, everyone went home to bed after the sun set and waited for news of the Allies' arrival, which seemed long in coming. Romans somehow kept their sense of humor and jokes abounded. A wall in Trastevere bore the slogan: "Hold strong, Americans. We are coming to rescue you!" (*Americani! Tenetevi forte! Veniamo a liberarvi!*). The great Italian comedian Totò, appearing in a revue with Anna Magnani, would recount having spotted a dancer he liked in the chorus line and repeatedly inviting her to, "Come forward, come up to the front!" but she refused to move; Magnani demanded, "Why not?" and Toto's reply, "Because she is American!", brought the house down.[4] But joking aside, fifty thousand Allied soldiers died during the four months it took to advance the thirty miles between Anzio, where they landed, and Rome.

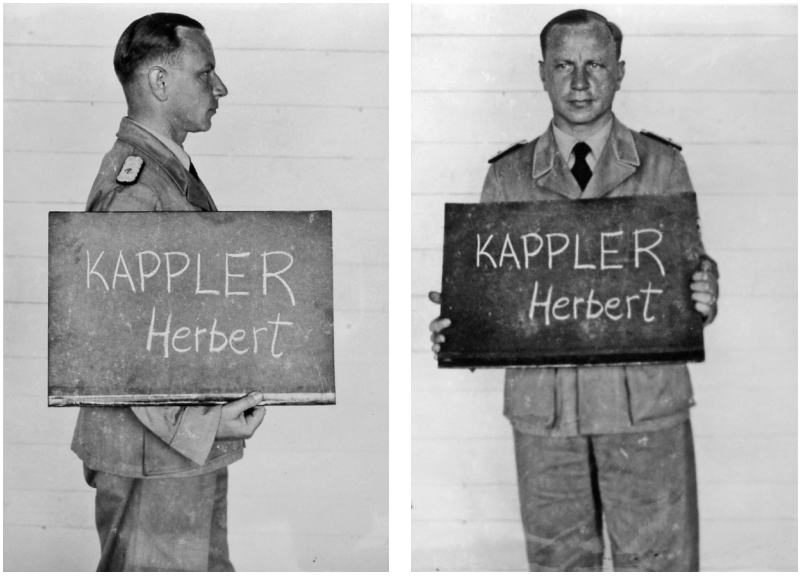
Palma and Mario were among the lucky ones. For many Romans in early 1943, daily life was desperate. Italy's economy had collapsed and food rations were below subsistence levels. Only those who could buy food on the black market, where the prices were approximately ten times the official rate, managed to get by. Thousands died of starvation.

## The Roman Jews

Less than a month after the occupation of Rome, on September 26, 1943, Major Herbert Kappler, head of the Gestapo, summoned the chief Rabbi of the Jewish community to Villa Wolkonsky, the German embassy. He demanded fifty kilos of gold, threatening the immediate deportation of two hundred Jews from the Roman ghetto to Germany if the request was not met. The ghetto, originally walled with gates and curfews, had been created by Pope Paolo IV in 1555 and was only abolished in 1860 after the unification of Italy. Before that date, the restrictions imposed upon the Jews varied depending on the particular pope, but the obligation to attend a Catholic sermon every Saturday was a constant throughout the centuries although there were few converts. The ghetto walls, along with an ancient warren of rundown alleys, had been demolished in 1888, creating a quarter with wide streets and open spaces. In 1943, it was populated by poor Jews, primarily small shopkeepers and wholesalers.

Many of Mario's colleagues and friends on Via del Babuino were Jewish. He wrote:

*As soon as the German troops arrived the hunt was on for Italian Jews who, up until that time, although living under sanctions, had not been arrested. Via Babuino was a center of art dealers almost all of whom were Jewish. Many had gone to the countryside to hide, some in churches, in convents, or hidden by friends, but others had remained in the city, having changed their address and assumed fictitious names supported by forged documents. Some of the friends with whom I played billiards in a parlor just across the street from my studio were Jews who, their shops closed and having nothing to do, came to pass the time. One day a truck pulled up in front of the billiard parlor. It was full of SS soldiers and they arrested a number of these poor souls, who were never heard from again. One of them was a man called Fiorentini with whom I often played billiards. I had nicknamed him 'mozzarella' because he was such a terrible player and he always lost, especially to me. The Germans put him in the truck and took him away. There were a lot of informants.*




29. Herbert Kappler after his capture by the British in 1944.

Kappler gave the rabbi a deadline of thirty-six hours, and the news quickly spread throughout the city. With some contributions from non-Jewish Romans, and a promise by the Vatican to donate as much as fifteen kilos of gold in the case of a shortfall, the required fifty kilos were collected by 6 p.m. on September 28 and brought to SS headquarters in Via Tasso, where the Jewish representatives were sent away without a receipt of any kind. The Germans were perfidious and the reprieve was brief. Shortly after dawn on October 15, under a drizzling rain, SS troops invaded the ghetto and rounded up 1,259 men, women, and children, who were locked in railway carriages at the Tiburtina train station. A few people risked their lives to deliver packages of food or to carry farewell messages back and forth. In Florence, the Italian train conductor was replaced by a German, and the train proceeded directly to the death camp of Auschwitz, where most of the prisoners were immediately murdered.[5]

The Germans liberated Mussolini from his mountain prison on September 12, 1943, shortly after the occupation, and rather than return the former leader to Rome, they installed him as the head of a puppet government, with his personal guard and Fascist militia, in the northern city of Salò, near Lake Garda.

Although Mario wrote that he and his business partner, Enrico Scafetti, belonged to the Action Party (Partito d'Azione), the details he recounts indicate that he adhered to a different group, the Italian National Democratic Union (Unione Nazionale della Democrazia Italiana). This was a small organization formed by Placido Martini, a socialist lawyer originally from the Castelli Romani, who had been active as an anti-Fascist from the first days of the regime. As a result of his political activities he spent seventeen years in exile at various Fascist confinement prisons. After his release in 1943, he returned to Rome and became part of the resistance. Martini was a lone wolf and an idealist, who rejected membership in the umbrella group of anti-Fascist parties, the National Liberation Committee (Comitato di Liberazione Nazionale, CLN). He believed that the CLN was comprised of the political elite of the past, who would maintain the status quo after the war had ended. This stance would have appealed to Mario who was, by nature, cynical about the instruments of power. The Unione Nazionale operated only in Rome. Their primary activity was to conceal and provide aid to the thousands of soldiers who were either deserting the Nazi-Fascist military or refusing inscription; in most cases they were helped to cross beyond the front lines and return to their families, but around 700 liberated soldiers remained in Rome and became part of the military wing of the group, mounting actions against the Germans and the Fascists. In addition to Martini, a small core group directed these various undertakings, flanked by a few hundred sympathizers, like Mario. The entire leadership of the Unione Nazionale was arrested within a few days in late January 1944 and the organization was effectively wiped out. The party was so small that, for the sake of simplicity, Mario must have decided to say that he belonged to the well-known Partito d'Azione.

The penalties for engaging in even such non-violent activities against the Nazi-Fascists were severe. Offenders were arrested and could be shot or sent to a concentration camp in Germany. Mario was never a military man, but he told me that during that period he kept a revolver hidden in a disused water tank in the lavatory of his studio.

## A Narrow Escape

When American troops made their carefully prepared landing at Anzio on January 22, 1944, they failed to take immediate advantage of the situation, and as a result, the Germans were able to occupy the mountains, trapping the Allied troops on the beach. However, on the day of the successful landing at Anzio, a patrol of American soldiers had managed to drive as far as the outskirts of Rome, leading the citizens to believe that liberation was imminent and that the Germans were fleeing. In the euphoria of the moment, many resistance groups let down their guard, continuing to meet in public places, planning their activities. They anticipated guerrilla actions and were prepared to mount an insurrection in support of the approaching Allies despite the danger. Herbert Kappler, the head of the SS, was well aware of the damage that such tactics could inflict and already had a network of paid informants in place, either traitors from within the parties or men who had succeeded in infiltrating them. Immediately after the Allied forces landed at Anzio, he ordered a round-up of all those under surveillance or who were suspected of partisan activities. Many members of the liberal and socialist factions of the resistance, such as the Unione Nazionale and the Partito d'Azione, were arrested while most Communists escaped the dragnet.[6]

Mario wrote about what happened to his friends:

*A few days after the Allies finally landed at Anzio [January 26, 1944] a group of us, all members of the Action Party, decided to celebrate with a lunch at La Rosetta, a famous restaurant in Piazza del Pantheon. We were eleven and the appointment was*

*for twelve thirty at the restaurant.*[7] *That morning, we [Mario and Enrico Scafetti] were expecting one of our regular clients, Antonio Mandolesi, to come to the gallery to see a painting that we had attributed to Turner, although it may not have been by him. In any case, it was a very attractive view of the Grand Canal in Venice. He telephoned around noon to say that he would be fifteen minutes late. I have often asked myself what would have happened if he had not been late for his appointment. It is true that our lives are suspended from a slender thread.*

*Mandolesi arrived at one thirty and apologized for being late. He began to look at the little picture that I had just cleaned and varnished. He liked it very much and asked the price, after which he did a little negotiating, like any good businessman, offering half of the asking price. Scafetti, who was also a clever businessman, knowing his client well, had asked double what we had decided to sell it for. After a certain amount of bargaining, I succeeded in getting Mandolesi to raise his first offer. In the meantime, it was past two o'clock, and Mandolesi was still there. I said that I had an appointment for which I was already late, at which point he wrote a check and left. I made my way to the Rosetta as fast as I could. I got to the restaurant to find it closed, and there were a lot of waiters and other people standing outside talking. I asked someone what had happened and was told that the SS had come with a van and arrested ten people who were dining at the restaurant. Evidently a traitor had informed the SS about our meeting. The spy was certainly someone in our group, because no one else knew about the meeting. That same evening, those few of us from the directing committee who had not been arrested convened. In the meantime, we had managed to find out that our friends had been brought to Via Tasso, to SS headquarters, evidently to be interrogated. The families were all desperate, and we met every few hours to decide what could be done. We knew that those who were able to afford it could purchase a prisoner's release with gold. Not everyone was in a financial position to buy the gold coins for the ransom. Two of our friends, [Alfredo] Berdini and [Giacomo Marescalchi] Belli, were freed after their wives, at great sacrifice, managed to get enough gold.*[8] *[Agnese and Alfredo Berdini's grandson, Paolo, became an art historian and often visited Mario when he came to New York.] A high-ranking prelate [Monsignor Giovanni Montini, who later became Pope Paul VI and may have been related to the Berdinis], negotiated on their behalf, and they were released. We were not in a position to do anything for the other eight.*

*While we were trying to find money to finance their ransom, a terrible incident occurred. A platoon of SS soldiers, consisting of about two hundred men, guarded*

*the Palazzo Quirinale where the German high command was headquartered. Every day, they paraded through the streets of Rome, from their barracks to the Quirinale, accompanied by a small band, for the changing of the guard. Some partisans from the Communist Party [Rosario Bentivegna and Carla Capponi of the Gruppi d'Azione Pattriotica (GAP)] had decided, without telling any of the other opposition parties, to put a remote-controlled bomb in a garbage can on the Via Rasella, part of the daily route of the SS platoon. The bomb was detonated [on March 23, 1944] when exactly half the platoon had marched past the garbage can. It was a massacre; thirty-three soldiers were killed. The surviving SS soldiers immediately began to search all the surrounding buildings, thinking that the bomb had been thrown out of a window. Many people were arrested—including a cousin of mine, who had a shop in that street, practically in front of where the explosion took place. General Kesselring was the commander of the German forces in Rome. He ordered 330 Italians to be shot as a response to the massacre—that is, ten Italians for each German killed. [In the end, 335 men were killed, due to the haste and confusion with which they were selected. When the Germans realized that the count was not right, they decided to murder all of them anyway.]*

