PART TWO

New York and the Samuel H. Kress Foundation

What a marvelous fragment of social history is hidden behind the vast accumulation of panels and canvases! How curious as human types and how extremely significant for their period are figures like Samuel H. Kress and Mrs. Delora Kilvert! How fascinating and almost like characters out of fiction are men like Alessandro Contini Bonacossi and his wife Vittoria! Besides these, we have the art dealers competing against each other, and restorers suddenly reaching dizzy heights; and finally, art historians, even distinguished ones, busy writing certificates by the thousand.

Federico Zeri, "Early Italian Pictures in the Kress Collection", *The Burlington Magazine*, August 1967

CHAPTER 11

Welcome to America

Samuel Henry Kress

Like many of the great entrepreneurs of the period, Samuel H. Kress (1863–1955) came from a modest background in rural Pennsylvania, near Allentown. As a boy, he worked in the stone quarries and, at seventeen, obtained the credentials to teach in a nearby one-room schoolhouse. He saved enough money to open a small "notions" store, which gradually grew into a wholesale business. Sam, as he was known, turned out to be a retailing genius; he went on to make a fortune with a chain of five-and-dime stores, drawing on the model created in 1876 by F. W. Woolworth in Utica, New York, and which had become popular in the late nineteenth century. The first S. H. Kress & Co. five-and-dime opened in 1896 in Memphis and was an immediate success. The stores were spread across the country but the greatest concentration was in the South and Southwest.[1]

These great emporiums of democracy offered their customers a large variety of wares, from sewing needles to china to clothing and everything in between at affordable prices. One could get just about anything at the "fivvy," as my mother called our local store. Unlike today's big-box stores, the Kress buildings were individually designed, and great fanfare accompanied each store's opening. They became instant attractions in the many small cities where Kress built them, anticipating rapid growth. The first were in the Gothic Revival style, but between 1929 and 1944, an in-house architect, Edward Sibbert (1899–1982), designed sleek, modern structures characterized by the striking use of terracotta ornamentation on the façade, including the famous Kress logo.

The flagship store was located on New York City's Fifth Avenue and 39th Street. For this location, Sibbert created an award-winning Art Deco building in the Mayan Revival style, which

52. Samuel H. Kress.

53. A Mayan revival relief from the flagship store on Fifth Avenue.

was erected in 1935 and torn down in 1980 to be replaced by a nondescript glass tower. However, many Kress buildings still survive on the main streets of towns small and large, from Charleston to San Francisco, the golden logo intact, although their interiors have been gutted and repurposed. Many have received landmark status. The importance and personal attention Samuel Kress gave to design and materials suggest he had always possessed the aesthetic sensibility that found its true outlet when he discovered the masterpieces of Europe's past.

Kress, like many Americans of his day and age, was a pious man, conscious of his social obligations, and his collecting activities were colored by a sense of civic responsibility from the outset. Kress's success was partly due to his exceptional attention to detail and ceaseless vigilance over his many ventures. He spent forty years building up his business, constructing and personally supervising each of his far-flung stores. This meant that he was constantly traveling and living mainly in a Pullman railway car. His

younger brothers, Claude and Rush, had been brought into the business and, in 1924, Samuel ceded the presidency and primary responsibility for the company to Claude.

In 1925, at the age of sixty-two, he bought a grand duplex penthouse apartment in a newly constructed luxury apartment building on the corner of Fifth Avenue and 83rd Street. By that time, he was one of the wealthiest men in the United States and began to invest his fortune in the acquisition of art. He acquired his first old master painting in 1926, a rather conventional decorative work by Hondecoeter. Following that initial purchase, he began buying art by the boatload, almost literally, until 1941, when the Second World War put a stop to commerce with Europe. Nonetheless, he did acquire a number of paintings from New York dealers during that period.

Starting with Italian paintings from the early schools and the Renaissance, he eventually widened his reach to include sculptures, small bronzes, medals, tapestries, and decorative arts—including an entire room from an eighteenth-century English house. Exceptionally taciturn, Kress left little in writing apart from a general expression of his intentions. One can only guess what his collection meant to him, apart from the declared moral purposes. At one time he thought of building a great museum on

54. Kress store in El Paso, Texas.

55. Terracotta reliefs on the store in Memphis, Tennessee.

Fifth Avenue. Had he done so, the hypothetical Kress Museum's collection of Italian old master paintings and sculpture would have surpassed the holdings of any museum in the country. This idea coexisted with a populist impulse to donate works of art to the small cities across the country where Kress had built his stores. By the time he created his foundation in 1929, Samuel Kress had already made individual donations of old master paintings to more than two hundred municipalities. During the depths of the Depression, he sent works from his collection around the country in an "art train," which enjoyed such success that its journey had to be extended to include more cities. He believed that art fostered social improvement and the development of good character and values among the citizenry.

The Restorer and the Count

The creation of the Kress Collection depended on a network of experts, advisors, and suppliers. Among these, two men played particularly important roles: Stephen Pichetto (1887–1949), and Count Alessandro Contini Bonacossi (1878–1955).

Pichetto was an Italian American from a modest background. It is sometimes said that he was originally a portrait painter by profession, although there is no confirmation of this. Nor is it known where he trained as a restorer. He opened a studio in 1908, at the age of twenty-one. In New York City directories, he was listed variously as a restorer, an artist, or an art dealer—perhaps he was all three. There were few professional restorers in the United States at that time, and he quickly became a prominent figure in the New York art world. His clients included the pre-eminent dealer in old master paintings, Lord Joseph Duveen, as well as many important private collectors, and in 1928, he was appointed consultant restorer of the Metropolitan Museum, where he worked on a large number of paintings in a high-ceilinged, brightly lit attic.[2] But his greatest client of all would be Samuel Kress.

Pichetto may have met Count Alessandro Contini Bonacossi, the Italian art dealer, during one of Contini's earlier expeditions to New York, which began in the mid-twenties. His wife, Donna Vittoria, recorded in her diaries meetings with or visits to all the major collectors, as well as other dealers and their agents.[3] Accounts differ about when and how Contini met Samuel Kress and what role Pichetto played in that meeting.[4] Ann Hoenigswald suggests that Pichetto himself may have initiated the contact with Contini, serving as a conduit to Kress.[5]

Mario had a different story about the historic encounter between Kress and Contini, recounted to him, he said, by the count himself. He wrote:

Contini was returning to Italy from New York on a transatlantic liner in the 1920s, a trip that he may have engineered expressly to meet Kress. He noticed a pretty woman walking on the deck with Mr. Kress, an American widow called Delora Kilvert, his close friend, companion, and official hostess until his death. One morning, Contini happened upon her, alone, enjoying the fresh sea air, and began a conversation about some of the great American art collections that were being formed. He asked if Mr. Kress was a collector and she said no. He feigned surprise. How was it possible, he asked, that an important magnate such as Samuel Kress was not interested in works of art like his peers, Morgan, Carnegie, Frick, and so forth? As he spoke, he took out of his waistcoat pocket a paper in which were folded two diamonds he had bought during his recent stay in New York. He held them up to the sun to examine their color and brilliance. Like every society woman at that time, Mrs. Kilvert was interested, and he pressed the precious gems into her hand to admire. She commented on how exceptionally beautiful they were. Contini said, "If you really like them, I will give them to you." She demurred, saying that she could not possibly agree to take such a valuable gift, but the count continued to insist and finally Mrs. Kilvert accepted both the diamonds and the count, who became a friend, opening one of the most exceptional chapters in the history of American collecting.

Count Contini and Donna Vittoria did voyage to New York in December 1926. According to the meticulous diary that Vittoria kept for her children and grandson during their four-month-

long sojourn in the United States, Mrs. Kilvert paid a visit to the Continis on January 19, 1927, purchasing a length of antique velvet.[6] Two weeks later, an entry records that she asked the Continis' help in furnishing an apartment for her friend, a certain Mr. Kress.[7] A few days later, on February 13, the Continis went to the Kress apartment, bringing carpets, tables and eight paintings, which they hung on the empty walls.[8]

Although Samuel Kress never married, his relationship with the beautiful and resourceful Mrs. Kilvert endured for years. She looked after him, arranged his social life, and influenced his decisions concerning his art collection. In the many negotiations that took place between Kress and Contini over the years, she frequently served as an intermediary. Apart from his relationship with Mrs. Kilvert, little is known about Samuel Kress's personal life. His niece, the late Jocelyn Kress, reported that he was eccentric, extremely shy, anti-social, and exceptionally preoccupied with his health. She added that before 1925 he owned stacks of very bad art. Perhaps he owned the Barbizon landscapes and French academic paintings that were popular at the time, but if he ever had such a collection, it disappeared without a trace.

Samuel Kress's background as a mass-merchandiser seemed to influence his approach to collecting; he felt that he could get a better deal by buying paintings in bulk. His first major purchase from Count Contini consisted of 65 paintings and until the onset of the Second World War, most of his purchases were from the Italian dealer, who claimed credit for Kress's formation as a collector.

Contini and the ebullient and very intelligent Vittoria made an odd couple. He was a giant, well over six feet tall, while she was a tiny woman, pretty and a bit plump, with, as everyone noted, extraordinary blue eyes. Once they had arrived in New York, the couple would take an apartment at one of the great hotels, the Pierre or the Plaza. This always included a large room that they would furnish as an appropriate setting for the paintings they hoped to sell. The pieces of furniture they brought with them were

the finest examples of walnut and parcel-gilt Renaissance cassoni, consoles, tables, even period fire mantles, draped with lengths of red, blue, yellow, and green antique velvet. It was a style that had found favor with such legendary collectors as Isabella Stewart Gardner in the early part of the century and is still preserved in her museum. Antique velvet was so popular among American collectors that the fabric fetched astronomical sums. Mario said that several dealers in Rome traded exclusively in this material, but the demand for it collapsed along with the crash of the New York stock market in 1929. By the 1930s, this particular taste in decorating was in decline, but the Kress Foundation kept a supply of the precious velvet into the 1950s, using it to line the shadow boxes. These cases were popular among dealers and collectors, because they added importance and scale to smaller paintings, such as private devotional works or fragments of large altarpieces. Many Kress paintings retain these now outmoded surrounds, although the nap of the velvet has completely worn away.

A number of dealers used their skill as decorators to create irresistible settings, veritable Aladdin's Caves, for their wares. To entice the reticent millionaire Andrew Mellon, Joseph Duveen hired the floor below Mellon's apartment in Washington, filled it with furniture and paintings, and gave him the key.[9] Mitchell Samuels, the owner of French & Co., owned two buildings in the East 50s,[10] where he not only sold marvelous antiques from every period, but also offered upholstery services and maintained workshops where entire rooms were created for wealthy collectors from all over the United States. The rooms could be staged for a client's approval before the installation was shipped to their home.[11]

The Continis were no strangers to this approach and frequently availed themselves of Mitchell Samuels's services in their pursuit of Samuel Kress, for whom they tirelessly acquired furnishings, rearranging the rooms over and over again until Kress was satisfied. Nevertheless, after spending years touring the country from one city to the next with their paintings, offering them unsuccessfully to all the important collectors, the Continis were thrilled to have

finally found their very own client. They felt that they had inspired Kress to become a collector and were forming his taste.[12]

That same February of 1927, Stephen Pichetto appears for the first time in Vittoria's diaries. Vittoria describes him as the top paintings' restorer in America. His Italo-American dialect made her laugh.[13] Pichetto soon became very much a part of the process of marketing Contini's offerings to Kress. They visited him often during their stays in New York, and he helped them in various ways, consulting about the arrangement of the paintings in the apartment, and the progress of the negotiations with Kress to whom he provided flattering descriptions of their quality and condition.

A key element in the seduction of Sam Kress was Donna Vittoria's excellent Italian cuisine. In the diaries, a great deal of space is devoted to the dreadful American meals the Continis were served at private homes and at restaurants and the dyspepsia she constantly endured. Even at the finest tables, the food was bland at best, and she rejoiced in obtaining real Italian ingredients to tempt Kress's appetite. Vittoria was resourceful in any number of ways and was her husband's partner in every sense. The dour Kress was cajoled by her lively attention, and she encouraged him to collect for patriotic reasons, which must have appealed to him. Eyes twinkling, the countess waxed rhapsodic over the beauty of her paintings—about which she seems to have been entirely sincere—and ranted against the art historians who were relying on the new x-ray technique instead of their eyes to make attributions.[14]

Although her criteria for assessing the quality of her paintings appeared to be based entirely on emotion, Mario and others said that she really did possess an uncanny intuition about art. Mario often remarked on her intelligence, taste, energy, and instincts, and sincerely admired her. She was, by all accounts, an extraordinary woman and a driving force behind the Contini enterprises. Her husband, who was in charge of the business end, needed constant encouragement and would begin to despair after two or three months of dealing with the hard-nosed Kress. Their trips to

New York were framed as social visits, so they were forced to wait for Kress to bring up the subject of business transactions. It was always a cliffhanger, involving months of haggling—torture for Contini, but a process Kress appeared to relish. The business would be concluded at the very last moment, just as the desperate count was making arrangements to embark with his possessions, leaving the couple exhausted yet jubilant. The deal was always for the purchase of the entire "lot" as Kress called it, consisting of up to 160 paintings, primarily of the early Italian Schools.

With Contini's encouragement, Kress became determined to own at least one example of a work by every Italian painter, masters great and small alike. Studded among the hundreds of paintings he acquired, were masterpieces, or "leaders," as the department store magnate liked to call them, some of which came from Contini, while others were purchased from important galleries such as Duveen's or Knoedler's. One famous example is the *Allendale Nativity*, which Kress purchased from Joseph Duveen in 1938. To the dealer's intense irritation, his expert, Bernard Berenson, would not agree on the painting's widely accepted attribution to Giorgione. Berenson insisted that it was by the young Titian—still very fine of course, "one of the most fascinating Giorgionesque pictures ever painted,"[15] but not as desirable (or expensive) as a painting by the rare master from Castelfranco. The incident, which was widely publicized, was the cause of the definitive break between the dealer and the famous art historian. The weight of scholarly opinion was against Berenson, and he eventually accepted the painting as a Giorgione toward the end of his life. The general consensus today is that it is by Giorgione. However, this was not the only scandal connected with the painting. To the horror of the sophisticated international art world, Kress exhibited the work in the window of his Fifth Avenue store for the Christmas season, so that the public could enjoy it.

Stephen Pichetto's collaboration became essential to the Continis as his role in Kress's collecting activities and the running of the foundation grew. Pichetto was Samuel Kress's most trusted

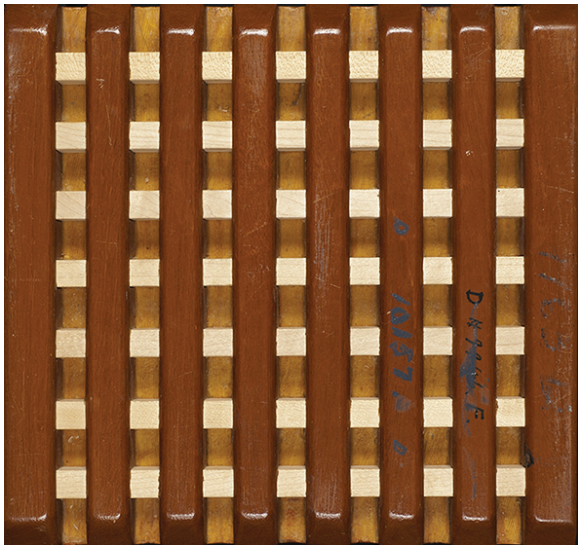
advisor and had final approval on all purchases. John Walker, the curator and then director of the National Gallery of Art, draws a portrait of Pichetto during the 1940s, describing him as a "large, well-fed bullfrog, perfectly tranquil but ready to snap at any insect which might fly by. He had a cigar, lighted or unlighted, always in his enormous mouth. He would get up, invariably with an amiable smile, and take me through room after room where assistants were cleaning, inpainting, relining or cradling to point out some new Kress acquisition."[16]

When Mario arrived in New York in 1949, only months after Pichetto's death, he was taken to this studio where he became familiar with his predecessor's practices. He said that Pichetto

56. Samuel Kress and Stephen Pichetto in front of Giorgione's *Allendale Nativity*, at the National Gallery of Art, Washington DC.

inflated his fees and charged the foundation for work he did not do, as many of the paintings purchased from Contini had already been cleaned and restored in Florence. His method, as John Walker described it, was a sort of assembly line. Every painting on panel was thinned, flattened, and cradled. Paintings on canvas were relined, whether necessary or not. All were coated with thick, glossy varnishes, and Pichetto subsequently added a few minor, often unnecessary retouches. By 1950, the retouches had begun to alter, and "Pichetto whitening" became a notable problem as time went on.[17] Despite his shortcomings, Pichetto was articulate and persuasive, as surviving documents and a radio broadcast recording attest. He won the trust of the crusty Samuel, leading him to become, in time, both a trustee of the Kress Foundation and curator of the Kress Collection.[18]

The procedure known as cradling was widespread in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Its basic purpose was to keep the wood panel flat and prevent it from splitting. Most of the



57. A cradle on the reverse of a small painting in the Kress Collection.

paintings that passed through the American art market in the twentieth century had been housed in churches and palaces with thick stone walls that tend to retain humidity. When the panels suddenly encountered the dry conditions of a heated American house or apartment, they often reacted dramatically and warped or cracked. The new owners, who had paid large sums of money for these objects, were consternated, as were, of course, the dealers. Panel paintings began to be cradled as a preventive measure, whether it was necessary or not.

Few panels in American collections escaped this fate. Another consideration in the flattening of panels was the taste of the time. The aesthetic of the Machine Age favored flat, mechanically smooth surfaces without a trace of cracks or other deformations and most wealthy collectors wanted paintings that looked flat, smooth, and glossy.

Like many restorers, Pichetto relined every painting on canvas that came through his studio. The new linen was pasted to the back of the original canvas with animal glue-based adhesive, the surface pressed repeatedly with fifty-pound heated irons. Pichetto's methods were the usual practice of most English and American restorers in that period.[19] Mario kept one of Pichetto's irons, which still bears an engraved plate reading "Property of the S. H. Kress Foundation." I have it in my studio, although I can hardly lift it. It is an invaluable teaching tool, as it makes it easy for students to understand how and why so many paintings look flat and rigid, with all the brushwork and liveliness of the surface obliterated.

In line with the streamlined aesthetic of the times, to achieve a perfectly smooth, enamel-like finish, Pichetto built up his final varnish with viscous solutions of dammar resin in turpentine, alternating with thin applications of shellac—a 'spirit' varnish dissolved in alcohol. The different solubility of the two materials allowed multiple applications so that a thick coating could be built up.

Another technique Pichetto used, recounted by Mario, was to build a dam around a painting and pour varnish onto the face to

create a surface like a mirror. I can confirm this practice; I have removed varnish coatings from Kress paintings that had telltale ripples in their surface. This highly varnished look was one that Duveen also prized and was preferred by his American clients.

Samuel Kress's Decline and Pichetto's Sudden Death

Beginning in the early 1940s, Samuel Kress had a series of strokes. He lost mobility and speech. His youngest brother, Rush Harrison Kress, had been in the Kress company for many years by that time. He was a mild man, completely devoted to his dictatorial brother. After Mario came to New York, he heard the stories of how Samuel, during his frequent inspections of his stores, used to make Rush walk a few paces behind him. In order to take care of his brother, Rush, with his wife Virginia and their four children, moved into 1020 Fifth Avenue. He took over the operations of S. H. Kress & Co. and the foundation, determined to carry on his disabled brother's legacy.

On January 20, 1949, Stephen Pichetto died of a massive heart attack while walking along a Manhattan street. By then, the foundation relied on him completely for all its art-collecting activities, and his unexpected demise created a major problem for Rush Kress. Meanwhile, the large purchase from Contini made the previous year languished in storage, and Pichetto's staff was paralyzed without him. Mrs. Pichetto kept the studio open, and the bills mounted. The ties between the Kress Foundation and Pichetto's studio were so close that the foundation felt responsible for the studio's expenses whether or not any work was being carried out. This was not good business and the situation looked at risk. Guy Emerson, the vice director of the foundation in charge of the art program, urged Rush to proceed slowly, as Pichetto had warned them of the danger of paintings being spoiled by "careless and incompetent people … in the field … rumored to have 'ruined'

many paintings at the Metropolitan and Boston museums".[20] This view was also held by John Walker, the curator of the National Gallery, and his mentor, Bernard Berenson, whom Rush Kress considered a friend. On the very day of Pichetto's death, Rush sent a telegram to 'the Count,' as Rush always called him, who, before responding, asked Berenson for advice. In the flurry of correspondence that ensued, everyone counseled caution.

Berenson, Walker, and Contini all had an interest in who would be appointed to this important insider position. Contini supported Mario, with whom he had worked for several years.

58. Rush Harrison Kress with Baciccio's *The Sacrifice of Isaac*.

Neither Berenson nor Walker liked the idea of a Contini candidate, but they were unable to agree on any other suggestion. Walker suggested Giannino Marchig or Louis de Wild, both well-known restorers, but Berenson was not in favor of either man.[21]

Less than three weeks after the death of Pichetto, Contini wrote to Rush:

> February 9, 1949
> As I explained to you at length in my last letter, the choice of a candidate who possesses the many necessary qualities restricts the horizon considerably. Only one man – in my opinion – has my complete and unconditional confidence; that is the man who has the keeping of my own collection and to whom I have always entrusted the most important works. Naturally I have always been very jealous of this man, as I consider him irreplaceable; therefore, I have been faced with a serious case of conscience… B.B. whom I believe has always had a very high opinion of the way in which my pictures are kept, did not even think I would be willing to suggest him; but when I told him the news he seemed very pleased and agreed entirely … This man has the temperament of a Master. His technical and artistic knowledge and his ability to inculcate into others love and care in their work make him substantially quite unique… I do not think he would be able to dispose of more than six months of the year for the US.[22]

Some years later, Guy Emerson, who by that time had become Mario's close friend, showed him another letter from Contini to Kress, which said, "Mario Modestini is the best restorer in the world, but don't let him know that I told you because it might go to his head."[23]

Kress acted on Contini's suggestion and immediately sent a telegram to São Paulo, where Mario was visiting, urging him to come to New York as soon as possible. Mario's friend, Gualtiero

Volterra, who was Contini's buying agent and business partner as well as a friend of Rush Kress, flew to New York to await Mario's arrival and smooth the way. Married to Patricia Kelly, an Australian, who also translated Contini's letters to Rush Kress and Berenson into English, Volterra spoke fluent English, while Mario knew only a few words.

Mario was glad to have an excuse to leave Brazil. On March 7, 1949, after a ten-hour flight, he arrived at La Guardia Field, where he was met by Volterra and taken to the Plaza Hotel. Here he checked into a spacious room with a large window overlooking Central Park. It cost $8.50 a night. Mario never ceased to be amazed at how cheap it was; he kept the bill as a party trick to astound people years later when such a room cost $600 a night. The next day, Gualtiero accompanied him to the foundation's offices in Stephen Pichetto's studio in the Squibb Building at 745 Fifth Avenue. Here he met Rush Kress and the staff. Mario was introduced to Dr. Herbert Spencer, a board member; Guy Emerson, the art director; "Red" Geiger, Mr. Kress's secretary; William Suida, research curator; and John Walker, chief curator of the National Gallery. Despite Mario's complete lack of English, with Gualtiero's help a discussion took place—mainly regarding what sort of task Mario would carry out as an example of his work and where he would do it.

I chose a panel that had been recently cradled, The Assumption of the Virgin[24] *by Paolo di Giovanni Fei, a Sienese artist of the fifteenth century, today in the National Gallery of Washington. It was a tempera painting with a gilded gold background, very dirty, covered with candle smoke, soot and old varnishes. I don't think it had ever been cleaned. The picture was sent to me at the Hotel Plaza where I had a large north-facing window with perfect light. My first problem was to find something to use to soften the fatty black soot deposits. Normally I used an unguent that I made up myself from various ingredients according to a recipe by Secco Suardo consisting of melted animal fat, linseed oil and Marseilles soap.*[25] *Being without my usual materials I had to improvise and bought a product called Pond's cold cream that women use to clean and protect their skin. I mixed this with a little bit of Marseilles soap and some raw linseed oil. I made various tests to see how long it was necessary to leave this creamy*

emulsion on the painting, removing it with turpentine. In a few days, I had cleaned the painting and done some minor retouching with tempera colors. The painting was in a very good state. John Walker pronounced himself satisfied and told Mr. Kress that I had done a beautiful job. (See Plates IV, V, VI)

The first order of business was to find a workspace for Mario and an office for the foundation.

Although Mr. Kress wanted me to move into Pichetto's studio, I didn't like the space. Despite the fact it was on the fifteenth floor, the light was poor due to the very small windows, which meant that the restorers always had to work with electric lamps. While Gualtiero Volterra was still in New York, after a lot of looking, it was decided to take a suite of rooms at 250 West 57th Street next to the Art Students League, which would serve both as my studio and as offices for the Foundation. There was a big room with good north light from a large window. The collection already at that time consisted of about eight or nine hundred paintings, some on loan to the National Gallery, some at 1020 Fifth Avenue, the Kress residence, and many in storage at Morgan Manhattan and Atlas warehouses.

There were a number of Italians in New York, many of them Romans Mario knew from the art world. Some of them were Jews and others anti-Fascists. Some found their way home again, while others ultimately made a new life in New York. Mario was in the fortunate position of having left Italy voluntarily for an exciting new job, although, like most expatriates, he always missed the enchanted Rome of his youth that the war had changed forever. However, the move to New York had not been an easy decision to make and in the beginning Mario agreed to work for the Kress Foundation only part-time:

I stayed on until the middle of April and worked on several other paintings. After Gualtiero left, the wonderful research curator of the Foundation, Professor William Suida, the great Viennese art historian, befriended me and helped me in my conversations with Mr. Kress. We agreed that I would take on the responsibilities of the Kress collection for part of the year and would oversee the men on Pichetto's staff.

Mr. Kress was very kind and cordial to me, which was, in fact, his nature. He was very American and, in some ways, had a taste for simple things. After we had confirmed our arrangement, he invited me to lunch at Horn and Hardart's restaurant, where, he said, they made the best coffee in town. The walls were made of little boxes with glass doors through which you could see the food offered. With a quarter or fifty-cent piece the door would open and you took whatever meal you had chosen. It was an interesting experience and naturally I never went back there again.

I traveled back to Rome to tidy up my affairs before returning to New York in July, as we had agreed. For the moment, not sure how long I would stay in New York, I did not completely close my gallery.

Shortly after Mario's return to Rome, Kress's secretary, Red Geiger, began to cable that the workroom would be ready on April 25 and when will Modestini arrive? After much frantic correspondence between an anxious and impatient Rush Kress and a concerned Contini, Mario finally booked passage to New York on the Queen Elizabeth to assume his new responsibilities. Among his papers I found a radiogram dated July 12, 1949: WELCOME TO AMERICA SUIDA AND EMERSON WILL MEET YOU AT DOCK R H KRESS.

By August 19th a Rush Kress memo asks whether Modestini "needs any more paintings to work on during the next three weeks." Scrawled pencil note in the margin: "Now has 30."

CHAPTER 12

Carnegie Hall and Huckleberry Hill

Following the death of Stephen Pichetto, Mario had only committed to working six months a year for the Kress Foundation, but the studio at 250 West 57th Street quickly became overcrowded with the avalanche of work that kept arriving from the storage warehouses. It was evident that the Kress Foundation's art program required Mario's full attention, and Rush Kress hounded him until he agreed to take a full-time position. Reluctantly, Mario was forced to make a decision about whether or not he would leave his beloved Rome for good, to which he ultimately agreed, though with great difficulty and not without regret. However, for various reasons—an unhappy marriage and complicated personal life, his terrible memories of the German occupation, and his disgust with contemporary politics—he was ready for a change. Many years later, he told me that Gualtiero Volterra had warned him to think carefully before making his decision, because once a person went to New York, they never returned to Italy.