*From the Regina Coeli prison and the SS headquarters in Via Tasso, 330 political prisoners—including our friends and a number of Jews—were rounded up. During the night, SS trucks brought them to the Fosse Ardeatine, as it is known today, on the Via Ardeatina. Their hands were bound behind their backs with wire and they were forced into one of the vast caves where pozzolana earth for making cement was quarried. Each one was killed by a pistol shot to the back of the neck. The horror of the scene is unimaginable. After they had all been killed, the Germans exploded a bomb at the entrance to the cave to seal it off.*

*About three months later [on June 4, 1944], the American and Allied forces finally liberated Rome from the Germans. With their help, we located the sealed entrance to the cave. The American soldiers made a hole above what had been the entrance to the cave and illuminated the interior with a strong searchlight. The corpses were piled one on top of the other, and the decomposing bodies had emitted vapors, which formed a sort of fog. That night I was unable to sleep or eat and could not help but think that if it hadn't been for that thirty-minute delay I would have been there among them.*

*A few days later, together with Berdini and Belli, we began the gruesome task of identifying the bodies. Hundreds of the victims' relatives were present. One of our friends, Avvocato Placido Martini, had two gold teeth, but his widow had great*

*difficulty recognizing the body because the SS had removed them—probably while torturing him in Via Tasso. Several days later, we learned that the informant had been identified and was dead. He was found near his house with a bullet in the back of his neck.*

The Allied troops wanted to simply seal the cave and declare the site a cemetery, but the wives and relatives of the murdered men, whether Jewish or Catholic, wanted to identify their loved ones and give them a proper burial. The first group that entered saw great mounds of earth, which proved to be piles of bodies thinly covered with dirt. The space in the cave had been too small to hold all 335 men, so the Germans selected the victims in groups of six or eight, shot them in the back of the neck, and then the next group was brought in and made to kneel on top of the dead.[9] At the beginning of July, American soldiers began to exhume the bodies. An Italian forensic doctor, Attilio Ascarelli,[10] helped the grieving relatives find their loved ones, a grisly endeavor due to the deteriorated state of the bodies. Twelve bodies remain unidentified, and efforts have recently been renewed to try to match their DNA with that of family members.

After the war, the Nazis and Fascists responsible were put on trial. The Chief of Police, Pietro Caruso, who had helped to round up the victims, was sentenced to death and shot by a firing squad the next day. The director of the Regina Coeli prison, Donato Carretta, was seized by a mob and drowned in the Tiber.[11] Herbert Kappler was tried by an Italian military tribunal and sentenced to life in prison.

For many years, there has been consistent and heated debate over how responsible the partisans who planted the bomb in Via Rasella were for the massacre that followed. The passionate disagreement was perhaps inevitable given the fragmented nature of a resistance movement composed of so many different political parties, in addition to the various independently operated splinter groups, a mirror image of post-war Italian politics. The Action Party belonged to a larger coalition of anti-Fascist groups, the

30. Le Fosse Ardeatine, exhuming the bodies.

National Committee for Liberation, which covered the entire political spectrum from Communists to monarchists and everything in between. The only common ground these groups shared was that they all wanted to fight the German occupation.

The organization responsible for the Via Rasella bomb was a faction within the National Committee, the Gruppi d'Azione Patriottica, GAP, as it was commonly known, which consisted of cells of three or four members, each acting on their own. In fact, for the sake of security, these cells were forbidden from collaborating. Their recruits were mainly university students, and

their purpose was to carry out violent acts against the Nazi–Fascist oppressors, such as committing assassinations and bombing locales frequented by German officers and soldiers. The GAP's members were audacious, determined, and successful. The cell that carried out the attack on Via Rasella was composed of three people, all in their twenties: Rosario Bentivegna, a medical student and the principal actor, who, disguised as a street sweeper, planted thirty kilograms of dynamite in a public trash bin; Franco Calamandrei; and Carla Capponi. They acted without instructions from, or the permission of, the National Committee for Liberation [the CLN]. According to some writers, one of the GAP's aims was to provoke the enemy and create a climate of fear and hatred, even if there was no strategic military objective.

German policy clearly stated that, in the case of any action taken against the occupying soldiers, ten Italians would die for every German killed. In the immediate aftermath of the tragedy, many Romans suggested that the partisans responsible should turn themselves in so that other lives could be spared. Mario felt strongly that the attack was an act of useless violence carried out by Communist fanatics and cowards with no loyalties except to the party. In 1949, Rosario Bentivegna and Carla Capponi were given medals of valor. Although Bentivegna defended the bombing as an act of war for the rest of his life, the episode divided not only the populace but the Communist Party itself.

After Via Rasella, the Germans meted out further punishment by reducing the bread ration from 150 grams a day to 100 grams. In some areas, there was no bread at all. The city was full of refugees—half a million had arrived during the two years that preceded liberation—and many people were starving to death in the streets, the hospitals, and the prisons. This is the context of Alberto Moravia's, *La Ciociara (Two Women),* which was made into a film starring Sophia Loren.

There was a follow-up to Mario's story of the Fosse Ardeatine. In a strange coincidence, while in Monte Carlo in the late 1990s, a friend asked us to join him for drinks at the apartment of Marilu

Mandolesi, an elegant Italian divorcée. Mario chatted with our hostess with his usual ease, particularly as they were both Romans, and her father had been a collector of paintings. She thought that perhaps Mario might have known him—his name was Antonio Mandolesi. Mario turned white. I was standing next to him and, worried, I asked him quietly if there was something the matter. Then, suddenly, I caught on, recognizing the name from Mario's memoirs, which I had been translating into English. This was evidently the same Mandolesi who was late for an appointment, and who had inadvertently saved Mario from the Fosse Ardeatine.

After 271 days of German occupation, at dawn on June 4, 1944, soldiers from the American Fifth Army slowly and stealthily entered the outskirts of Rome. Airdropped leaflets had warned Romans to stay off the streets. There was little resistance. The Nazis and Fascists abandoned their headquarters, jails, hotels, and apartments and fled. General Kesselring, German commander of the Italian campaign, had made the decision to evacuate without attempting to defend the city, abiding by the agreement that Rome was an 'open city'. Most Romans stayed awake all night, watching and listening behind closed shutters. Among them were Mario, his mother, his sister with her five daughters, his companion, Rita Venanzoni, and their five-month-old son, Antonio. Before long, tanks and entire columns of troops from the United States, England, Australia, New Zealand, India, and Morocco began pouring into the streets, and the city gave itself up to delirious abandon. Flour, chocolate, cigarettes, and chewing gum were grabbed in desperation by the starving populace, though these gifts were far too little to satisfy the needs of 1.5 million inhabitants. It would take a long time to address the food shortages, but the terror was over.

CHAPTER 7

# After the War: Transitions

## Pietro Maria Bardi and the Studio d'Arte Palma

After the liberation of Rome, Mario resumed work in the gallery on Via del Babuino. He had begun to make a reputation for himself as a restorer and connoisseur of old master paintings. One evening, a stranger stopped by and asked to see the painting in the window, a small panel by Biagio d'Antonio, a fifteenth-century Florentine painter, which was in perfect condition. The client decided to buy it and asked if he could pay in gold. Mario and Enrico had no reason to refuse, and the transaction was completed.

The customer's name was Pietro Maria Bardi (1900–1999), a well-known figure in the cultural world of pre-war Rome. He was a journalist, and a promoter and critic of contemporary art. During the Fascist regime, he had held the important position of director of the Galleria di Roma, the official showcase for modern


31. Pietro Maria Bardi, standing to Mussolini's right, at the formal opening of the *Exhibition of Rationalist Architecture* at the Galleria di Roma, showing the dictator his "table of horrors", a collage of works by academic architects opposed to modernism. Adalberto Libera leans on the table and Giuseppe Terragni is the figure between Mussolini and Bardi. March 30, 1931.

painting and sculpture favored by the regime. He had also been the standard bearer of the Rationalist Architecture Movement, MIAR (Movimento Italiano per Architettura Razionale). MIAR supported the avant-garde tendencies of modern architecture and design influenced by Le Corbusier and the Bauhaus, whose dynamism was appealing to Mussolini in the early 1930s, as opposed to the pompous, imperial style of Marcello Piacentini preferred by conservative members of the leadership. Bardi's interest in Fascism, per se, was superficial; like many Italians, he was impressed by Mussolini's heroic masculinity and saw him as a strongman who had struggled and won, the founder of a new society, and the subject of a cult.

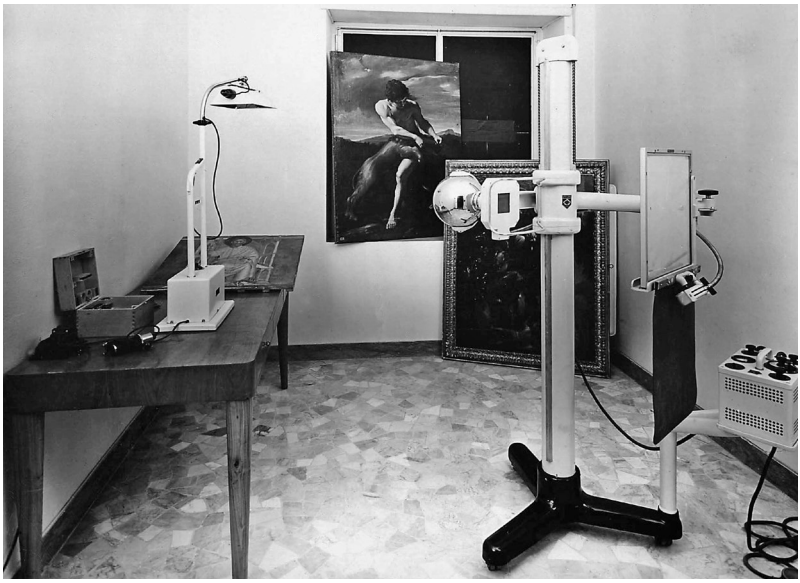
Bardi explained to Mario that he was about to open a large gallery, and he wanted it to represent all aspects of art, from the

traditional to the contemporary, and to provide such services as restoration and reframing in order to satisfy all the clients' needs. In the light of his beliefs, Bardi's choice of the overblown complex on Piazza Augusto Imperatore as premises for his new Studio d'Arte Palma was ironic. However, the large spaces and modern facilities were appealing. In addition to galleries, the twenty rooms could accommodate offices, a library, a frame studio, and so on. Bardi needed an expert in old master paintings, about which he knew little, and he invited Mario to set up a state-of-the-art restoration studio and become his partner. He also promised that all expenses and profits would be shared equally. Though Mario was doing well with Scafetti in the gallery on Via del Babuino, particularly after the sale of the Constable, he felt confined by the small space of the restoration studio, which could not even accommodate an assistant. Mario knew this was a great opportunity, and he decided to accept Bardi's offer, dissolving his partnership with Scafetti, much to Scafetti's own disappointment.

32. The restoration studio with triple north-light window.

The Studio d'Arte Palma opened in May 1944, not long before the end of the Occupation. (Mario officially became a partner in March 1945, although he evidently was a consultant before that date.)[1] Everyone believed the gallery was named in honor of the charismatic director of the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna, Palma Bucarelli. Although she had not yet reached the powerful position she would later occupy, Bardi had known her for some time and was indeed very taken with her. In any case, the name had a nice ring to it, and Mario claimed that he liked it because he had always admired the great Venetian painter, Palma il Vecchio.

Mario chose three rooms with the best natural light for his restorer's studio. In addition to easels, relining tables, and the usual studio furnishings, he added the latest technical equipment, including microscopes and a machine for x-raying paintings. He had several assistants, including his old schoolmate from the Via San Giacomo, Amleto De Santis, a painter with strong Communist leanings, who had undertaken some particularly dangerous work



33. Examination room with x-ray machine.

during the Occupation, and De Santis's fellow radical, a painter called Giuseppe Barberi, known as Peppino. Their political associations would eventually create some problems during the McCarthy era after they moved to New York to assist Mario. There was also a reliner, Alvaro De Rossi, who bore the odd nickname *Zuppa di Pesce* ('Fish Soup'), and a restorer of antique furniture who specialized in eighteenth-century French *boulle* (a veneer of tortoise shell with inlaid copper designs). His nickname was *Cocilovo*, which means 'cook an egg,' and he was a marvelous craftsman. His workshop was outfitted with benches, machinery, and every woodworking tool imaginable.

The gallery's first exhibition, *Seventeenth-Century Italian Painting*, opened in December 1944 with a catalogue by Mario's friend, the young art historian Giuliano Briganti (1918–1992), who was just beginning to make a name for himself as one of the most intelligent and sensitive interpreters of the seventeenth century in Rome, as well as many facets of contemporary culture in the city.[2] The exhibition was a great success and established the gallery's reputation. The paintings had all been cleaned and restored and were displayed in period frames. According to Mario, five hundred people attended the inaugural evening. At that time, primarily through the efforts of Roberto Longhi, there was a revival of interest in seventeenth-century paintings, which had long been out of fashion.

## Palma Bucarelli

The Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna was temporally housed at the Palazzo delle Esposizioni until a dedicated building was constructed on the Valle Giulia in 1911. Mario began his relationship with the museum under the directorship of Ugo Fleres (see Chapter 2) and continued during the period that Roberto Papini was director. Papini did not have an entirely easy time at the museum. A new wing had been added but he had to deal with much

interference from the government, which appropriated most of the additional space to store works from the exhibition mounted to celebrate the tenth anniversary of Fascism. Political currents also constrained Papini's acquisitions, particularly of contemporary art. In 1941, after Italy entered the war, Papini was drafted to serve in the military. He was pessimistic about Italy's involvement and predicted to Mario that Hitler would win all the battles but would lose the war.[3]

He was succeeded (some, including Mario, suggested that he was ousted) by Palma Bucarelli (1910–1998), at the time a functionary of the Ministry of Fine Arts. Palmina, as she was called, was a strong, independent woman with a colorful past in every sense, which she didn't trouble to disguise. Her family was originally Sicilian, but during her childhood they led a nomadic existence following her father's various postings as a government attorney, before finally settling in Rome. She obtained a good degree in art history from La Sapienza and, after passing the entrance examinations for the *sovrintendenza*, was appointed to a junior position at the Villa Borghese in 1933. From there, she rose rapidly through the bureaucracy. While at university, she became involved in a tragic love affair with an older married man, Arduino Colasanti (1877–1935), a distinguished art historian and General Director for Antiquities and Fine Arts, who committed suicide. Not long after, she met the great love of her life, the famous journalist Paolo Monelli, also married at the time, but whom she eventually married in 1963. Monelli was often on the road, affording Palma time to conduct many flirtations and love affairs with powerful men who could advance her interests, such as Giulio Carlo Argan. For this, she won the widely-disseminated sobriquet, "*il terno a letto*" or "lucky in bed", a play on the expression "*il terno a lotto*," meaning lucky at the lottery game. Although ascribed to others, Mario said that the epithet was invented by the witty and sharp-tongued Federico Zeri, which seems entirely plausible.

Palma was an imposing figure who worked obsessively to promote modern and contemporary art from many nations, which

she courageously and successfully exhibited and acquired while director of the National Gallery. It was sometimes even said that the extent of her ambition was rather cold-blooded. Such works include an important 1947 piece by Jackson Pollock, *Watery Paths*, which she succeeded in snatching from Peggy Guggenheim, her American rival with whom she was often compared. Palma scandalized the establishment, as much for her personal life as for her intellectual interests and groundbreaking exhibitions. For these things, she was repeatedly reviled, mainly by the Communist Party and press, who continued to follow the Stalinist line and opposed the abstract art she championed. In fact, the 1959 acquisition of Alberto Burri's *Grande Sacco,* and the 1971 exhibition featuring the ironic *Merda d'Artista* (*Artist's Shit*) by Piero Manzoni—the price of which fluctuated with the market value of gold—prompted parliamentary inquiries.

She had great style and made an indelible impression bicycling around Rome in couture clothing during the German occupation.


34. Palma Bucarelli.

She was known in particular for her eyes, which were a pale blue-violet with silver reflections. Although many artists painted her portrait, Mario thought that none succeeded in capturing her beauty, adding that perhaps only Titian himself could have done her justice. She played politics but had no political allegiance at a time when most Fascists became newly minted Communists to hold on to their appointments and power under the new post-war government. Mario was an old-fashioned Socialist and remained bitter over this papering-over of the Fascist past. It was one of the factors that eventually caused him to leave Italy.

By the 1950s and 60s, Bucarelli had become a celebrity, the most famous museum director in Italy, presiding over grand soirées in her elegant apartment at the museum, her clothes and jewelry rivaling those of such celebrities and fashion icons as Grace Kelly and Maria Callas.

Federico Zeri, a friend of Giuliano Briganti, visited the exhibition of seventeenth-century Italian paintings at the Studio d'Arte Palma and stayed to become Mario's collaborator. Mario described their first encounter in his memoir:

*During the Seventeenth-Century Italian Painting exhibition, among the great influx of visitors, was a young art historian, Federico Zeri. He had just received his doctorate in art history and was working with antiquities, one of his interests, in the Roman Forum. After visiting the show, he asked one of the guards who the owners of the gallery were and if he might talk to them. He introduced himself as an employee of the Ministry of Fine Arts and congratulated us on the exhibition. He knew Giuliano Briganti, who had done the catalogue, since they had both been pupils of Toesca. We talked for several hours, after which Bardi and I looked at each other with the same thought in mind: that the young man was, as the saying goes, 'un pozzo di scienza' ('a well of knowledge'). He could talk on any subject, any painter; he had an incredible memory and knew the provenance of many of the works on exhibition.*

*We asked him if he had some free time to collaborate with us, and he cordially agreed. There was not a day that he did not come to see what I was doing in the restoration studio. He had an insatiable curiosity to know how a work of art was made—something that was not taught at the university, even today. I mean the*

*mechanics of things, such as how a panel is prepared for a gold ground, the tooling of the gold, how Fra Angelico achieved his results, the different types of wood used for panels in different parts of the world. He was interested in the minutest details of the techniques of painting of various schools and periods. When the cases of paintings that I had bought in London arrived, he would study each one and would always find the correct attribution—not only the artist's name but also the provenance of the painting, where it had been exhibited, and when.*

When the war ended, the art world, even though it had never been entirely dormant, even during the German occupation, fully reawakened. Many new galleries opened, showcasing emerging artists, while literary journals and social gatherings contributed to the rich ferment of cultural life in post-war Rome. The second exhibition mounted at the Galleria d'Arte Palma opened in April 1945. It featured the work of Giorgio Morandi, whom Bardi knew well from his Galleria di Roma days. Mario wrote that the show included approximately one hundred paintings, drawings, and etchings. It was very popular, both a critical and financial success. The still-life paintings were priced from 8,000 to 12,000 lire, which was a large sum of money in 1945. Mario and Bardi became friendly with the president of the British Council in Rome when they exhibited the work of *Fifteen English Painters* in late 1947, a show curated by Herbert Read. The consul wished to buy a Morandi for the Tate Gallery but had no funds so the Studio Palma made a gift to the museum of one of the artist's still-life paintings. It has a beautiful antique frame, like many of Morandi's paintings, and is still at the Tate.[4]

## Riccardo Gualino

The Studio d'Arte Palma became a magnet for many sophisticated collectors of old master paintings. One of its clients was the Torinese industrialist, intellectual, and philanthropist Riccardo Gualino (1879–1964). Gualino had created a vast network of

businesses that rivaled those of the Agnellis and was courted by Mussolini in the mid-twenties. An open-minded thinker, he was treated as an enemy after he opposed the regime's policy of devaluing the lire. His financial ventures collapsed in 1929, and *Il Duce* took advantage of his bankruptcy to prosecute him for fraud. After a trial that lasted all of ten minutes, he was sent into internal exile—*al confine*—on Lipari, a tiny island off the northern coast of Sicily. Here he became an anti-Fascist of profoundly liberal beliefs. The Fascist punishment of internal exile was not, as Silvio Berlusconi later suggested, sending one's political enemies on a vacation. Although Lipari is now a tourist destination, at that time it was a bleak place, sparsely populated by only a few fishermen. The rations were meagre and the prisoners were policed by violent Fascist militia.

Gualino had been an avid art collector with wide-ranging interests before he was forced to sell many of his acquisitions to settle his debts. After he was released from exile, he recouped some of his fortune and began successful new ventures, which enabled him to begin collecting old master paintings again. His wife, who shared his interests, was a painter, and Bardi eventually arranged a small exhibition of her work. Mario met Gualino in a fortuitous encounter:

*[Gualino] wanted to sell two paintings from his collection, an anonymous Florentine fifteenth-century work and another close to Paolo Veronese. The price for both was one and a half million lire, a fair request, and I started to take out my checkbook. Suddenly he changed his mind and said, why don't I sell you a half interest in the paintings and we will remain partners? I agreed and after a short time I sold both of them for five million lire, which was an excellent profit. He came to my studio to collect his share and told me that, at that moment, Italian paintings could be bought in London at auction for a few pounds each. He asked me if I would be interested in going to London to buy paintings. I said I was interested but the laws in Italy at that time forbade the exportation of currency, as he well knew. He smiled and said, don't worry about that part of it, I can give you a letter of credit drawn on the Midland Bank in London and you can buy all the paintings you want, send them to Italy,*

*sell them here and we will divide the profits. I accepted his offer. I asked our director, [Francesco Monotti], who spoke a little English, to accompany me since I did not know a word of the language. We decided to leave as soon as possible.*

## London, 1945

*We arrived in London in an evening of horrible weather, foggy and cold. We tried to order a meal in the hotel restaurant but there was nothing to be had except tea and black bread. The hotel was an old Gothic-style nineteenth-century horror called the "Imperial Hotel." There was nothing imperial about it. The rooms were cold and dark, with little light. In Italy, even at that time, by comparison we lived like kings. The war had left the city in shocking condition with immense areas of destruction everywhere. You could barely make out where the streets had been amidst the rubble. The center had begun to function, there were some buses and taxis in circulation, and the Underground was working again. Even though our rooms were freezing, we slept deeply, tired from our trip. Francesco contracted a bad cold and had a fever.*

*We called the only person we knew in London, Herbert Matthews, the correspondent from the New York Times. We had gotten to know him when he was posted to Rome and, together with some members of the British Council, had visited the Morandi exhibition. In the morning, we dressed and went downstairs for a breakfast consisting of an omelette made with powdered eggs, a sausage that tasted like it had been stuffed with sawdust, and tea with no sugar or milk. Herbert accompanied us to the bank with the letter of credit, and we opened an account of £10,000, which was a lot of money at that time. We made the rounds of the various auction houses, all nearly empty. Paintings were being sold for nothing, a few pounds each, just as Gualino had said. After the destruction wreaked by the war, there appeared to be no interest in art, and because there were no collectors, the dealers weren't buying either. Private collections were being dismembered to pay for rebuilding and the new, exorbitantly high taxes. The art market was flooded. Aside from the auctions, there were dealers who sold paintings at very low prices. Padre Toncher had shelves full of paintings that were arranged like books. Bellesi was another dealer who sold paintings for two or three pounds; Dent's prices were from five to ten pounds. Everything was black with soot.*

*The first week, I bought about one hundred paintings for a total of £600, including works by Pannini, Zuccarelli, Tintoretto, Garofalo, Dosso, Francia,*

*Solimena, Canaletto, and others. Herbert Matthews invited us to dinner, and we met his wife, Nancie, and their children; it was an extremely pleasant evening. Herbert showed us a small painting by Morandi that he had bought directly from the artist in Bologna. He was very proud, as he had paid very little for it. Francesco went back to Rome after a few days, because he was still sick and could not get better in the dreadful London weather. I asked Nancie Matthews if she would help me buy paintings, as I was not able to make myself understood, and she happily came with me to the auction houses. Nancie spoke a little French and Italian so we were able to communicate perfectly.*

## Contemporary Art at the '*Palma*'

Pietro Maria Bardi's strengths were different from Mario's. Bardi had always moved through the modern and contemporary art world with ease, and he was a brilliant organizer. After the success of the Morandi exhibition, the gallery mounted, in quick succession, shows of Giacomo Manzù, Filippo De Pisis, Corrado Cagli, Renato Guttuso, and other modern painters, many of whom were Bardi's friends from his days at the Galleria di Roma before the war. Both figurative and abstract artists were represented without distinction, despite the split between the two groups that occurred after the war, with the Communists espousing figurative painting in line with Stalin's ideas about art, and the liberals supporting abstract and conceptual trends.