Once Mario was back in New York, the final contracts were signed:

My position with the Kress Foundation was formalized. I was named curator and conservator of the collection, for which I received a salary; space, materials, and other costs associated with the work on the collection were paid by the foundation, while I was responsible for staff salaries, living arrangements and so on. I sent invoices for each restoration, reframing, making of shadow-boxes and the like. This was very similar to Pichetto's understanding.

I found an apartment on Madison and 68th Street but the most important thing was to learn English so that I could communicate with the people I worked with, especially Mr. Kress who was difficult to understand in any case since he always talked with a cigar in his mouth. In my free time, I went to the movies where there was always a double bill. A friend from Rome [Rita Venanzoni] who had married an American military official had moved to New York and she often went with me to translate the dialogue. This helped me very much to learn English and especially the pronunciation and the sound of the language that is so different from Italian. Also, while I was working I often had occasion to talk to the employees of the Foundation who were all Americans and therefore I had to force myself to try to speak English. Professor Suida helped me very much, especially with Mr. Kress. In fact, I found myself more at home in Greenwich Village, still an artist's quarter, with its proximity to the Italian neighborhood. With the help of Guy Emerson, I found a wonderful duplex apartment at number 4 Washington Square North. The town house, in which Robert E. Lee had once lived, belonged to New York University to whom the Kress Foundation had been very generous. Subsidized by the university, the rent was only $200 a month. It had an entrance on Fifth Avenue and another on Washington Square with tall ceilings and plenty of space. I lived there for many years.

I will always owe a great debt to Professor Suida for befriending me when I arrived in New York. I was like a fish out of water, not knowing a word of English, and he helped me in every way he could. Many evenings I was his guest for dinner with his family in Forest Hills. His wife was an excellent cook. Muti, as her family called her, was a very kind and gracious woman, adored by her husband. She was also the practical one in the family, as Suida himself was the classic absent-minded professor.

Renzo Ravà

Mario had another friend in the city, whom he had met in Florence through Count Contini. Renzo Ravà came from a Venetian family of Spanish Sephardic Jews, but his grandfather, a banker, had moved to Florence in the nineteenth century. The family lived in Piazza Indipendenza, which was newly built and very fashionable at that time, and owned a country estate on the Pian dei Giullari, overlooking the city.

When the racial laws were passed in 1938, Renzo was dismissed from his position in the Faculty of Law at the University of Florence, where he had been the youngest person ever to be appointed professor. He decided to go to Paris, where he had always felt at home, but he found that France was much more anti-Semitic than Italy. He managed to secure a US visa at the last moment before the German invasion. In New York he made many friends among the colony of upper class Italians who, for various reasons, found the city congenial. While living there during the war, he got an American law degree at Columbia University.

Once the war was over, he returned to Florence. Renzo's siblings had remained in Italy where they all survived the Nazi occupation. The house on the Pian dei Giullari had been occupied by the Germans and was semi-destroyed. After restoring it, he decided to practice international law, and to live between Florence and New York, arranging legal and other matters for families, mainly the old nobility, who had interests in both cities. Alessandro Contini Bonacossi became one of his first clients, and through him he met Gualtiero Volterra and Mario. The three men became fast friends. During the time Mario and I lived together, Renzo would call every morning at 8:30, even when we had dined with him the night before, and they would talk for a half an hour. And that was just the first call of the day.

Carnegie Hall

By May of 1950, Mario had moved to a large studio in the tower of Carnegie Hall, with brilliant light and just across the street from the Kress Foundation. Two of his assistants from the Studio Palma came to help him, Amleto De Santis and Giuseppe (Peppino) Barberi. Both Amleto and Peppino were dedicated Communists and considerably more radical than Mario. During the German occupation, they had put up posters around Rome and risked their lives in other more dangerous activities. Mario loved Amleto, whom he believed to be one of the most gifted painters of the Scuola Romana and felt that he never received the credit he deserved. This was certainly not because of Amleto's political affiliations; the most successful artists in Rome were all Communists.

Peppino's arrival in New York was recorded by the *New York Times*. A blurb dated March 13, 1950, featured a photograph of Peppino at customs. "Restorer of old paintings here from Rome," it reads, and goes on to say that Giuseppe Barberi worked for the Kress Foundation and was on his way to Washington to restore the paintings of the National Gallery. Wearing a beret, he is opening his suitcase to show the tools of his trade, which include stained paint rags, a Communist newspaper, used paint brushes, and a tin of shoe polish. Rita Venanzoni, who met them at the airport, was their spokesperson: "Oh yes," she said, "the artists will be able to complete the restoration of the 150 paintings in the National Gallery by March 1951." Mario nearly died of embarrassment.

Mario needed to staff his studio quickly to deal with the huge Kress project, so he kept some of Pichetto's men:

I took on three of Pichetto's assistants. Angelo Fatta was the carpenter who, under Pichetto's direction, thinned and cradled all the panel paintings. The cradles were well-made but excessively heavy and I tried to explain to him that this could cause further cracking of the original panel, but he was difficult to communicate with and fixed in his ways. Born in Sicily, he had come to the United States when he was twenty

years old and spoke a strange dialect, a mixture of Italian and Brooklyn English, that was, to me, incomprehensible. Henry Hecht, the reliner, and Paul Kiehart, a restorer, also came to work with me. Another Pichetto assistant, Frank Sullivan, was a sort of handyman. By some curious logic, John Walker hired him to be the restorer of the National Gallery.

Walker liked to claim that Sullivan was the best restorer in the world because he never touched a picture, but Mario told me that he used to work on Paul Mellon's English paintings, lining four or five of them at one time, and that he spoiled many of them. Eighteenth-century English paintings are very delicate and difficult to clean, because they were painted using soft resins and other soluble substances, such as tallow, wax, and balsam.

The paintings arrived in such numbers that even after the move to Carnegie Hall, there was still not enough room. Mario recalled:

I took a second studio for woodworking, framing, relining and so on, reserving the tower space for cleaning and retouching. For the moment, our needs appeared to be


RESTORER OF OLD PAINTINGS HERE FROM ROME

Joseph Barberi checking brushes at the New York International Airport yesterday.

59. Peppino arriving at Idlewild in 1950.

60. Mario and his men at Carnegie Hall in front of *Queen Zenobia Addressing Her Soldiers* by Giambattista Tiepolo. From left: Emilio Quarantelli, Robert Manning, Bartolo Bracaglia, Giuseppe Barberi (Peppino), Mario Modestini, Amleto De Santis, and Angelo Fatta.

satisfied. I had brought two more of my Roman assistants to New York, Claudio Rigosi and Bartolo Bracaglia, and a wonderful frame restorer, the Florentine, Emilio Quarantelli, a great character of whom everyone became very fond, particularly Rush Kress, even though there was no way they could communicate with each other since Quarantelli only spoke pure Florentine dialect.

During the McCarthy era, an informer denounced Amleto and Peppino as Communists, and they were deported back to Italy. It took some time to sort this out. Two years later, Guy Emerson wrote to Rush Kress that the pair had been granted visas as a result of the efforts made by Colonel Henry McBride, one of the officers of the National Gallery. Emerson goes on to say that they are the only men Professor Modestini can entrust with major work and

that they will "be a great help and comfort to Mario." Everyone called Mario "Professore", except his friend, Renzo Ravà, who actually was a professor.

Huckleberry Hill

The war in Korea began in June 1950 and, like many Americans, Rush Kress was alarmed, fearing that New York City would be one of the main targets of a nuclear attack. This was the era of backyard bomb shelters, air raid drills, and schoolchildren ducking under their desks. Kress decided to build a safe haven for the collection in Pennsylvania's Pocono Mountains, where he owned a vacation property called Huckleberry Hill. The construction work was completed in six months and was inspected in time for the October 1, 1951, board meeting. The location was very remote, in the far north-east corner of the state and the nearest town, Newfoundland, was five miles away.

61. Huckleberry Hill.

Mario had been involved, naturally, in designing the building. He described it in his memoir:

The art facility consisted of three stories: the ground floor was a bomb-proof bunker large enough to store the entire Kress collection. It was fitted with rolling racks with all the paintings arranged by school and period so foundation and National Gallery staff and prospective regional gallery directors could easily examine them. Above the storage was a large restoration studio. There was a carpenter's shop for Angelo Fatta fully equipped with woodworking machinery and a separate studio for Emilio Quarantelli, the framer. The x-ray machine was in a lead sealed room in the basement. There was a photo studio although we did not have a photographer on the staff. Robert Manning, William Suida's son-in-law, had been engaged as my assistant to be in charge of the record keeping and he hired a photographer called Colden to come up periodically for several weeks at a time. We had photo equipment and whiled away many a winter evening doing our own photography of the work in progress so we would not lose time waiting for the photographer to arrive. Colden was ultimately replaced by Angelo Lomeo and his wife Sonja Bullaty (1923-2000), two real artists who made the best photographs of paintings I have ever seen. They became great friends.

The studio was fully equipped with every conceivable tool for restoration and examination to facilitate our work: microscopes, a fluoroscope, a custom-made apparatus consisting of a platform mounted on a hydraulic lift in order to work on oversized paintings, a press for relining and so on. When I hired Gustav Berger, later to become famous for his work with adhesives, he built us one of the first vacuum hot tables for wax relining according to the Dutch method.

The black-and-white photographs produced by Sonja Bullaty and Angelo Lomeo were works of art in their own right. Sonja was a gifted artist. She paid great attention to the paintings she was photographing and always talked about how much she learned from them about composition, color, and tone, which she then applied to her own work. She was born to a Jewish banking family in Prague. When she was eighteen, she and her family were sent to Theresienstadt, a concentration camp not far from the city. From there she was shipped to Auschwitz and was one of the few prisoners to survive the final death march. After the war, her

schooling interrupted and her family murdered, she made her way back to Prague, where she became an apprentice of the great Czech photographer, Josef Sudek (1896–1976), before immigrating to the United States. Sonja and Angelo became lifelong friends of Mario as well as of Sandrino Contini Bonacossi after he arrived in New York in 1956. Sonja later befriended me as well. Despite what had happened to her, she was the most positive, optimistic person I have ever met. She had a great gift for life and greeted every day with joy.

62. Sonja Bullaty with Josef Sudek in Prague.

The staff numbered about ten men. The living quarters occupied the entire top floor of the building. Mario had his own room and there was a dormitory for the others, plus a kitchen, a dining room, and bathrooms. Two small houses on the property were available for married men or visitors.[1] This arrangement didn't suit everyone. Some restorers came and went very quickly. Mario wrote about one particularly short-lived appointment:

One time I brought a young restorer from Florence, [Raoul] Montefiore, the son of an old-time forger. He was nicknamed "il gretolino" (the scratcher) because he loved to draw fine craquelure. He had asked to come, but when he saw this place in the middle of the forest, he went mad. After a week, he no longer worked but paced around the studio, smoking cigarettes. I suggested that perhaps he should go back to Florence. He agreed right away and I never heard from him again.

When I would become too fussy over details in my own restoration work, Mario would call me *Gretolina*. "*Gretolina,* stop working, let's have some lunch," he would say, or, "What are you doing? Are you putting eyes on the fleas?"

Mario continued his description of Huckleberry Hill:

The winter snows reached two or three feet in height. Often, we opened the door in the morning to find a white wall blocking the entrance. We couldn't go out until the plow came to clear the drive. The summers were hot and humid. Autumn and spring were the only two pleasant seasons. We worked from Monday morning until Friday afternoon when everyone returned to New York for the weekend. Occasionally we were snowed in for the weekend and we cursed the beastly weather.

It was very difficult to find a good cook. One man we hired had worked for the army. He used to take a piece of lard, tie it to the handle of the pot with a string, and let it boil for a while. Then he would remove it, wrap it up, and put it away to use another day. Another time one of the trustees had given us some wonderful beefsteaks, enormous. He cooked them until they had become like leather. After that I fired him. We knew a young couple who had just come from Italy. He was a lawyer, and she was an excellent cook. After a while, he found a job working for the television and we lost them.

To add to the culinary difficulties, nearby Newfoundland was a dry town, but it was possible to obtain Mondavi or Gallo jug wine in another town, further away. It was the best they could get.

Evenings were spent playing cards or working in the photography studio. In warm weather, after work, the men fished from a stream that had been stocked with trout. On one occasion, Sandrino Contini Bonacossi was visiting and insisted on joining in, even though he was dressed in his best clothes. Someone gave him waders to protect his trousers, but somehow, he slipped, tumbled into the stream and, of course, his waders filled with water. He had no change of clothes and had to sit barelegged while his trousers dried. There was much joking and hilarity about this and other incidents.

It was a difficult living situation, although the many conveniences of the facility—purpose-built for optimal working conditions—partly made up for the discomforts, and the foundation did everything in its power to make life at the outpost tolerable. On the whole, the men were happy to have steady work and were better paid than they would have been in Italy. As for Mario, by the time the operation was moved to Huckleberry Hill, his dedication to the Kress Collection was so complete that he could, in his characteristic way, shrug off any inconvenience.

After visiting the Allentown Art Museum in the late 1980s, Mario and I, together with Marilyn Perry, the director of the Kress Foundation, drove to Huckleberry Hill out of curiosity and spent the night in the main house, which had been converted into an inn. Mario and I slept in what, he told me, had been Virginia and Rush Kress's bedroom. We had dinner at the inn and discovered that the town was still dry. The old studio was still there, empty and looking indestructible, it had a rather eerie atmosphere.