Corrado Cagli had been a fixture in the pre-war art scene, particularly at the small chic gallery, La Cometa, founded and directed by the society figure Contessa Laetitia Pecci Blunt, known to her friends as Mimì. It became a popular gathering place for artists and intellectuals of all sorts. The countess's title had been bestowed upon her by her great uncle, Pope Leo XIII (Vincenzo Gioacchino Pecci), by combining the noble name, Pecci, with that of her husband, Cecil Blunt. Blunt was a wealthy New York banker, born Cecil Blumenthal, who had converted from Judaism to Catholicism and changed his surname. The Count and Countess

Pecci Blunt lived in a fifteenth-century palace near the Ara Coeli; the name is still carved into the palace's marble lintel in Roman lettering. When the racial laws were passed in 1938, among other restrictions, Jews were forbidden to own property and Jewish businesses were confiscated. The Galleria La Cometa was forced to close due to its association with 'Zionist art', and the Pecci Blunts moved to New York. Here they met Renzo Ravà, another Jewish exile from Florence, who was to become Mario's closest friend after the war. Corrado Cagli, who was also Jewish, left Italy around the same time, becoming an American citizen in 1941.

He joined the US army and witnessed the horrors of Buchenwald; the group of drawings he made there was exhibited at the Studio d'Arte Palma in November 1947. At the inauguration, a fight broke out between the figurative artists, the Communists, and the abstract artists, who were liberals and moderates. The latter mounted a collage at the gallery's entrance that featured some of Cagli's pre-war works with images of *Il Duce*, meant to serve as a reminder not only of Cagli's recent collaborations with and support for the regime, but also that of his fellow Communist painters. This led to the throwing of punches and the arrest of a number of painters, who ended the evening in detention at the local precinct. The incident remains famous in accounts of Rome's post-war art scene, though oddly enough, Mario never spoke of it, possibly finding the whole affair ridiculous.[5] He continued buying paintings in London and restoring them, as well as works belonging to various museums, including the Spada, Corsini, and Barberini Collections. The market for old masters was very active, and Mario said that when the paintings arrived from London, there was a line of dealers waiting to see them.

The Studio d'Arte Palma also offered Mario an opportunity to pursue another of his long-standing interests by allowing him to mount what may have been the very first exhibition of antique frames. This exhibition showcased a number of the finest examples Mario had been able to assemble over the years.[6] Mario first developed an appreciation for frames when he was a boy of

35. Exhibition of antique frames at the Studio d'Arte Palma in the late 1940s.

fourteen in his father's *bottega*. At that time, very few people took an interest in frames, and they could be acquired for prices ranging between 150 lire and 300 lire.

The cheaper frames included numerous examples of the seventeenth-century *pagnottella* type, of which there were provincial variations from the Marches, Naples, and Genoa, silvered and finished with a golden lacquer tinted with dragon's blood and gamboge to resemble gold. The most highly prized were fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Florentine, Venetian, and Bolognese models, some designed by noted sculptors. Mario learned to identify their style, period, and origin. The Studio d'Arte Palma gave him an opportunity to share his passion for frames with the public.

This appreciation for antique and the occasional original frame contrasted with the usual practice in the art market of replacing old frames with modern reproductions. Joseph Duveen, the leading purveyor of old master paintings in the early part of the twentieth century, notoriously removed the existing frames from every painting that passed through his hands, replacing them

with new examples more to Duveen's taste. In museums across the United States, it is often possible to identify a Duveen provenance from the frames. For Renaissance works, Duveen commissioned frames from the Florentine dealer, frame maker, and occasional forger Ferruccio Vannoni, an associate of Federico Joni. Vannoni was a wonderful designer, and each of his frames is different—in itself a work of art with a distinct personality. Frames for eighteenth-century English portraits, a specialty of Duveen, were made in Paris based on French models. The elaborate ornaments are made of recut gesso—a finishing technique that involves re-carving the final, fragile gesso layer before gilding. They look like chiseled bronze. Today, antique frames are difficult to find and are valued as works of art in their own right. Curators and collectors seek to replace reproductions with period pieces and prices have risen accordingly.

36. A small tabernacle frame created by Ferruccio Vannoni for Duveen to house the *Madonna and Child with a Pomegranate* by the young Leonardo da Vinci.

After the war, life in Rome returned to a kind of normality. By 1947, the Studio d'Arte Palma enjoyed international success, and the two principals, Mario and, especially, the extroverted Bardi, had enlarged their circle of friends and business acquaintances. For the first time in his life, Mario was prosperous, and he bought and restored a *casa colonica* on the Via Appia Antica. The Via Appia Antica is a unique road, shrouded in mystery, studded with Roman ruins. At that time, many film stars resided in the neighborhood, behaving scandalously at drunken parties. Ava Gardner, who had lately left Frank Sinatra, was a temporary resident. While she lived there she conducted a tumultuous love affair with the great Spanish bullfighter Luis Miguel Dominguín.

By the end of the decade, both Mario and Bardi, for quite different reasons, would leave Rome. However, the heady post-war years were filled with serendipitous encounters and unexpected opportunities, which would have far-reaching consequences for both of them.

37. Mario in the late 1940s.

## Cesare Zavattini

Mario met Cesare Zavattini (1902–1989) in 1943 or early 1944, when Zavattini was already a successful writer of stories and screenplays, and a well-known gadfly. In the post-war period, he gained international fame for his collaborations with many of the great neorealist filmmakers, including Federico Fellini. He worked on such masterpieces as Roberto Rossellini's *Roma, Città aperta* (*Rome, Open City*) Vittorio De Sica's *L'Oro di Napoli* (*The Gold of Naples*), with the young Sophia Loren and Marcello Mastroianni, and, later, *La Ciociara* (*Two Women*). He was nominated for an Oscar in 1948 for his script for De Sica's *Ladri di biciclette* (*Bicycle Thieves*)

38. Mario's copy of the 1944 edition of one of Zavattini's books. The painting is on the back cover.

and again in 1952 for the motion picture *Umberto D.*, which Ingmar Bergman called his favorite film. Perhaps Zavattini's most famous collaboration with De Sica was on *Il giardino dei Finzi-Contini* (*The Garden of the Finzi-Continis,* 1970). His stories deal with the tragic fate of the many poor and downtrodden characters that filled Rome in the early 1950s. They are terribly sad, and I have always found them difficult to watch.

Within a short time, Mario and Zavattini became good friends. In that period, the writer decided that he wanted to paint, and he began to make tiny pictures of religious subjects, such as funerals and crucifixions in a deliberately naïve style, although, as he himself said, he had no talent for painting ("*negato per la pittura*"). Mario treasured a book Zavattini had given him: a minute volume, eight by six centimeters, and on the back cover, a heavily impastoed painting by the author of a priest saying mass in front of an altar. It is inscribed: "*Caro Mario. Questo è il primo colpo che do alla nostra amicizia*" (This is the first blow to our friendship). I do not know if he was referring to his own abilities as a painter or to the subject of the illustration, since Mario was fervently anti-clerical.

Zavattini was an extravagant and extroverted nonconformist, otherwise Mario's strange story about circumcision would be difficult to believe.

*One morning, Zavattini stopped by my studio and said to me, "Mario, I have decided to declare solidarity with these poor Jews by having a circumcision. Do you know a urologist?"*

*"Of course," I replied, "he is a friend. If you want, I can telephone him right away. And I agree with you, so I will have myself circumcised too."*

*"You're a real friend," he replied.*

*We went to Doctor Granata in Via Frattina, who, when we told him what we wanted to do, said, "You're crazy! What if the SS arrests you? They'll think you're Jewish. I have never met anyone who wanted to be circumcised at your age and in such circumstances, but there's a first time for everything." We explained to him the reason for our decision. It turned out to be an easy operation, fast and simple. We left feeling very satisfied.*

Zavattini came up with another idiosyncratic idea: to make a collection of self-portraits by contemporary painters, each eight by ten centimeters in size. As soon as he began publicizing this project, sometime around 1941, many artists agreed to participate, including Mario himself and Pietro Maria Bardi.

This collection of tiny self-portraits—all framed with the same simple molding—eventually grew to more than 1,500 pictures and covered every wall of Zavattini's apartment. It represented the entire history of Italian painting in the twentieth century, and ultimately became quite valuable, especially the self-portraits by famous artists. In 1979, financial circumstances prompted Zavattini to sell the entire collection at auction. Much of it is now dispersed, although the Pinacoteca di Brera in Milan eventually purchased 152 of the best examples.

Many years later, Mario had the occasion to reminisce about his friendship with Cesare Zavattini with Jennifer Jones, one of the famous Hollywood actresses Zavattini had worked with, who was married to the great collector Norton Simon. The actress had starred in one of Zavattini's films, *Stazione Termini*, directed by De Sica and released in 1953 as *Indiscretion of an American Wife*. The movie did not have much success, despite the fact that it starred Jones and Montgomery Clift as the two lovers. In the late 1980s, Mario and I were in Los Angeles, and Norton Simon, who had worked with Mario for many years and often sought his advice, invited us to lunch. Simon was by that time severely disabled by a rare nerve disease, Guillain-Barré syndrome, and was confined to a wheelchair. He and Jennifer Jones lived in a modest ranch house at the top of one of the canyons, filled with wonderful Indian sculptures and second-tier post-Impressionist painters.

I had loved Jennifer Jones ever since I saw *Love is a Many-Splendored Thing* when I was ten years old, and I was thrilled to have a chance to meet her. We were sitting around the dining table, Simon talking about this and that, but mostly about the purchases he had made that were now hanging in the Norton Simon Museum in Pasadena, which we had toured with him that afternoon. Most of

his remarks concerned the prices he had paid for the paintings and what they might be worth on the current market, which belied his great eye for quality and his achievement as a private collector. After all, he had assembled a collection that, at that time, rivaled—if not surpassed—that of the Getty and a number of other museums.

Suddenly, Jennifer Jones swept in, wearing a marvelous red satin full-length dress with a matching cape lined with pink satin. She looked and moved like a queen and I was totally star-struck as she talked about the various films she had played in while Simon gently teased her about being a ham actor. They clearly adored each other. She and Mario reminisced about Rome in the early 1950s, her role in De Sica's film and about Cesare Zavattini. When we were back in New York, she sent us a copy of *Stazione Termini* accompanied by a gracious note. I loved it and watched it many times.