During the period when the art operation at Huckleberry Hill was active, Rush Kress and his family often came up to stay in their house. The children, especially Maggie, Jocelyn, and Francesca, became very fond of Mario, and they stayed in touch later in life. Virginia Kress still lived in Samuel's old apartment at 1020 Fifth

63. The restoration studio at Huckleberry Hill. Mario is standing in the middle of the photograph with El Greco's *Laocoön* (National Gallery of Art, Washington DC) to his right.

Avenue and we were often invited to parties there. During one of these there was some rather staid dancing in the Venetian Sitting Room and Jocelyn asked Mario to dance. Afterward, she came to find me and exclaimed "Congratulations! Mario just told me that you're getting married." I was dumbstruck—Mario hadn't yet told *me*.

CHAPTER 13

New York, New York

Federico Zeri

Even after his move to New York, Mario continued to see Federico Zeri, with whom he had worked at the Studio d'Arte Palma, with some frequency. The scholar's reputation as a connoisseur was growing, and in the fifties and sixties, he often stopped in New York, to work on the Italian paintings catalogues for the Metropolitan Museum together with the curator, Elizabeth Gardner. He traveled about the country visiting museums, and was also writing the Italian paintings catalogue for the Walters Art Gallery in Baltimore. He had become one of the principal consultants to the oil tycoon, J. Paul Getty, "the richest man in the world" according to *Time* magazine. Getty was buying old master paintings to add to his collections of eighteenth-century French decorative arts and classical sculpture for an eventual museum in Malibu, California, which was to inherit the bulk of his vast

fortune upon his death, though, at that time, this was known only to his lawyers and accountants. Mario had also recommended Federico to Georges Wildenstein, who needed an expert to replace the aging Bernard Berenson as his advisor on Italian paintings. Zeri was, of course, delighted to collaborate with the dealer. It was a great opportunity for him not only to study the gallery's legendary reserves, but also to earn substantial commissions on their sale.[1]

Mario wrote of Zeri in this period:

In his various trips to New York, he often came to my studio where I always had a lot of paintings, from the Kress Collection and other private collections and museums. He would spend hours examining the paintings, considering whether the attributions were correct or not. In the evening, we frequented one of the few Italian restaurants in town together with our mutual friend, Sandrino Contini Bonacossi who was

64. Mario Modestini making some last minute adjustments to a painting by Bernardo Strozzi in Seattle, Washington.

working with me for the Kress Foundation. One evening Sandrino and I went to pick up Federico at his hotel. While we were there, he received a telephone call from Rome that his mother had died. He became mad with grief and wanted to kill himself by jumping out of the window. Sandrino and I managed to restrain him, I don't know how, hanging on to him by his jacket, trying to calm him down because he was totally beside himself. He left the next day for Rome and for days after that he wrote me desperate letters.

Zeri wrote Mario many letters over the years, full of veiled hints, a combination of personal news and professional matters that it is evident Mario was meant to understand. Some are wickedly funny, if occasionally suffused with paranoia. In a letter dated January 14, 1958, after discussing his new book, Zeri writes that he is sad because his sister had lost custody of her son and then goes on to warn Mario about a conversation he had with Berenson, whom he had visited at Villa I Tatti. He writes that BB seemed to be furious with Mario for reasons that he, Zeri, did not understand. "I remained silent and didn't comment except to say that your work was the best by a long shot that I ever had ever seen, and that you are the only restorer of importance who also has an exceptional aesthetic sensibility."[2] Mario supposed that on that particular occasion Berenson was annoyed because he had prevented the Kress Foundation from purchasing what was supposed to be a self-portrait by Andrea del Sarto that BB had recommended to Walker. Mario didn't believe in the attribution and said that it was also a wreck.

Mario was one of the few people Federico loved, respected, and trusted. He wrote to Mario, "I think of you as one of the few friends I have had in my life."[3] In his published writings, he acknowledged the impact that Mario had on his development as an art historian several times:

> Frequenting the art market, and especially those essential protagonists, the restorers, was more than precious, as it always is for someone who wants to learn to discover the innumerable

> modifications, transformations and alterations which a work of art undergoes during its history, especially those of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries which was the area I had chosen. Obviously, I am not talking about identifying forgeries, I am only saying that this education was the most precious element in my formation. At that time, I went often to the Palma Gallery in Rome, which showed both modern and antique works; it had a restoration studio, directed by an extraordinary man, Mario Modestini. … I consider him, together with Mauro Pellicioli, the most important restorer of our century. … I believe that people such as Mario Modestini should be treated with veneration.
>
> He had the eye of a great connoisseur and he revealed to me the many cunning deceptions used by restorers, and their techniques for faking or reconstructing … and ways of making false craquelure in the paint layer. Among other things, Modestini … has something which others in his field don't possess: a solid cultural base which extends into every field and a knowledge of all the aspects of art history, even the least visible ones. And finally, and this is his most unusual trait, he is immune from that characteristic which affects most of his colleagues … a secret form of envy which is transformed into bitterness and acrimony, openly expressed, that the Germans call "Schadenfreude", that is joy, more or less hidden, in the misfortunes of others.[4]

Zeri owned a parcel of land near Mentana, just outside Rome, the site of an ancient town. In the early 1960's he began to build a villa there. While excavating the land numerous epigraphs were found, which he had embedded in the walls of the internal courtyard. Mario wrote in his memoirs:

When I went back to Rome during the summers, I often went to see him [Zeri] while he was building his house in Mentana, begun by the architect [Luigi] Moretti and finished by Andrea Busiri Vici. In that house, he found the peace and serenity

to dedicate his life completely to his work, even though he continuously complained about the situation in Italy, the degraded condition of the museums, churches, frescoes, sculpture in public gardens destroyed by vandals, and, of course, other art historians. Despite his, at times, ferocious criticisms, his anger and bitterness were genuine, the result of deep feeling and frustration.

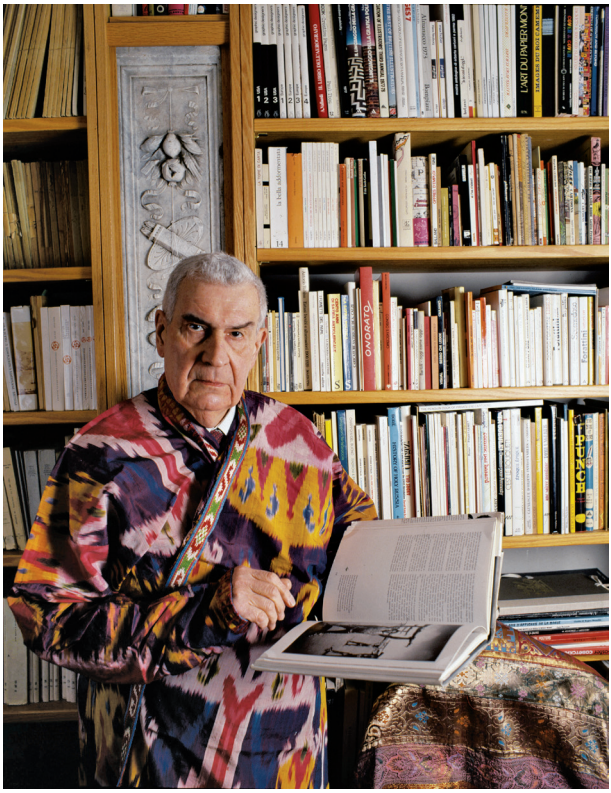
Like Berenson, Federico sought to see every painting he could and committed each of them to his exceptional memory. He had the legendary ability to recall every work in every collection he had ever seen, including where they hung, which is, of course, one of the tricks for training visual memory. It was a stunning feat and no one quite believed it until they heard him do it.

As a freelance scholar, Zeri's 'outsider' status allowed him to give free rein to his opinions, which he aired in several newspaper columns. His flamboyant, combative personality and fearlessness made him a perfect television personality. The bizarre always attracted him and he liked to wear all sorts of costumes on his shows. He became a popular figure, a household name, quite unusual for an art historian. His outspokenness landed him in a number of lawsuits for defamation, one of them brought by Cesare Brandi, after Zeri declared that a painting he had purchased for a museum as Raphael was "una crosta" (a scab), ridiculing it with the title "The Madonna of Captain Cook" because the plant behind the Madonna's head is a specimen from the South Seas that was not discovered until Cook's voyages in the eighteenth century. (Zeri was also an expert in botany.) In that trial, Mario was a witness for the defense.

Zeri was full of suspicions and contorted ideas that he repeated so often they were eventually regarded as fact. He insisted, for example, that Contini had met Donna Vittoria in a brothel, and that, because the count had a criminal past, he had assumed the identity of a dead soldier. He quarreled with almost everyone, including, eventually, his old friend, Sandrino. Mario reprimanded Zeri for his animosity towards their mutual friend and later, after Sandrino's tragic death, Zeri felt guilty about his behavior

and requested a photograph that Sonja Bullaty had taken at the National Gallery.

For Zeri, everything was a conspiracy, with himself as the intended victim. Effigies of his particularly loathed "enemies"—the art historian Giulio Carlo Argan and his friend Cesare Brandi—were hung by the neck like voodoo dolls inside the entrance of his house. I had heard for years about this weird practice but seeing it in person was unsettling. His practical jokes were childish and perverse, such as leaving a (fake) human hand dangling from someone's car trunk, or making crank calls to a convent of nuns, pretending to be the laundry man and asking them about their underwear.[5] Usually



65. Federico Zeri in Moroccan dress, in his library at Mentana.

he would conduct these phone calls in a falsetto voice. Despite his unorthodox and sometimes cruel behavior, his prodigious mind made him one of the most influential art historians of his time.

In his later years, Federico's health began to deteriorate and it was difficult for him to walk. On October 5, 1998 Mario and I were watching the mid-day news and heard that Federico Zeri had died that morning of a massive heart attack. Mario was crushed.

The Fire in the Studio

Not long after he settled in New York, Mario discovered Greenwich Village. In the early fifties, it was in its heyday—full of artists, beat poets, and folk singers, as well as Italian Americans living in what is known as Little Italy, boasting shops that sold fresh pasta, good olive oil, cheeses, and other Italian specialties. The most beautiful part of the Village is Washington Square, a nineteenth-century quadrangle with buildings on all four sides of a large park that features a triumphal arch.

Most of the buildings that surround Washington Square were, and still are, owned by New York University (NYU), which uses it as part of its campus. Some of the gracious old townhouses were still rented out, though it was well-nigh impossible to obtain one of those apartments, as they were in great demand. The Kress Foundation was a large donor to Bellevue Hospital, a part of the university, and Mario's friend and colleague, Guy Emerson, used his connections to find accommodation for him. He managed to secure a duplex apartment in a Federal townhouse at the corner of Washington Square North. Mario lived on the first floor and had a studio on the second. In December 1955, he was preparing a large group of paintings for the 1956 quinquennial Kress Exhibition at the National Gallery. It was the day after Christmas, and several of his assistants were working in the Washington Square studio while Mario was at a meeting at the Kress Foundation on 57th Street. The meeting was interrupted by an urgent telephone call from

one of his assistants, telling him that the studio was on fire and to come downtown immediately. Mario said that he jumped in a taxi and told the driver that he needed to get to Washington Square as fast as possible because his house was on fire. "Everyone says that," replied the jaded New York cabbie.

Fire engines were already there by the time he arrived, and firemen were still carrying paintings out of the building. They were stacked everywhere—on the sidewalk, the balcony, wherever there was room. After the fire was extinguished and the smoke cleared, everyone began to assess the damage to the paintings. Five paintings were badly burned: a Magnasco; an Antonio Pellegrini; most of a long frieze by Tintoretto and studio (mainly studio); a Bernardo Strozzi genre piece of street musicians; and a landscape by Jan Brueghel the Elder, the left half of which was completely carbonized. This was the signed version of a nearly identical painting in the Vienna Museum and the most valuable and rare of the five.

A fireman in the smoking ruin showed Mario a painting he had saved by throwing a fire blanket over it; this was the portrait of a woman in her bath by François Clouet. In fact, the blanket managed to cover most of the painting, except for the two upper corners, which were badly burned. The fireman told Mario that he saw this beautiful naked woman and decided he had to protect her. At that time, the subject was thought to be Diane de Poitiers, the mistress of King Henry II of France.

The reason for the fire was soon discovered. NYU had sent a workman to strip the paint from the front doors along Washington Square North. Since Mario's house was the only one without a Christmas wreath, he began there, using a blowtorch. The door was flanked by thin, fluted pilasters, which concealed the wiring for the doorbell. Since the wood was old, there were some fissures through which the flames entered and set the wires on fire. When the man finished, the fire was not yet apparent. Slowly, it spread up through the conduit of the old wires. When it was already quite advanced, the men working in the studio began to notice smoke coming

through the floorboards. They immediately began to remove the paintings and called the fire department.

As luck would have it, not long before the fire, Mario had adjusted the insurance to reflect the real value of all the paintings in the studio so that the losses were paid for, even though money cannot replace a work of art, each of which is unique. An Italian journalist picked up this detail and began to publish articles in

66. François Clouet, *A Lady in Her Bath,* ca. 1571, oil on panel, National Gallery of Art, Washington DC, 92.1 × 81.3 cm.

Italian newspapers claiming that the fire had been set deliberately to collect the insurance money. This was absurd, of course, but the media thrives on scandal. Mario was sick about what had happened. Apart from the disastrous loss of five paintings, he had also lost many personal possessions, including all his private papers and mementos. He could not bear to stay there after the fire and moved to East 52nd Street, by the East River. This new apartment had a large living room with a double-height ceiling and a big window with northern light, and here he lived for many years. This was where I first met him. He always kept a fire extinguisher on hand and did not like to talk about the conflagration, which is why he did not write about it in the draft of his memoir.

CHAPTER 14

Samuel Kress and the National Gallery of Art

Andrew Mellon: The Philanthropist

The beneficiary of the largest Kress gift was the National Gallery in Washington, for which the foundation continued to acquire paintings until 1960.[1] The museum was founded by an Act of Congress in 1937, and built for the nation by Andrew W. Mellon (1855–1937). Born in Pittsburgh during the era of coal and steel, Mellon made a fortune in banking and industry—one of the largest in the United States after that of John D. Rockefeller. He became a great philanthropist and, being public-minded, served as the Secretary of the Treasury for almost eleven years, in the administrations of Harding, Coolidge, and Hoover. He had long lobbied to establish an independent National Gallery of Art in the nation's capital and was able to secure a prime location in an area known as the Federal Triangle, just north of the National Mall, which was lined with other important museums.[2] He lived

to see his project approved, and in 1937, just before his death, he donated his own collection of paintings and sculptures and funded the construction of the building, which was designed by the famous architect John Russell Pope (1874–1937). Prized Tennessee marble, a pinkish-gray limestone, was used lavishly throughout the traditionally planned museum, with its classical façade and stately stairway that led to a rotunda inspired by the Pantheon from which barrel-vaulted corridors opened onto spacious galleries. Neither Mellon nor Pope lived to see the finished edifice, but it represented the style and aspirations of both.

Andrew Mellon was not a natural collector like his friend from Pittsburgh, Henry Clay Frick, who had always loved paintings and assembled a faultless collection of masterpieces. Mellon's tastes

67. Andrew W. Mellon.

were rather pedestrian: he bought the Barbizon paintings that were popular at the time, until, in the early twenties, he began contemplating a national gallery. He then turned his attention toward the old masters, which he purchased mainly from Knoedler's gallery. It was through them that he learned of the "secret" sale of paintings from the Hermitage in Leningrad (Saint Petersburg), which Stalin had ordered to raise foreign capital. Knoedler's was part of a consortium of three dealers involved in the sale. Determined to secure the paintings for the new museum, by 1931 he had succeeded in acquiring twenty-three masterpieces, including Raphael's *Alba Madonna* and Jan van Eyck's *Annunciation,* for $6,654,000. It remains a historic coup.

David Finley: The Director

Mellon's right-hand man was David Finley (1890–1977), an intelligent, sophisticated lawyer whom he had met at the Treasury Department during the early 1920s. Finley came from a distinguished South Carolina family, and his wife, Margaret Eustis, was a wealthy Washington society woman. Finley's father had been a congressman and thus he knew the political ins and outs of the capital city. Before anything was built or even approved, Mellon asked Finley to be the director of the nascent National Gallery and to take over the planning. Finley began to familiarize himself with the art world, the dealers, the collectors, and how the important European museums were run. In late 1936, when Mellon learned that Joseph Duveen intended to retire, he sent Finley to New York, where he purchased from Duveen twenty-four Italian Renaissance paintings and eighteen sculptures for the planned gallery.

According to Mario, David Finley was not a connoisseur, but he was knowledgeable in a general way, having assisted Mellon in building his collection over the years. Mellon was very much an Anglophile and was impressed with London's National Gallery, on which he based his own museum. Finley continued this model

of collecting, which was to exhibit only select master works, generously spaced, in well-lit galleries that had been expressly built for paintings.

He did not believe in crowding, and considered the old-fashioned hanging of the Palazzo Pitti in Florence, with its paintings stacked to the ceiling, the nadir of museology. Nor did he favor exhibiting paintings, sculpture, and furniture together. After Mario began working for the Kress Foundation, which owned wonderful works of decorative arts, he urged Finley to add some furniture to the galleries. However, Finley was completely opposed to this idea, and for many years Washington's National Gallery remained focused on their old master paintings and an outstanding collection of European sculpture, donated principally by the Kress Foundation. Despite their differing points of view, Mario got along well with David Finley and he felt that they had mutual respect for each other.

In 1938, after Mellon had died and the building had become a reality, Finley realized that after the Mellon donation had been "distilled," as curator John Walker put it—by which he meant culling the wrecks, "duds," and fakes—only 125 paintings, among them the masterpieces from the Hermitage, would be on display, together with some of the mostly indifferent sculptures acquired from Duveen's stock.[3] Mellon had anticipated that, as the building neared completion, it would attract other important collections. This had not happened, and with the opening not far off, the museum would look terribly empty. Jeremiah O'Connor, the curator of the Corcoran Gallery of Art, suggested that Finley should talk to Kress. O'Connor had visited the overflowing treasure house that Samuel Kress's New York residence had become, and new works were being acquired all the time. O'Connor persuaded Kress to give Finley a hearing.[4] Finley and Samuel Kress met on April 18, 1939, at Kress's apartment, 1020 Fifth Avenue, where they discussed the collection and the new National Gallery for seven hours.[5]

John Walker: The Curator

Finley decided that the next step was to have John Walker, the museum's newly appointed chief curator, visit Kress without delay, and he asked Walker to return from Rome, where he had been the Resident at the American Academy. Walker was from a wealthy Pittsburgh family and was a childhood friend of Paul Mellon, Andrew's son and a trustee of the National Gallery, to whom he had earlier written from Rome, inquiring if there might be a post for him.[6]

While living in Italy, he frequented Villa I Tatti and studied with Berenson, whom he greatly admired. He enjoyed a good relationship with the elderly critic, who came to depend on his "pet biped,"[7] as he called Walker. With Berenson's backing, he was offered the coveted position, which he accepted in late 1938. Lingering in Rome, he had begun to plan the new galleries for Washington when he was abruptly summoned by Finley. In Walker's memoir, *Self-Portrait with Donors*, the title of the chapter devoted to the Kress brothers is 'Two Unwary Collectors', referring, it seems, to Samuel's dependence on Contini, whom Walker considered a charlatan, a "modern Cagliostro."[8] Mario said this was because the dealer once foolishly offered Walker a bribe, which not only offended him, but also made him suspicious.

Walker's criticisms have some validity. The count tended to keep the best pictures for his personal collection and, while there were always a few "leaders", the "lots" Kress's preferred dealer offered were something of a grab bag. Typically, there would be a number of works by lesser masters, painters that reflected Longhi's taste, important examples of Lombard and baroque paintings. Many were gold-ground paintings by rare masters, paintings that today command large sums. A number were in very poor condition. Every painting came with five or six expertises (that is, signed statements of authenticity) from the most prominent art historians of the day.

For some reason, Walker was completely blind to Berenson's trafficking in the market, first for Colnaghi, an important English gallery, and then through his lucrative arrangement with Duveen. Regarding Samuel Kress's naiveté in accepting the opinions furnished by Contini, Walker writes in his memoir, "It never seems to have occurred to him that these experts, except for Berenson, were subsidized by the vendor whose wares they were appraising."[9] The brilliant Roberto Longhi, Contini's expert, is lumped in with the rest of his colleagues, although he made many fewer mistakes than his rival, Berenson. Unlike the American, Longhi researched and published pioneering studies of the many tributaries of Italian painting in the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, not just the major figures of the Renaissance that Berenson admitted to the canon. Mario greatly admired Longhi and said that he was never taken in by a forgery. It should also be noted that although Longhi made a good living, he never became so rich from his activities that he could live like a prince, as Berenson did.

Mario came to know Walker well and wrote of him:

Although he was a disciple of Berenson, he had never learned anything about connoisseurship. Berenson had a great deal of influence over him and from Villa I Tatti manoeuvered him to recommend purchases from Duveen and, later, Wildenstein, from whom Berenson drew a salary. Although Berenson's interests may have been pecuniary, Walker's were not. He was an honest man and his ties to Berenson were those of respect and loyalty.

Walker was dubious about the implications of Finley's initial meeting with Kress in April 1939. He wrote:

> Interesting Kress in the Gallery was a remarkable achievement but his board of trustees did not share David Finley's feeling of euphoria. They had heard rumors that the Kress Collection did not meet the high standard insisted on by Andrew Mellon. They therefore asked me to … return to America, and advise them on what they considered to be a somewhat questionable offer,

68. The "storekeeper's" apartment, 1940. The downstairs entrance hall with the *Allendale Nativity* on the right.

69. The Solarium with Titian, Giorgione, and Bartolomeo Veneto.

> if and when it was made. Kress himself was as doubtful that he wanted the collection in Washington as were the trustees that they would accept it. . . . As soon as I disembarked I was taken to 1020 Fifth Avenue where I met Sam Kress for the first time. I remember his small blue eyes, as hard and piercing as any I have ever seen. His head, which seemed rather large for his stocky body, suggested one of those portraits of Roman emperors of the second century; and like the late rulers of Rome, his expression was one of innate suspicion. . . . The apartment, a two-story penthouse, was expensively decorated in what might be termed New York Renaissance . . . Italian paintings, lighted with reflectors, were hung from dado to ceiling in every room. Each panel or canvas was in a shadowbox lined with old velvet; red, green, and sometimes gray. These packaged primitives, heavily varnished and cradled, bore witness to a storekeeper's sense of order.[10] (See Plate III)

Just before his return to the United States, Walker had made what proved to be a serendipitous visit to Berenson to say his farewells. By chance, Berenson had just received photographs of the Kress Collection, which Samuel Kress had sent for his perusal. Walker spent his last few days at I Tatti cramming, under Berenson's tutelage, memorizing the attributions for his upcoming test in the Kress apartment. He admits that he was letter perfect by the time he left for New York, and it served him well. Walker continues the description of his visit to the Kress apartment:

> Mr. Kress had a small black book which listed the works of art in each room, and as he and I walked from picture to picture he would say, "Mr. Walker, who do you think painted that Madonna?" I would study the picture for a moment and answer with some hesitation, "I believe, Mr. Kress, Berenson would attribute it to so-and-so. However, I don't doubt that Van Marle would disagree and ascribe it to such and such. Probably Longhi and Perkins would go along with Van Marle."

> Mr. Kress would refer to his notes and say, "Very remarkable, Mr. Walker, that is exactly the case." … Mr. Kress at the end of the day conceded that the new chief curator of the National Gallery knew something about Italian art. … I never mentioned my lucky trip to I Tatti. The next day I was taken to Mr. Kress's office downtown. Again, I was shown hundreds of Italian Primitives, all in their shadow boxes, some in racks, some hung, some stacked against the walls. These 'items,' as their owner designated them, were carefully inventoried, as though they were spools of thread.[11]

A taint of snobbism and patrician arrogance runs through Walker's chapter about the Kress brothers, noted by the *New York Times* art critic, John Canaday, in his 1974 review of the book.[12] In contrast to his devotion to the Mellons, Walker belittles Samuel Kress and accepts his paintings holding his nose, anguishing that he is letting Andrew Mellon down by accepting works that do not meet the high standards of the initial donation. However, when the Kress gifts were made permanent in 1961, the National Gallery retained 121 paintings from the original group, including masterpieces by Bronzino, Correggio, Crespi, Giorgione, Guardi, Domenico Veneziano, Lotto, Luini, Piero di Cosimo, and other great painters, many of which had come from Contini Bonacossi.

John Walker liked to give the impression that the only good Kress paintings went to Washington and that the rest were discards, too inferior for the National Gallery.[13] This slur left a strong and entirely unjustified impression that remained pervasive until quite recently. Every Kress regional gallery has paintings that could hang in any museum, and even the study collections include some superb paintings that attest to the embarrassment of riches the collection possessed at the time of its dispersal.

After the death of Samuel Kress, the practice of buying paintings in "lots" ceased, and the foundation made a concerted effort to be more selective; works were purchased individually, sometimes at the request of John Walker, from dealers all over

the world. This was not a given, because in 1947—according to Guy Emerson, the art director of the foundation—Rush Kress was of the opinion that enough had been done for the National Gallery, and he was more interested in funding medical research. With Emerson's encouragement, he allowed himself to be persuaded by the National Gallery that his brother intended to do more to enrich the Kress Collection.[14] After that, Rush never wavered, and the foundation was able to make purchases that would have been impossible even a decade later. It was, as Mario well knew, a buyer's market.

Both John Walker and Mario deserve credit for this change in policy, even though he and the chief curator often disagreed about acquisitions, and not always in a congenial way. The tone seems to have been set early on, during Mario's first visit to the National Gallery, which must have been not long after his arrival in New York in 1949. He described what happened:

When I visited Washington for the first time with Mr. Kress, Guy Emerson, and Professor Suida, we went for a tour of the galleries with David Finley and John Walker. I first stopped in front of two paintings by Vermeer from the Mellon Collection and remarked that they were fakes. Walker was horrified and told me I was crazy. In fact, those two paintings stayed on view for eighteen more years, until they were finally acknowledged as forgeries, perhaps by the famous Dutch forger, Van Meegeren. We continued our tour, and I found another fake, in the Kress Collection, a Madonna and Child that was supposed to be by Alessio Baldovinetti. This time Johnny Walker became very angry and told me that it had been bought from Duveen for $300,000, which was a lot of money at that time, and was recommended by Bernard Berenson [who wrote to Samuel Kress congratulating him on his acquisition of the Baldovinetti as one of the most beautiful paintings in America and a masterpiece of Renaissance painting]. I asked Walker if he had ever made an x-radiograph of the painting, and he said no. I saw that it was originally painted on panel and that it had been transferred to canvas. I was sure there was another painting underneath. In fact, I was certain that the painting came from Baron Lazzaroni, who sold many pictures to Duveen. Lazzaroni usually bought paintings by a minor artist and then had his restorer in Paris, Verzetta, turn them into "masterpieces" by an important Renaissance

artist, although the Baron fancied himself a "restorer"[15] *and sometimes he would ruin perfectly good pictures just for the pleasure of altering them.*

I offered to x-ray the "Baldovinetti", and about a month later the painting was sent to me in New York. I was delighted, because I would be able to prove that I was right. In fact, when I made the radiograph, there was a half-ruined Madonna and Child underneath the 'Baldovinetti,' by the Pseudo Pier Francesco Fiorentino. The forger had copied a photograph, printed in reverse, of a famous work by Baldovinetti in the Louvre. When Walker saw the x-ray, he asked me to clean the painting and the ruined Pseudo Pier Francesco emerged. Today it is in storage in the National Gallery.