## Ischia

In the late 1940s, Mario acquired another house. He told me that, one day, after spending hours bent over his worktable at the Studio Palma, his back locked and he couldn't straighten up; his assistants had to carry him out in that position. He knew that in Ischia—a large volcanic island in the Gulf of Naples, near Capri—there were centers that used the local "radioactive" mud to cure all sorts of infirmities, especially those involving bones and muscles. Mario went to the island, and after spending a couple of weeks receiving mud therapy at the Regina Isabella Hotel, his back was healed. Ischia was only just being discovered as a resort at that time, and so the island was still very simple, with just thirty thousand inhabitants. Mario told me that it was made up mostly of fishing villages, with just a few dirt roads that were traveled only by the occasional donkey cart. He fell in love immediately and bought a piece of land in Lacco Ameno overlooking the Spiaggia degli Inglesi, where he built a house.

In the sixties, Ischia became the center of a glittering international scene, with famous residents including Luchino Visconti and the English composer, William Walton. High-society figures and Hollywood stars came to visit. By the eighties, the island had been overdeveloped and was not quite so exclusive. Although today the area around the port is crowded with day-trippers from Naples and much of the coast has been spoiled, when Mario lived there it was known as 'Paradise Island' and until he sold it around 1980, he went every summer, usually in August, to paint and entertain friends.

CHAPTER 8

# The Florentine Connection

## Gualtiero Volterra

On one of his trips to London, Mario met the Florentine art dealer Gualtiero Volterra (1901–1967), the buying agent and partner of the marchand amateur Count Alessandro Contini Bonacossi. It was the beginning of a lifelong friendship. Volterra was the youngest son of a family of Jewish antiquarians, and in addition to being a gifted connoisseur of Italian paintings, he was a brilliant concert pianist. Volterra had been a child prodigy, and Mario remembered hearing him perform at the Teatro Augusteo in Rome. In Florence, he had met and married an Australian music student, Patricia Kelly (1907–1993). Although his concert career was cut short—he was forced to take over the family's failing business after the Wall Street crash caused a worldwide financial debacle[1]—Volterra and his wife remained important figures in the Florentine music world, and he continued to play the piano for several hours

each day in a soundproof studio that he had built in his villa, La Limonaia, at Bellosguardo. In 1939, Volterra, together with his wife and daughter, found refuge in Sydney, where they stayed until the war was over. With the exception of one nephew, the entirety of Volterra's family was rounded up during the German occupation of Florence and sent to the death camps in Germany.[2]

When Mario met Volterra, the Florentine dealer was negotiating for a group of works, primarily large altarpieces, from a renowned English collection that had been assembled by Sir Francis Cook in the second half of the nineteenth century and, to a lesser extent, by his grandson, Herbert Cook, an independent-minded amateur art historian. They assembled well over five hundred paintings, many of which had been sold by 1945. However, some gems still remained in the collection as unattributed or incorrectly catalogued works, and these continued to emerge years later.

At Gualtiero's recommendation, Contini Bonacossi began sending Mario some paintings to restore, including the Cook altarpieces, and asked him to come to Florence to look after additional works in his collection. Before the war, this role had been filled by Mauro Pellicioli.

## Count Alessandro Contini Bonacossi

Mario had met Contini a few years earlier:

*I knew Contini already in another context. It was through a painting that I owned together with Emanuele Sestieri. One evening towards the end of the war I stopped by Sestieri's gallery, just inside the entrance of a building where there was also a tobacco shop. Emanuele was one of the great art dealers of his time. He said to me, "Mario, today I bought a painting which is driving me mad. I cannot figure out who is the artist." He showed me a small panel. I looked at it and said, "This is by Sassetta and it represents the death of Saint Anthony. It is one of the predellas of the altarpiece of which the central panel is now in the Louvre." Sestieri looked at me and said, "Mario, you have been very honest to tell me that. You could have kept it to yourself and bought*

*the painting, which I would gladly have sold to you. I will give you a half share of the painting at the price you would have paid." I wrote a check and thanking him, wished him a pleasant evening.*

*Federico Zeri, the young art historian, today world famous, who worked with me at the Galleria Palma, went to see the painting the next day, and, in great excitement, told me the artist was not Sassetta but the Master of the Osservanza, a pupil of Sassetta who at that time was confused with the artist himself. The painting was in excellent condition. I removed the old varnish, did a few retouches in tempera, and revarnished it. Bardi was enthusiastic about our acquisition and began to think about a possible buyer. Count Contini, the greatest collector of Italian painting, came immediately to mind.*

Before moving to Florence, Count Contini and his wife, Vittoria, had lived in a grand apartment on the Via Nomentana, one of the most fashionable streets in Rome at that time. The couple became successful dealers while maintaining their status as marchands amateurs. Margherita Sarfatti, cultural icon and ex-mistress of Benito Mussolini, noted that Contini had great success selling paintings to the Nazis in the early 1930s.[3] Mussolini conferred the title of "count" on Alessandro and appointed him senator for life after he donated a collection of paintings to the Museum of Castel Sant'Angelo.

Around 1930, the Continis bought a nineteenth-century villa on the outskirts of the historic center of Florence. This villa was originally known as the 'Strozzina', or 'little Strozzi', because it had been constructed by a member of the same Strozzi family that had commissioned the famous Renaissance palace. By the time Mario and Bardi visited, it had been renamed Villa Vittoria, in honor of the countess.

*Bardi and I went to Florence and the count gave us an appointment that very morning. As we went through the gates of the Villa we were struck by the beauty of the magnificent garden, full of wonderful flowers, many types of rose bushes, and trees which seemed to date from the Renaissance. The entrance to the palace itself was a monumental staircase that ascended to the first floor. There were two landings and on each one was a pair*

*of life-size, sixteenth-century angels, of polychromed wood with great gilded wings. The entrance hall contained Renaissance furniture of carved walnut, partially gilded, typical Florentine work. It was breathtaking. We were conducted to a green sitting room with similar furnishings, hung with old master paintings.*

*After about ten minutes the count appeared. He was about six feet tall with a head like a Roman senator and slightly cross-eyed. His hair wrapped around his skull to conceal his bald pate, and he had a very forceful manner. We showed him the little panel. Like the clever dealer he was, he remained poker-faced. He asked the price and we told him we were asking fifty million lire at which point he shifted in his chair and said, no, it's not worth that price: I will buy it for forty-five but on the condition that I pay you half in money and the other half in trade for objects and paintings. We replied, well, let's have a look at what you are offering and we began to tour the galleries where there were masterpieces worthy of the Uffizi. Over every doorway was a majolica relief by one of the Della Robbia. Each room was named after a great artist whose works could be seen there: the Bellini room, the Titian room, the Tintoretto room, the Sassetta room, the Bramantino room, the Andrea del Castagno room, the Piero della Francesca room, and so on. The family's living quarters were on the upper floor, furnished in impeccable modern taste by Gio Ponti, the well-known architect and designer, and hung with works by contemporary Italian artists.*

*Contini took us to a large storeroom full of furniture, majolica, sculptures, pictures and so on. Some of the furniture was very beautiful. We selected a sixteenth-century walnut and gold table, an exceptional example, which is today in the Museum in São Paulo, as well as other extraordinary pieces. Among the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century paintings we took one representing an Allegory of Music, which had been exhibited as a Velázquez in an exhibition of Spanish painting at the National Gallery of Modern Art in Rome in 1931 with a catalogue by Roberto Longhi. When I brought the painting to Rome and cleaned it I found the signature, "Mengs", which had been covered, probably before the count bought it.*

The identification of the Master of the Osservanza has always been contentious and became the subject of a quarrel between Cesare Brandi, who identified him as Sano di Pietro, and Roberto Longhi, who believed that he was an independent artist. The problem of associating the prolific and pedantic Sano, who signed his first work in 1445, with the creator of the poetic earlier

paintings was explained succinctly by Federico Zeri who wrote, "The anonymous painter is far too intelligent to be identified with Sano … even though the morphological details share a striking similarity."[4] Mario's panel of the *Death of Saint Anthony* is now at the National Gallery in Washington, along with three other panels of the series. As Miklós Boskovits notes in his catalogue entry for the painting, a total of eight panels depicting episodes from the life of Saint Anthony have been identified as belonging to the same altarpiece in which they were arranged vertically around a central figure, probably of Saint Anthony, although the scholar does not believe this to be the fragment in the Louvre. The original destination of the altarpiece remains a matter of speculation, as does the date, with the weight of opinion, based on stylistic comparisons with documented works, tending to place it in the early 1430s. Over the years, the attribution has shifted from Sassetta, to the Master of the Osservanza, to the young Sano di Pietro with many art historians suggesting that the series represented a

39. Count Alessandro Contini Bonacossi.

40. Donna Vittoria.

collaboration among all three painters.[5] Recently a document came to light recording a payment for the altarpiece of the *Birth of the Virgin* in Asciano, in the past widely accepted as entirely by the Master of the Osservanza, to Sano di Pietro, ending seventy years of impassioned debate.[6]

## Sandrino Contini Bonacossi

A few years later, when Mario began to restore paintings from Contini's personal collection at the Villa Vittoria, he became close to the family, which consisted of the count, Donna Vittoria, their two children, Alessandro and Vittorina, and a nephew who was also called Alessandro, nicknamed Sandrino so as not to confuse him with his older half-brother. Sandrino's genealogy was complex. Count Contini's brother, Oscar, married Beatrice Galli, the daughter of Countess Vittoria by a previous marriage. The couple moved to Argentina and in 1913 Elena became pregnant with twins. She gave birth in January 1914. Only one of the infants survived and the mother herself died two days later. Oscar Contini died in 1916. The count and countess brought the orphaned baby to live with them. He called them both mamma and papa but, in reality, they were his grandmother and uncle.

The count and countess adored Sandrino, the youngest of the family. When still a child, he developed a malformation of the spine. Vittoria did everything possible to correct the problem. His doctors prescribed a metal corset to be worn during the day and removed only at night. For this reason, Sandrino could not attend school and was educated at home by tutors. Perhaps it was this deformation that caused him to be full of complexes, with a sense of inferiority that manifested itself particularly in the self-destructive relationships with women that led to his tragic death many years later.

Sandrino was cultivated and brilliant and held two doctoral degrees, in art history and in literature. Those who knew him

recall an extraordinary personality, jovial, alert, a prankster, always ready with a facetious remark. His sense of humor was typically Florentine, edgy and biting. He was an anti-fascist and belonged to the Action Party. Immediately after the German occupation in September 1943, he was entrusted by the Florentine division of partisans, Giustizia e Libertà, with such essential but dangerous tasks as stockpiling stolen weapons, making explosives, carrying out acts of sabotage, and rescuing prisoners from the Nazi-Facists. Under the nom de guerre, *Vipera*, after the liberation of Florence he continued to fight courageously with other partisan brigades in northern Italy until the end of the war and engaged in political activity as the representative of the Tuscan section of the CLN to the Allied Forces.[7]

After the war, Sandrino became the count's secretary, taking care of the business aspects of buying and selling works of art, and was the effective curator of the Contini Bonacossi Collection. The count's older son, Alessandro, had other interests. He was a completely different character from Sandrino, a poet, rather serious and gloomy. The two men did not get along particularly well and Sandrino nicknamed his half-brother *Conte Pioggia* (Count Rain).

Mario and Sandrino immediately became friends.

*Many times, while I was working in the Villa, I stayed for lunch and dinner with the Continis. They had a Russian cook who was fantastic. She cooked both French and Italian food. I will never forget her ravioli and her tagliatelle. Almost every evening we stayed at the table after dinner, and, as we talked, mainly about paintings, Sandrino would take the glasses and build an enormous pyramid. The count watched him, suffering, until finally, thinking the pyramid would collapse, he yelled with a deep voice, "Sandrino! Stop it!"*

When Sandrino was in his early thirties, he met an actress, Elsa De Giorgi, at a society party in Rome. She was headstrong and ambitious and the idea of becoming a rich countess was appealing. She began a flirtation with Sandrino. Knowing Sandrino's weaknesses, Count Contini and Donna Vittoria were alarmed by this turn of

events, but Sandrino was so enamored that there was no opposing him. Elsa had managed to charm the Longhis, especially Roberto's wife Anna Banti, who pleaded her case. They were married in Rome in 1948. At first, they lived at Villa Vittoria, however, the countess could not bear the pretensions and airs that the actress immediately began to assume, and was not willing to allow her to dominate the household. To avoid friction, Count Contini bought the couple a house on the Via San Leonardo, perhaps the most beautiful street in Florence, just above the Forte Belvedere. Sandrino adored his wife and tried to satisfy her every whim.