On that first walk through the gallery I saw another fake, but I didn't say anything because I thought I had given Johnny Walker enough bad news for one day.

70. Lazzaroni's Baldovinetti, National Gallery of Art, Washington DC, 79.5 × 60 cm.

It was a gold-ground painting of a Madonna and Child, in thirteenth-century style, probably the work of a forger from Orvieto called Riccardi, who was the nephew of the infamous faker of Etruscan jewelry, Teodoro Riccardi, whom I described earlier. Finally, I saw yet another fake: a little Annunciation, also given to Baldovinetti—not by Verzetta this time but probably by a Florentine forger working in the thirties.[16] *It was part of the Kress Collection and had come from Wildenstein, I believe through incompetence rather than bad faith.*

Despite their rocky start, Mario and Walker traveled together to Europe on several occasions and often collaborated, especially on the final purchases from Contini in the mid-fifties, when they tried to coax the dealer into selling some of the pieces from his personal collection. In the little correspondence I found in Mario's files, a very friendly letter from Walker praises his restorations and use of

71. The painting during cleaning, revealing the damaged Pier Francesco Fiorentino underneath.

frames—in particular the one he designed for the *Nativity* by Fra Angelico and Filippo Lippi, which was a challenge due to the near impossibility of finding an antique frame for a tondo, especially one of that size.[17] The two men continued to work together as late as 1968. Knowing how Mario felt about Walker—whenever his name came up, it was always preceded by "*quello stronzo di Johnny Walker*" ("that asshole, Johnny Walker")—I was not surprised to learn from Walker's letters to Berenson that the feeling was mutual. Walker hardly mentions Mario in his memoir, referring to him only once, offhandedly, as "the brilliant restorer, Mario Modestini," while he goes on at some length about Pichetto's qualities and how he failed to appreciate them at the time.

Mario believed that Walker wanted to limit the number of Kress paintings in the final donation to protect Andrew Mellon's legacy. Shown here are just a few examples of paintings that could today belong to the National Gallery; all are in wonderful condition.

72. Giovanni Antonio Boltraffio, *Youth Crowned with Flowers,* ca. 1490, oil on panel, North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh, North Carolina, 39.1 × 28.9 cm.

73. Orazio Gentileschi, *Young Woman as a Sibyl,* ca. 1620, oil on canvas, Houston Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Texas, 82.5 × 73 cm.

74. Pieter de Hooch, *Woman with Children in an Interior*, 1558–1560, oil on canvas, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, California, 67.6 × 53.6 cm.

75. Canaletto, *The Grand Canal from the Campo San Vio* (one of a pair), 1730–1735, oil on canvas, Memphis Brooks Museum of Art, Memphis, Tennessee, 112 × 161 cm.

CHAPTER 15

The Regional Gallery Program

One of the most remarkable things about the Kress Foundation's donations was the flexibility offered to its beneficiaries, who could pick and choose from the ever-expanding art collection. John Walker decided that Washington would not accept more paintings than there were in the original loan. In order to improve the Kress Collection in Washington and fill in gaps, paintings were constantly swapped back and forth between the National Gallery and the foundation.

After Samuel Kress's commitment to Washington replaced his initial idea of a Kress Museum, he decided to create smaller Kress Collections in other American cities that did not yet have a museum. As noted earlier, Kress had made gifts of individual paintings to cities as early as the 1930s and had sent train carriages full of art travelling throughout the country in this same period. Ultimately, the foundation owned about 1,300 paintings, which meant that roughly 900 pictures, as well as some sculptures, were

available for distribution to museums in the heartland, through what became known as the Regional Gallery Program. This led to the development of eighteen regional museum collections.[1] In addition, twenty-three study collections, generally of approximately ten paintings, were formed for some colleges and universities.

Cities with major Kress stores were invited to apply to the Regional Gallery Program. Many of them did not have a proper museum building, but other suitable spaces were acceptable. As they were approved, the directors of the various institutions were invited, one by one, to come to Huckleberry Hill to peruse the collection and make their choices. Each regional gallery could choose approximately forty works of art. Normally the visit would begin in the storerooms, where the paintings were hung on sliding screens, arranged according to period and school on numbered racks so that pieces were easy to locate. This first inspection was followed by lunch with the staff, during which time the paintings under consideration were discussed. In the afternoon, everyone returned to the storerooms and again considered the paintings, making new selections, eliminating some and adding others. Many directors didn't have any experience with old master paintings and relied on the foundation to advise them. This task usually fell to Mario and his assistant, Robert Manning, who would discuss the relative merits of the works the directors were interested in. The selection for El Paso, one of the finest collections and the second to last to be formed, was made entirely by Mario and Robert, which gives an indication of just how rich the Kress Collection was, even at that late date.

The advantage of Huckleberry Hill was that it greatly facilitated the complicated logistics involved in the Kress Foundation's goal of donating the entire collection. It provided safe, humidity-controlled storage for one thousand paintings. (Of course, that number decreased as each regional gallery opened.) It was a convenient and relaxed setting in which the directors of the future regional galleries could sort through their preferences. There was a great deal of swapping until the final deeds of gift were made, and

the comings and goings of innumerable paintings could be easily tracked in the central facility. Occasionally, the foundation would grant a director's request to purchase a particular painting that was on the market.

Among Mario's other responsibilities, he made all the arrangements for mounting the exhibitions at each Regional Gallery. He therefore traveled a great deal during the decade he worked for the Kress Foundation, crisscrossing the country, going to every city where a regional gallery would open, accompanied by a lighting technician, Abe Faber. He consulted on wall colors and other details, and hung the paintings so that everything would be ready for the inaugural event a few weeks later. He then returned for the opening, accompanying Rush Kress and other foundation staff. Rush was very fussy about how each Kress collection looked, and the only person he trusted with the installation was Mario, who chose the frames, hung the galleries, and worked with lighting designers, photographers, and the foundation staff.

Mario also made countless trips to the National Gallery in Washington, where the largest number of Kress paintings were located, and he played an important, often decisive, role in the purchases the foundation made. This sometimes brought him into conflict with John Walker and, behind the scenes, Bernard Berenson, as well as Count Contini. At the same time, he himself was restoring paintings and overseeing the work of his assistants.

The Kress Collection was dispersed in 1961 to more than ninety institutions in thirty-three states, as well as Puerto Rico. In addition to the 1,300 paintings, the foundation possessed 158 sculptures, most of which went to the National Gallery, as did the 1,300 small bronzes, medals, and plaquettes. There were also the 13 panels of the Barberini tapestries, a selection of drawings, an eighteenth-century period room, furniture and other decorative arts, and 200 antique frames. Of the paintings, approximately 1,000 were by Italian artists including masterpieces by Cimabue, Duccio, Giotto, Botticelli, Fra Angelico, Filippo Lippi, Verrocchio, Raphael, Andrea del Sarto, Pontormo, Correggio, Bellini, Carpaccio, Giorgione, Titian, Lotto,

Tintoretto, Veronese, Carracci, Bernini, Strozzi, Tiepolo, Guardi, Canaletto, and Bellotto, and numerous other fine works by less well-known masters.

The other European schools of painting were represented by 300 pictures, encompassing French works by Clouet, Poussin, Claude, Watteau, Chardin, Boucher, Fragonard, David, Ingres, and other painters, and the marble bust of Cagliostro by Houdon. There were important examples of German paintings by Dürer, Grünewald, Altdorfer, Holbein, Cranach, and many other artists, and some good Dutch paintings. The early Flemish group included examples by Petrus Christus, Bosch, Memling, and form the core of the National Gallery's collection today. The foundation also acquired a group of Spanish paintings with important works by El Greco, Murillo, Zurbarán, and Goya.

The Philadelphia Gift and Alfred Frankfurter

The first Kress Regional Collection was inaugurated in July 1950 at the Philadelphia Museum of Art in conjunction with the Diamond Jubilee celebration of the museum's founding. The museum's summer *Bulletin* was devoted to the group of twenty-six paintings, which were valued "in excess of $1,000,000,"[2] and a summary catalogue by William Suida is prefaced by a letter from the foundation stating that these were not necessarily final selections, as they could eventually be supplemented and substituted with other pieces. There were some outstanding masterpieces in the group, six of which were ultimately claimed by the National Gallery. With only a few exceptions, the paintings were worthy of an important museum.[3]

Shortly after the opening trouble began to stir. In a column in the *New York Times*, "Donors, Museums and the Public," the critic, Aline Louchheim, reviewed the Kress loan. She praised a couple of paintings for their beauty and importance, notably canvases by Giovanni Battista Tiepolo and El Greco, but in general, criticized

the museum for accepting such inferior works as paintings by Sebastiano Ricci and Magnasco, which she considered "more instructive than distinguished," and compared Philadelphia's standards unfavorably with those she claimed were applied by the Metropolitan Museum and the Museum of Modern Art. Suida was chided for his "overly enthusiastic" attributions. Indeed, the research curator should perhaps have been more cautious in his attribution of certain works. *The Education of Cupid*, a recently acquired large canvas with a distinguished provenance, was given unequivocally to Titian.[4] While it is a fine picture and the great Venetian may have had a hand in its execution, it is considered to be mainly by Titian's collaborator, Lambert Sustris.

Suida's most contentious attribution was a half-length figure of Saint Sebastian. He believed, as had many scholars in the past, that it was by the young Raphael. The work had an impressive provenance, and an inscription on the back of the panel in a seventeenth-century hand was recorded in 1847, when it was sold from Edward Solly's (1776–1844) second collection,[5] stating that it was by Raphael: "This St. Sebastian was painted by Raphael Sanzio of Urbino for the Counts degli Oddi in Perugia, I.A.D.S.P."[6] The Oddi family were early patrons of Raphael and had commissioned the *Coronation of the Virgin*, now in the Vatican, from the young painter. From Solly, the painting went to the Cook Collection, where Tancred Borenius brusquely demoted it to Giannicola Manni, an obscure follower of Perugino, although Herbert Cook demurred, noting that claims for the youthful Raphael "might someday be admitted."[7] After the painting was purchased by Contini Bonacossi, Roberto Longhi wrote a thoughtful opinion in which he outlined the reasons he thought that it was indeed by Raphael in one of his earliest phases.[8]

Mario, who restored Saint Sebastian in 1950, agreed that although there was a possibility the painting was by Raphael, it was not the right moment for the foundation to expose itself by insisting on an attribution to one of the greatest artists of the Renaissance given the published opinion by Borenius, and that it would have been wiser to call it "attributed to Raphael."

On November 28, *Art News,* the influential magazine published by Alfred Frankfurter, ran an editorial about the Philadelphia exhibit. Frankfurter, after praising the benefactions of the Kress Foundation in general, wrote of the Philadelphia loan: "The pictures presently in the Philadelphia gift shed little glory upon the museum. … The best of this gift lies in about a dozen good examples of typical and average masters of the Italian Baroque and Rococo. … But a major disappointment is the actual use on labels … of such great names as Raphael and El Greco and Carpaccio."

76. Attributed to the Master of the Greenville Tondo, *Saint Sebastian,* 1500–1510, oil on panel transferred to canvas on pressed-wood panel, Princeton University Art Museum, Princeton, New Jersey, 76.7 × 53.4 cm.

Of the incident and its aftermath, Mario wrote:

Poor William Suida was very upset, because he had made the attribution [to Raphael], and in some way, I too felt responsible for that initial defeat. I had a talk with Guy Emerson about what we might do to improve our relationship with the critics—especially Alfred Frankfurter and his Art News, a widely-read weekly that was taken seriously. It turned out that the Kress Foundation had never had any direct dealings with Frankfurter. In any case, Guy gave me carte blanche to contact Frankfurter and do whatever was necessary, on the assumption that the editor was ignorant of our collection and was under pressure from a clique of dealers, especially Wildenstein. I called him up and invited him to lunch. He accepted graciously and we met at a restaurant on Madison Avenue that he suggested.

Soon the conversation turned to the Kress Collection and before he had a chance to express any negative opinion, I proposed that he should devote an article in Art News to us for the year-end number, which was always a double issue. He was a little cool towards this idea and remained evasive. I got up my courage and asked him if $25,000, a great deal of money at that time, would be enough to pay for the expenses of such an article. His eyes lit up, a smile brightened his normally severe expression, and he replied that it seemed like a fair offer. We then began immediately to discuss which paintings would be illustrated in the article. Our lunch continued until three o'clock, and then, with a handshake to seal the deal, we went our separate ways, I to the Kress Foundation where Guy Emerson was waiting for news of my meeting. I told him the details of our discussion, and he found my offer of $25,000 a bit high. I explained that this article would, in effect, cause Frankfurter to take back all the damaging things he had said in the past and would not be appreciated by the New York dealers who had become our enemies. In the end, the article appeared with many color illustrations and spoke in glowing terms about the importance of the Kress Collection. However, to this day, the rumor persists that the Kress Collection is full of junk and that the National Gallery got the only good things.

While Guy Emerson and the director of the Philadelphia museum, Fiske Kimball, made efforts to placate an offended Rush Kress, the Philadelphia trustees were concerned and over the next two years continued to put pressure on the Kress Foundation to make good on their promise to improve the collection in

Philadelphia. No doubt they felt neglected as they watched one masterpiece after another go to the National Gallery while their own requests were ignored. In fact, in January 1953, in a letter to R. Sturgis Ingersoll, the president of the museum, Rush Kress stated that the foundation would not be able to do anything more for Philadelphia until after the fifteenth anniversary exhibition in Washington opened in March 1956.

The frustrated museum trustees decided to act on their own and informed the foundation that they intended to return fourteen paintings, which "are not of the quality elsewhere established by the standards of our collections." On May 14, in an uncharacteristic, harshly worded letter, the affable Guy Emerson tersely instructed Ingersoll to return the entire collection to the Huckleberry Hill storage facility before "our Curator, Mr. Mario Modestini" departed for Italy at the end of June. Rush Kress, who, as noted earlier, cared deeply about the Kress installations at each museum, made his annoyance clear as Emerson added: "The Foundation has never been wholly satisfied with the rooms assigned by your Museum to our Collection; the galleries assigned to the Kress paintings and sculpture in other museums with which we are dealing are in every case superior in size, lighting, etc. … It is our feeling that the providing of satisfactory rooms should be a condition of the final arrangements between the Foundation and the Philadelphia Museum of Art."

In earlier correspondence with Ingersoll, Rush Kress explained that the foundation was in the process of opening three new regional galleries. "Since the hurried opening of the Philadelphia exhibition in 1950, we have had six openings during 1951 and 1952 and the shipments go out sometime during February for New Orleans and Houston, where we will have openings during the next several months, with the tenth opening at Tulsa, Oklahoma in the Fall of this year. Several cities are constructing buildings during the coming year and in 1954 for which we are now getting the paintings ready."[9] Indeed, the staff of the foundation, and Mario in his role as conservator and curator, were busily engaged in acquiring

paintings not only for Washington but for the regional galleries during most of the decade of the 1950s.

Masterworks for the Regional Galleries

The North Carolina Museum of Art was the last regional gallery to open (in 1960). In 1947, through the efforts of a legislator and lawyer named Robert Lee Humber, the primary force behind the founding of the museum, the state authorized a $1 million matching grant to buy a collection of works of art. This was unheard of at the time. W. R. Valentiner (1880–1958), a former assistant to the legendary director of the Berlin Museum, Wilhelm von Bode, and subsequently curator or director of several important American museums including the Metropolitan, the Detroit Museum of Arts, and the fledgling Getty, had just retired. He agreed to become the first director of the North Carolina Museum and to acquire paintings for the new institution. He knew the art market well and had superb taste. With the initial grant, he purchased over 120 masterpieces of the still unfashionable baroque period, as well as some eighteenth-century paintings that could also be had for reasonable sums. Among the European paintings he acquired are two great views of Dresden by Bellotto, unrivaled in the United States. For the matching grant, North Carolina approached the Kress Foundation. North Carolina's representative was Carl Hamilton, who fascinated both Federico Zeri[10] and Mario.

One of the most interesting characters to take part in the regional gallery collections was the legendary Carl W. Hamilton (1886–1967). Around 1956 or '57, he came to Pennsylvania with the director of the Raleigh Museum in North Carolina, whom he was advising.[11] *His credentials were impressive, as he had once been a great collector himself.*[12] *Mr. Kress invited Hamilton to dinner at 1020 Fifth Avenue where many extraordinary masterpieces—all part of the collection—were hung. Before dinner, Rush Kress always asked someone to say grace. When it was my turn, I would make a fake benediction in a combination of Italian and Latin that*

77. Giotto, *The Peruzzi Altarpiece*, 1310–1315, tempera on panel, North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh, North Carolina, 105.7 × 250.2 cm.

amused the guests. This time, Mr. Hamilton, whom Mr. Kress had never met, offered to give thanks for the meal and quoted a long passage from the Bible. Mr. Kress was a passionate devotee of the scriptures, and he immediately asked his guest if he knew the Bible well. Hamilton answered that he knew it by heart. Mr. Kress could hardly believe this and asked one of his daughters to get the Book,[13] *from which he began to ask questions. As soon as he began to read a line, Carl Hamilton would finish it. Mr. Kress was very impressed, and they became great friends.*

In fact, Mr. Kress asked me if I would help with the selection of paintings for the museum in Raleigh. I knew that they had already assembled a collection of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century paintings and that therefore they needed medieval and Renaissance Italian paintings, as well as a few large baroque canvases to complement what had already been acquired. There were important altarpieces from the Cook Collection by Massimo Stanzione and Domenichino, which had been offered to the National Gallery. Johnny Walker, following Berenson, was not interested in Italian painting after 1600 and turned these, as well as many other masterpieces of baroque painting, away. In addition to these important large canvases, there was a polyptych given to Giotto and assistants by Richard Offner that we had acquired, partly from Wildenstein and partly from another dealer. The five panels had been separated from each other in the past and we were able to reunite them. The altarpiece had been painted for the Peruzzi Chapel in the Franciscan church of Santa Croce in Florence, whose walls are still covered with frescos by Giotto and his followers. After we managed to buy all five panels, a tabernacle frame was made, and I offered it to

Johnny Walker for the National Gallery. He refused it, saying, in these exact words, "Oh, no, Mario. Perhaps the central panel but not the four saints." I was horrified; dumbstruck by his words, I could only reply feebly that I would never separate the panels of the polyptych, which we had labored so hard to reassemble.

A few days later, Carl Hamilton came to talk about the schedule for consigning the paintings to Raleigh, the catalogue, and so on. I said to him: "Carl, I had a thought, that in order to complete the Kress Collection in your museum you should have one painting of world-class importance." "Which one?" he asked me. "The Giotto polyptych from the Peruzzi chapel." He looked at me in amazement and said, "You must be kidding." "No," I said, "it's true. You can have it." He nearly fainted.

While Mario was fond of Carl Hamilton, the museum director he admired most was Walter Heil from San Francisco. Heil also benefited from Walker's shortsightedness.

78. Giovanni Battista Tiepolo, *The Realm of Flora*, ca. 1743, oil on canvas, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, California, 71.8 × 88.9 cm.

One morning a woman came to the foundation with a photograph of an unpublished painting by Giovanni Battista Tiepolo. Suida and I looked at it and, convinced that it was right, asked the price. The owner told us she was asking $15,000. Mr. Kress agreed to buy it. It was in excellent condition and only required removal of yellow varnish. We immediately thought it was something for the National Gallery, and after it had been cleaned, we sent it to Washington. Mr. Walker, together with Mrs. Shapley and Perry Cott, the curators, decided that it was not by Giovanni Battista but by his son, Giandomenico, and sent it back to New York. Suida and I were furious and decided to show it to Walter Heil, the director of the De Young Memorial Museum in San Francisco for whom we were assembling a beautiful group of paintings. When we showed him the picture, he couldn't believe his eyes, especially when we told him that the National Gallery had refused it. His first comment was, "Are they blind!"

The painting is one of the artist's masterpieces, and today it is published in every monograph about Giovanni Battista; it is one of the centerpieces of the Kress Collection in San Francisco.

Many of the directors knew little about old master paintings. Walter Heil was an exception. He made his selection and to complete the collection asked Mr. Kress if he would buy a painting of Saint Francis by El Greco.

Walter Heil was an excellent connoisseur, and he often came to New York to do research and visit the galleries. One morning while walking along Third Avenue, where there is a cluster of small antique shops, he spotted a Renaissance marble bust of Cosimo de' Medici. He went in to have a closer look and asked the price. They were asking $3,000. He managed to keep a perfectly straight face, wrote out a check, and bought the sculpture. He had it sent to a warehouse to be packed and shipped to San Francisco and invited me to come and see it. It was an exact replica of the bronze bust of Cosimo I by Benvenuto Cellini, which is in Palazzo Vecchio. I looked at it carefully and it made a very good impression. The carving was exceptional and reminded me of the marble crucifix in the Escorial by Cellini, which I happened to have seen a few years earlier. I had been particularly struck by this crucifix because of the quality of the execution and the tragic expression of the figure of Christ.

I told Walter of the similarity and asked him if he had ever seen the Cellini in the Escorial. He hadn't and, in fact, it is a little-known work, partly because the

museum is not a popular destination like the Prado, since it is a bit outside Madrid. My feeling was that the bust was by Cellini, possibly with some collaboration, after the bronze of Cosimo I. The news that a Cellini had been bought in New York for $3,000 spread like wildfire and, naturally, was greeted with some skepticism, especially by the dealers. In fact, poor Walter had a hard time convincing the specialists that his discovery was right. I believe that later it was exhibited at the Bargello in Florence, where it was favorably received, as a studio work by some, and as autograph by others. Eventually Walter went to Spain and saw Cellini's crucifix in the Escorial. He called me as soon as he returned, excited by the similarities in execution of the figure of Christ and the bust which he had bought on Third Avenue for his museum.

Framing the Kress Collection

Mario had loved period frames from the time he was a boy helping in his father's *bottega*. He inherited his father's collection of frames and continued to add to it over the years, accumulating around three hundred fine examples from different periods, mainly Italian. He was very knowledgeable about different styles, which he had learned from his father and from an odd job he had drawing profiles of frames for a gilder near Piazza Navona.

When he moved to New York, he sold his frames to Count Contini, who also had a passion for them and had his own collection. When Mario began working for the Kress Foundation, he found that there was a dearth of good frames. Pichetto had always used reproductions, and it wasn't as easy to find antique frames in New York as it was in Italy. At the time of the move to Huckleberry Hill, the foundation purchased Contini's frames, and Mario hired the Florentine specialist, Emilio Quarantelli, to fit them to paintings according to their style and period. In many of the regional gallery and study collections every painting has a wonderful frame. It is difficult to match paintings and frames, however, so not all of them were used. Nearly two hundred were left over, most of which were given to the National Gallery, and some to the Metropolitan Museum. In the meantime, interest

in good frames grew, and in 1990, the Met held an exhibition of Italian Renaissance frames in the Lehman galleries, which included the richly carved examples Robert Lehman had collected.

The Scientist and the Restorer

The Kress Foundation had long been committed to the proper conservation of the works in its collection. The foundation's support, and his own seriousness of purpose about the materials he used, allowed Mario to collaborate with a conservation scientist, Robert Feller, to develop new stable materials for retouching and varnishing. Traditional varnishes—dammar and mastic—are made from natural resins, the sticky substances exuded by plants and trees; after these substances are collected, they harden and are then dissolved, usually in turpentine, which is itself a distillate of the gummy substance exuded by pine trees. No matter how carefully these resins are prepared, they oxidize over time and become yellow and slightly opaque.

Dr. Feller, whose research was funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, was working with synthetic resins that he thought might be substituted for the more traditional natural materials. Mario was particularly interested in finding a stable medium for retouching, and Feller supplied him with a number of different polymers to try. A couple of his assistants at Huckleberry Hill prepared panels with samples of paint made from various combinations of pigments and resins, both new and old. They took them to the National Gallery, where they were put under the glass roof, above the lay lights, to age. After some months, they were taken down and the results studied. It seemed to Mario that the most promising binders were from a low molecular weight polyvinyl acetate resin, manufactured by Union Carbide as PVA AYAB. Like all plastics, the appearance and handling properties were initially not very sympathetic, but by manipulating it with different solvents and at different viscosities, they found a

satisfactory solution. Mario used a dilute solution of the PVA in ethyl alcohol and mixed it with high-quality dry pigments on the palette. The use of polyvinyl acetate as a medium for retouching was subsequently widely adopted, with individual variations, and is still in use, since it has proven to be one of the most stable of the twentieth-century resins.

Mario also wanted a synthetic varnish that would not turn yellow in twenty years. The Dutch company Talens had developed a new product, intended as a conservation varnish, for their Rembrandt series, choosing a synthetic polycyclohexanone resin called AW2 with properties similar to dammar. Feller was experimenting with other resins and came up with one he called Mellon varnish 27H, from a resin in the class of methacrylate polymers.[14] AW2 had better handling properties, so Mario used it as an initial brush varnish and followed with a spray coat of 27H. He was quite happy with this technique. One day—one that is now famous in the annals and lore of the history of paintings conservation—Feller sent out a general alert to immediately stop using 27H. The results of artificial aging tests, published in 1957 by a scientist at the Scientific Department of London's National Gallery, had shown that the resin cross-linked under certain circumstances, which could mean that it would eventually become insoluble. Everyone, including the National Gallery, was alarmed by this news.

Mario was summoned to a meeting in Washington in December, attended by Feller, John Walker, Perry Cott, Guy Emerson, and Frank Sullivan. The conversation was taped. As he explained about the cross-linking of 27H, poor Feller was in a panic, urging everyone to remove it from all the paintings they had used it on without delay. That would have entailed removing the restoration as well; in some cases, the retouching was fairly extensive and represented hundreds of hours of work. Mario thought the whole thing was a little ridiculous and, as usual, remained calm. He assured the group, especially Feller, that he had always put a coat of another material, either a dammar, Talens Rembrandt, polyvinyl

acetate resin, or beeswax under the 27H, which he only used as a final varnish. He guaranteed this, so that the terrified scientist would not have to accept responsibility for anything that might happen to the Kress Collection in the future. Mario was made to sign a paper confirming that he had been advised of the risks.

So much for artificial aging: not only has 27H remained soluble, but Mario kept a bottle that sat on his windowsill for fifty years where it remained water white. However, it is just as well that he stopped using it, because 27H, and most other high molecular weight synthetic resins, although they do not yellow, have turned gray over time, muffling the colors, and they tend to separate from the surface—sometimes the coatings can even be peeled off like sunburnt skin. They are very unattractive, and removing them is deeply unpleasant because, unless they can be peeled off, toxic aromatic solvents are needed, and the dissolved resin tends to smear, rather than coming off quickly as the natural resins do.

Artificial aging has its purposes, but there is no more reliable test than the passage of time. Mario first used the new retouching medium in 1953 on the *Madonna and Child* by Perugino (see Plates VII, VIII, IX), now in the National Gallery, and varnished the painting with Talens Rembrandt varnish. Whenever I went to the gallery with Mario, he would go to the painting to check the restoration. A few small retouches have faded due to the use of a fugitive variety of red lake; otherwise, they have not altered in sixty years, and the thin varnish is not particularly yellow. Hanging nearby was a painting by Signorelli, *Madonna and Child with Saints,* that he had restored only a few years before the Perugino, using egg tempera, watercolor, drained oils, and dammar varnish. Those retouches were distinctly discolored, as were those of a Mantegna portrait, restored with the same technique. Another painting in Washington, restored in the fifties using PVA AYAB, is the severely damaged *Allegory* by Piero di Cosimo. Recently I decided to have a close look at it. From a few feet away, it reads perfectly. When you really stick your nose on it, you can see that among the hundreds of little retouches, some are ever so slightly discolored and I wonder if Mario used 27H

varnish which might have absorbed dirt. Other paintings, notably the extensively damaged El Greco in the Metropolitan Museum, *The Vision of Saint John,* restored by Mario in 1956 with AYAB, look perfect, as many conservators and curators over the years have acknowledged with astonishment. It is quite a testament not only to Mario's skill but to his pursuit of stable materials.