## Roberto Longhi

While working on Contini's collection, Mario collaborated with Contini's advisor, Roberto Longhi, whom he had first met at the time of the Rospigliosi sale. Longhi was born in 1890 in the small Piedmontese town of Alba. After finishing his studies with Adolfo Venturi at La Sapienza in Rome his first job was teaching art history at two Roman high schools. One of his students, the nineteen-year-old Lucia Lopresti, fell in love with him, and they married in 1924. She became an acclaimed novelist and is better known by her pen name, Anna Banti. However, Longhi did not seem to have been cut out for marriage. The couple was constantly in competition with each other, and they were famously unhappy together. Both Mario and Count Contini wondered whether it was love or hate that kept them together, for the answer was unclear.

Longhi first met the Continis toward the end of the First World War, when he was stationed with their son, Alessandro. Recognizing Longhi's gifts, they brought him into their circle. Between 1920 and 1922, the Continis traveled throughout Europe with the young expert, looking at some of the world's greatest collections and buying paintings. The Continis educated themselves, and Longhi polished his skills. During that trip, he kept a travel diary written in a self-invented shorthand.[8] He earned his first

university appointment in Bologna, in 1934, and in 1939, moved to a small villa in Florence. For most Italians, belonging to the Fascist party was a necessity and he became an influential figure during the regime; he was an advisor to Bottai, the powerful minister of culture, and was involved in all the important issues and decisions of his time. Longhi's passion for the visual and literary arts of all periods caused him to embrace such contemporary artists as Boccioni and De Chirico, among others, and he was involved in the lively art scene in Rome, as well as actively engaged with a number of avant-garde writers. These wide-ranging interests suffused his perceptions of many schools of painting that had previously not been appreciated, such as fourteenth-century Bolognese painting in which he teased out resonances of expressionism and abstraction.[9] When Mussolini made an alliance with Hitler in 1941, Longhi publicly denounced the fundamental basis of German aesthetics as "hysterical, stifled, and, above all, racist."[10] When the government collapsed in 1943, Longhi renounced Fascism and was suspended

41. Roberto Longhi, ca. 1930.

from his professorship at the University of Bologna for two years. In the post-war period both he and his wife had Communist sympathies.

In 1949 Longhi was appointed professor at the University of Florence. His facility in reading paintings—making them divulge their long-kept secrets—was extraordinary and derived from his method of intense scrutiny paired with study of the historical documents and context. The acuity, speed, and accuracy of his attributions made some of his English and American contemporaries think that he dabbled in black magic, which was an idea encouraged by his appearance, described by Federico Zeri as "smoky bronze, like an Indian or gypsy." ("Il colore del viso, non scuro né abbronzato, ma simile alla sfumatura bruna che caratterizza gli zingari e certi indiani."[11]) In addition to his indisputable genius as a critic and art historian, Longhi is also considered one of the finest prose stylists of the Italian language of the twentieth century.

Longhi's relationship with the American critic Bernard Berenson began on a positive note in 1922, when the young scholar wrote Berenson a flattering letter, asking if he could translate his quartet of books, essential texts of Italian art criticism for the Anglo-American world, *The Venetian Painters of the Renaissance* (1894), *The Florentine Painters of the Renaissance* (1896), *The Central Italian Painters of the Renaissance* (1897), and *The North Italian Painters of the Renaissance* (1907). Berenson acquiesced and the work began in a promising manner, but it was soon halted after Longhi's interpretation began to irk the older man. There would be considerable rancor—at which both men were adept—over the decades, until they reconciled not long before Berenson's death.

Longhi was both admired and feared. Some of his former pupils speak of him with resentment. He was known for stinging jokes and wordplay; for example, he scorned the pupils of his rival, Mario Salmi, by deliberately conflating their surnames, so that Luciano Berti and Umberto Baldini became Bertini and Baldi. The entire fourteenth-century Sienese school was dismissed as "one of

those Memmis" (*uno di quei Memmi*), after the artist Lippo Memmi, and Sano di Pietro became Sano di Dietro (Sano from behind).[12] He often made stinging remarks; of an art critic to whom he had listened with apparent interest he opined, "*Sì, è bravo. Peccato che in un suo scritto su Firenze scambiasse per trecenteschi i campanili costruiti nell'Ottocento.*" (Yes, he's very good. It's a pity that in one of his publications about Florence he mistook bell towers constructed in the nineteenth century for thirteenth-century originals).[13] He turned his pupils against each other or used them as indentured servants.

Longhi amassed a wonderful collection of paintings, most of them out of fashion at the time, and each in marvelous condition under thick deposits of grime and discolored varnish. They are invariably examples of schools he studied, or painters whose identity he had established. There are also a number of paintings by his contemporaries, especially Giorgio Morandi, the great metaphysical painter, with whom Longhi shared a deep and abiding friendship, as attested by their extensive correspondence. He smoked continuously. In every photograph of Longhi, he has a cigarette in his mouth, and although it eventually killed him, he managed to live until the age of eighty. The paintings still hang in his house in Florence, which is now a foundation that also houses his library, photographs, and archives.

Mario seems to have been one of the few people who did not experience the dark side of Roberto Longhi's personality. When it came to the difficult people he encountered in his professional life, like Longhi, Mario adopted a stance of complete detachment. He did not believe in wasting his energy on pointless squabbles, and so he let any unpleasantness slide off. He was never defensive, and was an excellent and subtle judge of character. He enjoyed the security of being confident in both what he knew and what he did not. On occasion, Mario did lose this preternatural patience. This rarely happened, but it was very effective when it did. In most cases, though, he simply noted people's behavior, filed the information away, and acted accordingly in the future.

## Bernard Berenson

Mario had decidedly mixed feelings about Bernard Berenson (BB), to whom he was introduced by Rush Kress, probably soon after he began work for the Kress Foundation. He wrote about this first encounter:

*Once Mr. Kress took me to visit BB at I Tatti. Apart from his inability to recognize fakes, he was the greatest non-Italian art historian of Italian painting of the Renaissance. His culture was vast and his memory that of a genius. He was one of the most extraordinary people whom I have had the good fortune to know. He made a striking impression on everyone and inspired great respect. When he entered the room, his appearance galvanized the group. He looked very ascetic, with a penetrating gaze in a sensitive and intelligent face. His eyes scrutinized everyone, trying to divine what sort of intellect each possessed.*

*He asked me to accompany him on his daily walk through the gardens, which was considered a great privilege. We strolled and talked and I addressed him as 'Professor'.*

42. Photo of Berenson inscribed to Rush Kress.

*He replied, "I am not a professor". We continued our walk and I decided I should call him 'Maestro'. Again, he interrupted, saying, "I do not have an orchestra. Please just call me Mr. Berenson."*

Over the years, Mario's attitude to Berenson developed into something more complex, as the two men came into conflict over Kress acquisitions. Mario grew critical of Berenson's abilities as a connoisseur, though he did not, for the most part, believe the famous scholar's motives to be dishonest. As a mild form of retaliation for their spats, Mario enjoyed recounting anecdotes about Berenson, which were usually related to the expert's uncertainty about the difference between a fake and an original. In his memoir, he shared the following story, which took place in the late 1940s:

*One morning, Count Contini greeted me with a little gold-ground painting by Pietro Lorenzetti of a Madonna and Child, saying, "Have a look at this and tell me what you think." I looked at it and replied, "Count, you are in a very playful mood this morning." I saw immediately, as he already knew, that the painting was a fake—in fact, a poor fake of the sort you could buy at that time in Via dei Fossi for two hundred lire. The count then showed me a letter from BB [as Berenson was called] in which he attributed it to Pietro Lorenzetti and advised the count to buy it as it was "worthy of your collection." It was a slightly altered copy of a famous painting by the Sienese master. At the time, I thought perhaps it was by Montefiore, a contemporary of Joni, Vannoni, Giunti, et al. That morning, I realized that BB did not understand about fakes.*

*Federico Joni, in his memoirs, recounts another episode about Berenson, whose name is changed only slightly to "Sonberen": One day Joni sent a cousin to BB with a painting that should have been by Sano di Pietro of a Madonna and Child. By this time BB recognized Joni's cousin and sent him away saying the painting was a fake. Sometime later, Joni found a real Sano di Pietro in perfect condition, and sent it to Berenson with this same cousin. BB looked carefully at the painting and said, "Tell your cousin that his work has improved greatly but not enough to fool me!"*

According to Mario, Berenson was acting in good faith, but more than once mistook a clever forgery for an original work.

This is surprising, because Berenson invested a great deal of time in the study of original paintings, often traveling great distances to see them, preferring not to rely solely on his extensive photo library. However, recognizing a fake is different from the essentially philological exercise of attributing paintings to a school or master. It requires a profound knowledge of the materials and techniques used in the manufacture of paintings.

Berenson's idealized, intellectual approach to his subject did not take these factors into consideration. This was demonstrated during Duveen's famous trial for impugning the reputation, and thus the market value, of a copy of the Louvre's *La Belle Ferronnière,* attributed to Leonardo. Berenson was called as an expert witness for the defense. The so-called Hahn Leonardo is on canvas. The Hahn's lawyer asked Berenson whether the Louvre picture was painted on wood or canvas, and the great Berenson, who did not know the answer, airily replied, "It's as if you asked me on what kind of paper Shakespeare wrote his immortal sonnets." Recognizing the Hahn painting as a copy is not terribly difficult. When it was finally sold at auction several years ago, everyone was surprised by the poor, almost amateurish quality of the famous imposter, and they marveled at the international sensation it had caused in the 1920s. Due to its fame, it was sold for $1,500,000, which is not bad for a mediocre copy.

No scholar has a perfect eye, even for originals. Mario liked to tell another story about Berenson and Count Contini:

*When the portrait of Ranuccio Farnese that Gualtiero had bought from the Cook Collection arrived in Florence from London, there remained the problem that Berenson had published it as a copy many years earlier. When the count and the countess finally saw the painting, they exclaimed in unison: "BB is blind!" The count asked me to remove the discolored yellow varnish which obscured the painting and, when I did, the masterpiece that everyone knows today was revealed in its full splendor. Now it was hoped that BB would change his earlier attribution of the painting.*

*Count Contini telephoned Nicky Mariano, the inseparable companion of Berenson, with whom he was on very friendly terms. He asked her if she would*

*accompany BB to Villa Vittoria to look at an important acquisition. In the meantime, I had completed whatever small retouches were necessary and it had been placed in a wonderful antique frame from the count's stock. One afternoon Berenson came with Nicky to see the Titian. I had set it up on an easel close to the window in good light. Count Contini introduced me to BB and said that I had restored the painting. He stood in front of the painting for a long time studying it in silence with a little magnifier that he always carried in his pocket, then finally said, "Yes, it is by him." He said that when he saw it many years ago in Richmond it was hanging between two windows. It was difficult to see and he had not been able to examine it properly. To my mind this was a poor excuse. The truth is that BB was never very good on Titian and Venetian painting in general. The count sold the portrait of Ranuccio Farnese to Kress for a large sum and today it is in the National Gallery of Washington. It is universally admired as one of the masterpieces of the collection and has been present at every major Titian retrospective of the last fifty years. Although over the years I have disagreed with Berenson's attributions on many occasions, it is to his credit that he was capable of revising his opinion. I have known many other art historians who, once they have made a pronouncement, will never change their mind.*

43. Titian, *Ranuccio Farnese,* ca. 1542, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington DC, 90 × 74 cm.

CHAPTER 9

# Barone Michele Lazzaroni

A number of Mario's stories featured his dealings with a controversial character, Baron Michele Lazzaroni (1863–1934), an art dealer and forger.

Originally from Turin, the Lazzaroni family moved to Rome when the city became the capital of the new Italian Republic, and made a fortune in real estate development. Little is recorded about Michele Lazzaroni apart from his involvement in the failure of the Banca Romana in 1889, for which he was later arrested and tried (though he was released in 1894 due to insufficient evidence), but he must have been quite an unsavory character. Evidently, he was able to hide this aspect of his personal history, since he subsequently became a high-living society figure in Paris, the owner of a triplex apartment on the rue Spontini, near the Bois de Boulogne.[1] Lazzaroni also owned a palace in Rome, a villa with an important garden on the Via Appia Nuova, a palazzo in Venice, and a villa in Nice.

His art dealing activities were at their height in the second decade of the twentieth century when he successfully sold false or falsified paintings to Duveen using Berenson as a conduit. The Baron assiduously cultivated the friendship and trust of both Bernard and Mary Berenson through his luxurious hospitality, wonderful meals and wine, small gifts accompanied by charming notes, and, one would imagine, fascinating conversation.[2]

*While I was at the Galleria Palma, around 1944, I met the son of Baron Lazzaroni. He came one morning and said that he had some things which he wished to sell. We knew about his father and all his mischief, selling false works to Duveen, who had no idea about Italian art. In any case, we went to his palace which was in the center of Rome, between Via Condotti and Via Frattina. He had a beautiful apartment full of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century paintings, most of which had been embellished by the baron's restorer, whose name was Verzetta. He had a studio in Paris and worked exclusively for Lazzaroni. The son asked us if we had any interest in them and we said we were mainly interested in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century paintings. He showed us a Carlevarijs and a large Magnasco which we bought right away, and then he invited us to another room underneath his apartment which was full of antique frames, which we also bought, and several file cabinets containing photographs which his father used as reference material during his antiquarian career. We bought those as well, mostly sepia prints which were commonly used at the beginning of the century, and almost all from Alinari and Anderson. Unfortunately, much of this interesting collection was used to make the didactic panels for the exhibition we sent to Brasil. [This material has never been returned and seems to have disappeared.]*

*When the photographs and paintings arrived at the gallery Federico Zeri was fascinated, especially by the archival documentation. The files contained material evidence of the forgeries which the baron had sold. For example, there was a photograph of Giuliano de' Medici by Botticelli, printed in reverse in order to make the forgery that was sold by Duveen to Otto Kahn and which was the cause of a terrible quarrel between the great Botticelli scholar, Herbert Horne, and Bernard Berenson. Horne rightly considered the picture to be a fake. Eventually the painting went to the Thyssen collection. In the fifties, it was offered to the Kress Foundation by Knoedler's. I went to look at it and told Mr. Henschel that it was a fake. He couldn't believe it because there were so many expertises, including, naturally, that of Berenson. When I last*

*heard of the painting, it was in a private collection in Milan, still published as an original by Botticelli.*

*There was also a photo of the Alessio Baldovinetti Madonna and Child from the Louvre, printed in reverse, which was used to make the fake that Duveen sold to Kress. The Cleveland Museum has a portrait of a man attributed to Bartolomeo Veneto, which is another of Verzetta's creations. Perhaps there is an original picture underneath by a secondary hand. The museum of the Galleria di San Luca in Rome has twelve or fifteen paintings which were given by Baron Lazzaroni, mostly from the period but improved by Verzetta in order to be able to attribute them to a better artist. In these restorations, or elaborations, Verzetta revealed his own personality, if you will, so that today his work can be recognized immediately because there is no doubt that every forgery reflects the taste of the time in which it was made. For example, the Greek and Roman sculptures which were restored in the sixteenth century, no matter how hard the carver tried to imitate the original, he could not escape from the style of his own time. It is even true of the Laocoön group which is said to have been restored by the great Michelangelo himself. The nineteenth-century restorations of the fresco of Giotto in Santa Croce and Piero in Arezzo rendered these works nearly unrecognizable until they were cleaned in this century. It is true of all fakes that, after a certain time has passed, it is easy to tell when they were made. For us today, looking at the false Vermeers made by Van Meegeren during the last war, it is inconceivable that they could have been accepted as genuine. And so, for the fakes by Joni, Vannoni, Giunti, Dossena and all the others. Not to mention the restorations of ancient sculpture that were carried out in the baroque and Napoleonic periods.*

Mario remembered that Lazzaroni's restorer was called "Verzetta", but he knew neither his first name nor the exact spelling. Nothing is known about this man today, except for a brief mention by Federico Zeri, who essentially repeats what he had heard from Mario. Of the paintings in the X book[3] with a Lazzaroni provenance, only one records payment for restoration and transfer, and it's not to Verzetta. The reference to a restorer named "Verzetta," or something like that, may be misleading. There is evidence that the baron himself worked on the paintings he sold. According to Joseph Duveen's associate, Edward Fowles, who inherited the business after Duveen's death in 1939, Baron

Lazzaroni was not only a dealer and connoisseur but also a restorer. Fowles wrote that, "It was customary for him to pick up a good painting at an auction sale in which, beneath the grime and neglect of years, he could perceive (as he expressed it) hidden qualities. After cleaning, and a little judicious restoration (he was particularly adept at the use of glazes) its latent qualities would be fully revealed." On one occasion, during a lunch in early 1920, Lazzaroni told Fowles "… how he had developed into a first-class restorer: a good friend of his had sold the famous Colonna altarpiece by Raphael to the Parisian dealer, Sedelmeyer, and later discovered that one of the angels in the upper part of the picture had been damaged in the course of its removal. The friend … brought it to Lazzaroni's studio in Rome. The Baron repainted the damaged angel, and it was later … sold to J. P. Morgan. … From that time onwards, Lazzaroni devoted all his free time to the restoration of pictures which he had purchased, and it was BB who first suggested that he offer some of them to Duveen's." [4, 5]

Lazzaroni also left a collection of early Italian paintings to the Accademia di San Luca, the ancient artists' guild and museum. When Mario and I visited in the late eighties many of the Lazzaroni pictures were on exhibit. They were repainted in such a ludicrous way that we had to laugh. The Madonnas resembled silent film stars with little red-lipsticked, Cupid's bow mouths like Clara Bow. One has to be careful about any painting in whose provenance Baron Lazzaroni figures. Each one I have seen (and I look for them wherever I go) has been faked to some extent. It seems the baron couldn't resist the temptation to alter his wares in some way.

## Giuliano de' Medici

As Mario mentioned, one of the most daring of Lazzaroni's fakes was a purported fourth version of Botticelli's portrait of Giuliano de' Medici, the beloved brother of Lorenzo the Magnificent, who was stabbed to death during the Pazzi Conspiracy on Easter Sunday, April 26, 1478.

There has always been much speculation about the genesis of Botticelli's portraits of Giuliano. They may have been posthumous, based on a plaster death mask, a common practice during this period, or they may have been based on an earlier prototype, now lost, that was made during his lifetime. Perhaps this prototype, if it existed, would have been made to commemorate the untimely death of Giuliano's Platonic love, the most beautiful girl in Florence, Simonetta Vespucci (1453–1476).

The Giuliano portrait was an excellent choice for a forger, because there were already three variants, all considered autograph works. In each, the sitter is in partial profile, facing right, wearing a sleeveless red tunic over a green shirt with elaborate sleeves. In the Lazzaroni version, Giuliano faces left and wears a shapeless black robe with a small red collar. When the baron first brought the painting to I Tatti, both Bernard and Mary were enraptured by it and believed that it was the first, lost, version. Duveen initially offered it to his best clients, Joseph Widener and Benjamin Altman, the most important collectors of the day, neither of whom were interested. Finally, it was purchased by the banker and philanthropist, Otto Kahn (1867–1934), for $125,000, a steep price. The sale was greeted by international publicity[6] and was even featured on the front page of the *London Times*.

Herbert Horne (1864–1916) was an English art historian and contemporary of Berenson who also lived in Florence and studied the Italian Renaissance. He was an expert on Botticelli and, in 1908, published a widely-acclaimed monograph. Although they knew each other well and shared the same interests, Mary and Bernard

considered Horne an "enemy-friend", of which they had many. The imperious Berenson did not tolerate any competitors.

When Horne saw the newly discovered Giuliano portrait in the *Times*, he wrote to Duveen's to request a photograph of the painting, which was provided to him over Berenson's objections. After studying it carefully, Horne decided it was a forgery. The ensuing scandal threatened to ruin Berenson's reputation as well as his relationship with Duveen Brothers, who were terribly concerned at this turn of events, as Otto Kahn was one of their best clients. The historian and Berenson biographer Ernest Samuels recounts the unfolding of the conflict, and Horne and Duveen's agitation:

> Meanwhile, the Italian government got wind of the affair, and Corrado Ricci, a member of the Italian Fine Arts Commission, demanded of the reputed seller, Count Procolo Isolani of Bologna, whether he had sold a Botticelli to the Duveens. The count, of course, could honestly say that he knew of no Botticelli having been smuggled out of his collection. Even Baron Lazzaroni, the intermediary, had not known it was a Botticelli until Berenson had subsequently identified it. Ricci inferred from the count's assurance that the picture was not authentic…
>
> The Duveens were panic-stricken and questioned Lazzaroni's honesty and Berenson's competence. The only thing that would satisfy them, they insisted, was a declaration by the count that the picture had in fact been in his family for generations. Lazzaroni came back to London in triumph from Bologna with the required letter, and a photograph of the painting on the back of which the count stated that it was one of 28 that he had brought down from his Villa and sold to Baron Lazzaroni. Joe Duveen proposed showing the documents to Horne, but Berenson, seconded by Henry Duveen, objected that it would set a "dangerous precedent to be accountable to anyone as a tribunal." To protect himself from Joe's impulsiveness, Berenson kept possession of the documents…

> "Ernest is in a funk," Berenson reported, "and can't get over it and Joe who is very impressionable can't get over it, so again I don't know what rash thing Joe will do."…Berenson was convinced that a "systematic campaign had been made against the Botticelli which however is only the whipping boy, from both Florence and Berlin… Dowdeswell reported that Sirén had been dinning into all their ears that I am a hopelessly discredited person!" At the height of Berenson's worry about the whole business, his wife, Mary, reassured him, writing that "… they [the Duveens] will probably come around," for "they cannot do without thee in regard to Italian pictures." But, she added, "if thee really and truly wants to get out of it, why we can change our extravagant way of life."[7]

Mary's comment referred to the costly renovations at their villa, I Tatti. Bernard's response was to authorize the suspended improvements to the property to continue. Passing this message along to the Berensons' architect, her beloved Geoffrey Scott, Mary declared, "Our feet are set upon the path of worldliness and riches and the devil take the hindmost."

As fate would have it, the First World War began in August, and by the time it was over, Horne had died and everyone had forgotten about the Botticelli affair. After Otto Kahn's death in 1934, the portrait of Giuliano, along with the great full-length *Saint George and the Dragon* by Carpaccio, was purchased by Baron Heinrich Thyssen-Bornemisza (1875–1947) for his collection in the Villa Favorita on the shores of Lake Lugano in Switzerland.

After the Second World War, the baron, whose fortune derived from the family-owned steel company, was nearly bankrupt. He asked his curator, Dr. Rudolf Heinemann, to sell some pieces from the collection. Heinemann usually worked with Knoedler's, Duveen's rival, and the firm offered the Botticelli, along with a number of other works, among them the early *Madonna and Child* by Dürer, now in Washington, to the Kress Foundation. This was an odd choice, as the foundation had just purchased what some

44. The portrait of Giuliano de' Medici sold to Duveen by Baron Lazzaroni.

45. Sandro Botticelli, *Giuliano de' Medici*, 1478–1480, tempera on panel, Accademia Carrara, Bergamo, 54 × 36 cm.

consider to be the first version of Botticelli's Giuliano a year earlier from Wildenstein's. That version had belonged to the Cini family in Venice, who were also obliged to raise money during the war, and is the most elaborate of the three versions, at almost twice the size of the other two, with an open window and a mourning dove.

When Mario saw the Botticelli among the paintings offered by Knoedler's, he immediately recognized it as a forgery. He had a number of reasons: the modern look of the face—more regular and conventionally handsome than the jagged features of Botticelli's portrait—and the unusual way in which it was executed, with the entire painting made up of tiny brushstrokes. With close scrutiny, a network of tiny cracks, characteristic of aged paint, can be glimpsed under the present surface. It was common for Lazzaroni to take a worn painting of the period by a minor artist

46. Sandro Botticelli, *Giuliano de' Medici*, 1478–1480, tempera on panel, Gemäldegalerie, Berlin, 54.5 × 36.5 cm.

47. Sandro Botticelli, *Giuliano de' Medici*, 1478–1480, tempera on panel, National Gallery of Art, Washington DC, 75.5 × 52.5 cm. Purchased by Kress from Wildenstein.

and refurbish it in the manner of an important painter. In addition, the flesh tones lacked the characteristic translucence of Botticelli's work. Altogether, it was a very strange object.

When provenance confirmed that it came from Lazzaroni, Mario could hardly believe that it had so many endorsements, including, naturally, Berenson's. It is now in a private collection and recent scholarship has catalogued it as "attributed to the workshop of Botticelli," although the entry for the Berlin *Portrait of Giuliano de' Medici* that appeared in the exhibition held at the Metropolitan Museum in 2012, *The Portrait in the Renaissance*, does not hesitate to say: "It should be noted that there is a fourth portrait in the series, previously in Milan and now in an American private collection, which does not date from the fifteenth century and is often considered a forgery."[8]

CHAPTER 10

# Assis Chateaubriand and São Paulo

An event of significance to Mario's future was an unexpected visit to the Studio Palma by Assis Chateaubriand (1892-1968), the publisher of a chain of Brazilian newspapers. Mario wrote in his memoirs:

*One morning, while I was working in my studio at the Galleria Palma on some paintings belonging to Contini, we had an unexpected visitor. He was a Brazilian businessman, Assis Chateaubriand, and Gianni Agnelli had recommended us as a serious gallery for old masters. He said he wanted to start a museum in São Paulo and intended to buy important paintings. Skeptical at first, we showed him our paintings, and he chose several. The choices he made were not those of an informed connoisseur, and we pointed out to him that some pictures were museum quality and others were simply not. Our frankness pleased him and inspired faith in us. That morning, he bought three or four paintings and commissioned us to identify other museum-quality works on the market. Further, he invited us to go to São Paulo to help him get this museum started.*

*He was a remarkable man: a [Brazilian] Indian who was the publisher of a chain of newspapers called the Diarios e Emissoras Associadas. This put him in a unique position to raise money for his museum. Brazil was full of immensely wealthy industrialists and coffee barons such as the Pignataris, the Materasso family, and many others. Chateaubriand, through his newspapers, had the goods on everybody, and he would threaten the rich with public exposure if they didn't make a contribution. He was very short and dark-skinned with a large head, and he was extremely shrewd. Rumor had it that he had once killed a man. When I asked him if this was true, he just shrugged and said, "An Indian," in a deprecatory way.*

Bardi had recently married Lina Bo, an accomplished young architect who had worked with the renowned Gio Ponti on his influential post-war publication, *Domus* magazine. The couple went to Brazil in 1946, accompanied by Francesco Monotti, the director of the Studio d'Arte Palma, who had gone with Mario on his first trip to London. At that moment, Chateaubriand's collection consisted of only a few pictures, so Bardi decided to mount a didactic exhibition, which would illustrate and explain the different schools and periods of art to a largely untutored public. This would include pictures from both Europe and elsewhere in the world. At the time, the tiny Materasso Collection of modern art was the only museum in Brazil.

Mario stayed behind in Rome to prepare the panels for the didactic exhibition. He worked with Emilio Villa, an art historian and writer, who had been engaged to formulate a concept and write the text for the diverse group of images. Federico Zeri was also involved. Within a few months, they produced hundreds of panels of text and photographs, which were ready to be installed in the headquarters of the Diarios Associados. 'Chato', as he was called, began to publicize this venture in all his newspapers and "invited" wealthy Brazilians to participate for the good of the country.

## São Paulo

Some months after the exhibition had opened, Mario finally went to Brazil:

*I took a TWA flight on the famous Havilland Comet that had four star-shaped engines. I think it was the most beautiful plane ever designed. We arrived in Dakar after about four hours, refueled and left again for São Paulo. From the window of the plane, I could see the moon, and the sky was full of stars. I went to sleep with the noise of the motors. When I awoke, I noticed that I could no longer see the moon from my window but it was instead on the other side. We seemed to be going back, and I asked the stewardess if my impression was correct. She said yes, one of the engines had failed and therefore we were returning to Dakar. We landed easily and were told that we would have to wait a bit while the engine was repaired. In fact, it turned out to be impossible to repair, and so we waited in Dakar for several days for a replacement engine.*

*It was the only time I visited Africa, and I still remember the colorful markets and the beautiful carriage of the women who wore headdresses like those in Piero della Francesca's fresco in Arezzo of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. Both men and women were tall, but the women seemed taller with their long gray mantles and white caps. They walked slowly, like so many queens. The markets had every conceivable kind of fish, brightly colored blue, red, and yellow. I tried to imagine what sort of work our still-life painters of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries would have produced with those multicolored fish as models. I also understood the fascination that Africa had exerted on nineteenth-century painters, especially the French.*

*Finally, the plane left for São Paulo. Bardi was waiting for me and brought me to their house, which had a magnificent view of the forest, the Mato Grosso. The next day, we went to the offices of the Diarios Associadas where Bardi had mounted the didactic exhibition. It had been a great success, both among the public and the critics.*

*Traveling through the city by car I was not very impressed by the architecture in the center where the oldest buildings were, it seemed, quite colonial. On the other hand, the modern buildings and houses were very avant-garde. Some of them were wonderful, inspired by the great architects such as Le Corbusier and Gropius, who had worked in Brazil. After passing a few days in the offices of the Diarios Associados, where I had been assigned a room with a drafting table and some chairs, I began to*

48. Museu de Arte São Paulo, designed by Lina Bo Bardi.

*realize that Brazil was still a very primitive country. The only available newspapers and magazines were local, mainly in Portuguese, although the journalists all spoke French as well, practically a second language for educated Brazilians. I was also appalled by the poverty and the complete indifference that the rich displayed. One evening, we were invited to a party given by the multi-millionaire playboy, 'Baby' Pignatari. There were mountains of food, fountains of champagne, strolling orchestras, the women dripped with expensive jewelry. Tents had been set up all over the hillside lit by thousands of torches. The party went on for days and was said to cost over a million dollars, at that time, in 1948, an immense amount of money. From the party, one could see the feebly lit shantytowns where hundreds of thousands lived in dire misery. I could never have lived there.*

*Bardi would have liked me to stay on in Brazil. He found himself immediately at home there, and Lina Bo had already built a dramatic glass house suspended on columns overlooking the Mato Grosso. Bardi and Lina had decided to settle there, and he became the director of the new museum, for which, later on, Lina designed the building. Most of the important Fascists had sought refuge in Brazil after the fall of Mussolini, so he had many old friends there.*

## Acquisitions for Brazil

Mario acquired many paintings on behalf of Bardi for the new museum, his contacts with numerous dealers and their respect for his knowledge and honesty facilitating the deals that were made.

*On my trips to London I began to look for important paintings for the new museum. Through the Matthiesen Gallery we bought an important Velázquez, a full-length portrait of the Count-Duke of Olivares for $200,000. From Knoedler's I acquired the early Raphael Resurrection for $400,000, which was a lot of money at that time, especially since the attribution to Raphael was controversial. I was convinced that it was by the master and urged its purchase.*[1] *A short time afterwards the drawings for two of the soldiers, in the collection of the Albertina in Vienna, were published and it is now universally accepted as Raphael. Another full-length portrait, this time by Titian, of Cardinal Madruzzo was also bought from Knoedler's.*

Mario and Bardi were hardly ideal partners, however. The hyperbole and tireless self-promotion in which his former partner now engaged as director of MASP irritated him, and he resented the way that Bardi claimed entire credit for assembling the museum's collection, including the old masters, about which he knew nothing. An example of this can be found in the Wikipedia entry for Raphael's *Resurrection*, which states, "… the work was acquired by the São Paulo Museum of Art. Pietro Maria Bardi, former director of the museum, took the responsibility of adding the Kinnaird *Resurrection* to the body of works of Raphael, based on the existence of two preparatory studies for the composition, starting a heated debate about its authorship."

In his memoir Mario went on to describe the many other acquisitions made for the museum:

*Wildenstein sold by far the greatest number of paintings to the museum. Georges Wildenstein and Bardi had developed a good relationship and Wildenstein was willing to extend credit to the museum for a large number of purchases that took years to*

*pay, but the debt was eventually settled. By 1953 the collection of the museum was substantially complete. Wildenstein made masterpieces available at very favorable terms from their legendary holdings: Bernardo Daddi, Giovanni Bellini, Andrea Mantegna, Poussin, Goya, and Holbein. All of the French paintings came from Wildenstein including a Chardin, Fragonard, and works by Corot, Daumier and Delacroix. Impressionist and post-impressionist works by Manet, Renoir, Cézanne, Van Gogh, Gauguin and Toulouse-Lautrec were added as well as Paris school artists such as Picasso, Léger and Modigliani. From Wildenstein we also purchased a group of English paintings including works by Reynolds, Constable, and Turner. My role was to make the selection for the museum from the paintings that were being offered by the various dealers. It was a propitious moment in the art market. Extraordinary things were available and the prices were, in comparison to today's values, paltry.*

49. Raphael, *The Resurrection of Christ*, 1499–1502, oil on panel, São Paulo Museum of Art, São Paulo, Brazil, 52 × 44 cm.

*In addition to the paintings we bought for the museum from major dealers, I purchased some sculptural works in London, from Baron Grundherr [Hugo von Grundherr (1874–1956)] whom I had met at the auctions. Apart from being a marchand amateur, he made very good forgeries of Frans Hals. His collection was in a castle, a gloomy place; the only heat was from the fireplaces and the rooms were sparsely furnished. I went to see him there and passed a chilly night but was able to purchase several large sculptures: a Greek marble statue of Athena, a large marble of Diana Sleeping, from the Barberini collection, very close to Gian Lorenzo Bernini, and*

50. Titian, *Cardinal Madruzzo*, 1552, oil on canvas, São Paulo Museum of Art, São Paulo, Brazil, 230 × 131 cm.

51. Giuseppe Mazzuoli, *Diana Sleeping*, 1690–1700, marble, São Paulo Museum of Art, São Paulo, Brazil, 55 × 81 × 168 cm.

*another work by Valerio Villareale, for one hundred pounds each. They are all in the museum in São Paolo. I also bought a large Solimena, Joseph and the Wife of Potiphar, and a Jacopo Tintoretto portrait, so good that it could almost have been by Titian.*

Mario's role in forming the collection has never been recognized. Bardi alludes to this in a conciliatory letter[2] in which he says that whatever transpired between them, in the end, they both had great careers. Mario was a tolerant man and often made allowances for others' vagaries, but when he felt that someone had betrayed him, he erased that person completely from his life. Bardi continued as director of MASP almost until his death in 1999, at the age of ninety-nine. He remains to this day a revered figure in São Paulo.