CHAPTER 16

The Art of Acquisition

The Early Fifties

Mario's passion for paintings, especially of the Italian schools, was the centerpiece of his life from childhood onward. He had absorbed everything that was available to him in Rome and Florence—museum collections, private holdings, paintings on the Italian and London markets, whatever he could manage to see. He had an excellent visual memory, a prerequisite for a connoisseur, and due to his work as a restorer, familiarity with the materials and techniques of paintings from every period. Until he went to New York, scope for his talents was limited. While he had been able to buy paintings on the London art market just after the war, he did not have the money to acquire important works, only what the Palma Gallery could sell to their Italian clients, paintings that he had purchased for five or ten pounds. Mario was never a salesman. That was Bardi's purview.

Mario preferred to stay in the background and was a master at keeping his own counsel.

It is the dream of every great connoisseur to build a collection, and Mario was no exception. One might think that with enough money it is easy to do, but collecting requires more than that. Some knowledge of the school or period is essential, as is taste, in the sense that the collector must possess an aesthetic response to quality and be able to discriminate among similar pieces to choose only the best examples. It is essential to obtain the best expert advice, but ultimately a great collector must follow his own instincts, which requires courage and confidence.

Mario's opportunity to acquire great paintings came when he went to work for the Kress Foundation. During that period, from 1950 until 1961, extraordinary works of art were available. It has always been the case that wealthy and determined collectors are offered many of the important pieces that come on the market, and the Kress Foundation was then considered a major player. The net earnings of the Kress Company in 1952 were $9,148,011, and the foundation owned 43 percent of the shares. The equivalent amount today would still be a vast amount of money, but now it would not be enough to accomplish what was possible then. The price of old master paintings was much lower in the 1950s than it is today, as important works cost hundreds of thousands, not millions, of dollars. In those days, the Kress Foundation could buy whatever it wanted, and the dealers beat a path to their door.

Rush Kress was wholly committed to ensuring that his brother's wishes were carried out, and he pursued new acquisitions with intensity, all the while keeping an eye on the bottom line. The most expensive purchase was the tondo of the *Nativity* by Fra Angelico and Filippo Lippi from the Cook Collection, which had been sent to the United States for safekeeping during the war, after which it was put up for sale. Just as it was about to be sent back to England in 1947, the foundation purchased it from the dealer Francis Drey for $400,000. In 1955, *A Lady in Her Bath* by François Clouet was acquired from Rosenberg & Stiebel for $365,000. Other highly

important paintings purchased in the $150,000–260,000 range included Jacques-Louis David's full-length portrait of Napoleon; Dürer's double-sided *Madonna and Child* and *Portrait of a Man*; Titian's portraits of Doge Andrea Gritti and Vincenzo Cappello; and the Grünewald *Crucifixion*. It was a golden age.

Every five years, the foundation held an exhibition of its recent acquisitions at the National Gallery. The first was in 1946. In preparation for the 1951 exhibition, Rush Kress, William Suida, Guy Emerson, and Mario scoured the premises of every dealer in New York for suitable paintings to add to the list, which already included masterpieces by Botticelli, Mantegna, Sebastiano del Piombo, Cosmè Tura, and Titian.

Count Vittorio Cini

Two of the paintings that were featured in the 1951 exhibition had a tarnished provenance, although the foundation was not aware of this when they were purchased. In 1949, Wildenstein offered them *The Feast of Herod* by Benozzo Gozzoli, one of the most charming works by this painter, and *Giuliano de' Medici* by Sandro Botticelli, which, like the Clouet, cost $365,000, among the highest prices the foundation ever paid for a painting.

Both of these had once belonged to Count Vittorio Cini (1885–1977), a Venetian industrialist with complex interests in various sectors of the economy, and an art collector. He had received many honors and favors from Mussolini during the early years of Fascism, but had broken with the dictator after he made a pact with Hitler and entered the war. When Germany invaded Italy in 1943, the SS arrested many anti-Fascists, among them Vittorio Cini, who was sent to the Dachau concentration camp. His son, Giorgio (1918–1949), tried every diplomatic channel to liberate his father, but without success. Finally, he learned that it would be possible to buy his father's release by bribing the German commander with gold. To obtain the precious metal, he

clandestinely sold two paintings from his father's collection, *The Feast of Herod* and the portrait of Giuliano de' Medici discussed earlier. He managed to secure his father's transfer to a prison hospital in Friedrichroda and then, in a dramatic rescue by air, brought him to the safety of Switzerland.[1]

When Mario arrived at the Kress Foundation in 1949, these two paintings had already been purchased for the National Gallery from Wildenstein's, and Mario cleaned and restored them, finding that they were both in excellent state under layers of old, yellow varnish.

When the Italian government learned that an American museum had acquired two paintings formerly owned by Count Cini, one of the most important Italian art collectors, he was charged with illegal exportation, a criminal offense. Although the export of works of art without a license is illegal in Italy, the regular import of art works into the United States is not forbidden by any law, so neither the foundation nor the National Gallery had any obligation to comply with the Italian government's demands. Their only recourse was to pursue the former owner. Cini asked Wildenstein if he could buy back the paintings but they had already been sold. Federico Zeri, advisor to both Count Cini and Wildenstein at this time, contacted Mario and asked if he would meet with Cini, who was desperate, to discuss if there were any way he might have the paintings back from the Kress Foundation. Mario wrote:

I was in Rome on my summer holidays and went to see Count Cini at the Grand Hotel where he lived together with his wife, Lyda Borelli, a beautiful woman who had been one of the great actresses of the Italian cinema. He offered to pay the Kress Foundation the price paid to Wildenstein, plus interest, and all the expenses they had incurred in acquiring the paintings. I explained to him that the paintings had already been given to the National Gallery, the transaction completed, and the cost of the paintings accounted for in the tax filings; therefore, it was quite impossible to return them.[2] *Count Cini had been pleading with me and was extremely upset. I felt very sorry for him, but I had to represent the position of the Kress Foundation and the*

interests of the National Gallery. Sadly, I bid him farewell and he graciously thanked me for what little I had been able to do for him.

These events followed closely on the heels of a tragedy in Count Cini's life. His son Giorgio's private plane had crashed as it neared the landing strip in Cannes and he had been killed. In his memory, Count Cini purchased the Isola di San Giorgio Maggiore in Venice, where he created a foundation with a rich endowment that is still active today.[3]

The scandal over the Cini pictures continued until at least 1956, when Nicky Mariano, Bernard Berenson's companion, wrote to Virginia Kress, pleading Cini's case, reporting that the attacks in the press had worsened. She asked if Rush would be willing to give the two paintings back in exchange for other works of art, or, if not, to write to Cini "telling him that this is impossible" so that he would have something to prove that he had made every effort to repatriate the two pictures.[4]

79. Benozzo Gozzoli, *The Feast of Herod and The Beheading of Saint John the Baptist*, 1461–1462, tempera on panel, National Gallery of Art, Washington DC, 23.8 × 34.5 cm.

French & Company

Mitchell Samuels of French & Company was one of Rush Kress's favorite dealers. He was a cordial and charming man with a wonderful sense of humor, always ready with a joke or a story. Rush loved to listen to his tales of the great chases of an earlier generation of collectors, such as Frick and Widener.[5] The gallery was located on East 57th Street, in a five-story building crammed with every kind of art object: majolica, tapestries, Renaissance bronzes, sixteenth-century Venetian glass, antique cut velvet brocade, paintings, antiquities, and European furniture dating through the eighteenth century. Mario said it was like Aladdin's Cave. Everyone loved to go there, except for John Walker, who found Samuels' stories tedious.[6]

Mario's first visit to French & Company was in late 1949. That day, ten paintings were purchased, ranging from $4,000 to $155,000. They included Tiepolo's *Queen Zenobia Addressing Her Soldiers* ($40,000) and El Greco's *Holy Family* ($30,000). The highest price was $155,000 for a large panel by the Master of the Saint Lucy Legend. The story of that acquisition, as recounted by John Walker, reflects the give and take that went on between the foundation and the National Gallery:[7]

> The major painting this dealer still possessed, and which he had been unable to sell to these giants of collecting, was a large and very darkened panel of uncertain authorship for which he wanted half a million dollars. I thought the price ridiculous and the panel, an "Assumption of the Virgin," not particularly desirable; but Rush Kress loved bargaining with his friend, always beginning his negotiations with the phrase "You'll have to sharpen your pencil." How sharp the pencil became in the case of this particular painting I do not know, but it was acquired against my advice and contrary to my better judgment. When it was cleaned, however, I recognized that I was entirely wrong. It proved to be in miraculous condition. Although its

> authorship remains uncertain, it is generally considered to be by the Master of the Saint Lucy Legend, whoever he is, but I ruefully admit it is one of the most beautiful Flemish pictures in the entire National Gallery.

The foundation asked musicologist Emanuel Winternitz from the Metropolitan Museum to study the instruments the angels are playing. He found that each is an accurate rendering of a known fifteenth-century example, and the painting actually cleared up confusion about some of them.

80. The Master of the Saint Lucy Legend, *The Assumption of the Virgin*, 1485–1500, oil on panel, National Gallery of Art, Washington DC, 199.2 × 161.8 cm.

Carpe diem: Grünewald and Jacques-Louis David's *Napoleon in His Study*

After the 1951 exhibition, a moratorium was declared on new purchases until suddenly, in 1952, John Walker learned that a painting by the rarest of masters, the mysterious German mystical painter Matthias Grünewald, a privately-owned *Crucifixion*, had been released for sale in Vienna. Guy Emerson broached the matter to a skeptical Rush Kress: "An emergency matter has come up which

81. Matthias Grünewald, *The Crucifixion*, 1511–1520, oil on panel, National Gallery of Art, Washington DC, 61.3 × 46 cm.

I hesitate to lay before you … however our policy of not buying paintings at the moment always had the qualification that we must consider exceptional items when they came on the market."[8] The price was $260,000, and if they did not act quickly there were other buyers, including dealers, who would snap it up. Rush Kress was not particularly impressed by the photograph—Grünewald was not his cup of tea—but, luckily, he went along with his advisors.

In 1954, the Kress Foundation acquired a life-size, full-length portrait of Napoleon, Emperor of France, by Jacques-Louis David. He is shown in his study in the Tuileries, standing in front of his desk, the legs of which are adorned with gilded cat-like heads.

82. Jacques-Louis David, *Napoleon in His Study*, 1812, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington DC, 203.9 × 125.1 cm.

The imposing throne chair was designed by David. The clock reads 4:13, which is probably in the early morning, since the candles have burned down. The overall effect of the painting is very colorful, with red velvet, green plush carpet, gilding, and the magnificently painted red, white, and blue uniform adorned with large medals and epaulets. It is the first version of this composition, of which the artist made at least four replicas, and was painted for a Scottish Catholic nationalist and admirer of Napoleon, the immensely wealthy Alexander Douglas, 10th Duke of Hamilton. The scholarly consensus is that the painting is entirely by David with the possible exception of some of the background. Often the artist would assign parts of his larger works to one of his able assistants, who included Ingres and Baron Gros.

After the painting had passed through various English collections, Wildenstein's purchased it in 1951. To celebrate the arrival of the painting at the National Gallery, the dealers hosted a formal dinner. Georges Wildenstein had managed to acquire a Napoleon brandy for the occasion, bottled in 1812, the same year the portrait was painted. After dinner, the guests eagerly awaited this nectar. A taste was poured into tiny glasses so that everyone could have a sip. Mario recalled that it was a strange, grayish, turbid liquid that, when everyone raised their glasses, tasted like dishwater. Such a disappointing end to the story of this great acquisition!

Serendipity and Chance: *Marchesa Doria Spinola, Doge Andrea Gritti* and Nino Pisano

Mario remembered each thrilling discovery made in the 1950s as if it had happened just yesterday, and his memoir is rich with such stories. Sometimes ingenuous errors could lead to happy outcomes when skill and intuition combined in evaluating a painting.

Not long after I arrived in New York, Mr. Kress asked me to come to the apartment at 1020 Fifth Avenue and have a look at the paintings that were displayed there. As

we looked around, Mr. Kress stopped in front of a portrait of a woman and asked me what I thought of his Leonardo. I looked at the painting and said, "I'm sorry, Mr. Kress, but this painting is not by Leonardo, it is by Giampietrino." Giampietrino was a Milanese follower of Leonardo. I don't know if he was ever his pupil. I asked Mr. Kress where they had acquired the painting and he told me Duveen's. He was naturally very upset and immediately called the Kress Foundation's lawyer, Mr. Hawkins. Mr. Kress, Mr. Hawkins, and I went to Duveen's, which at that time was still in its original premises on Fifth Avenue and 56th Street, a magnificent Beaux-Arts building by Carrère and Hastings, the architects of the Frick mansion, which Duveen had commissioned for the New York gallery. It has since been torn down and the site is now occupied by the Steuben Glass building.

83. Peter Paul Rubens, *The Marchesa Doria Spinola*, 1606, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington DC, 152.5 × 99 cm.

We explained to Mr. Edward Fowles that the Kress Foundation believed he had sold them a painting that was not by Leonardo but by Giampietrino and we would like him to take it back. Mr. Fowles was consternated and pointed out that the picture had been published as a Leonardo by William Suida, the curator of the foundation. We insisted and much discussion among the lawyers ensued. Finally, not wishing to lose an important client, Mr. Fowles agreed that we could choose something else from their stock. Mr. Kress asked me to have a look around, and I immediately spotted a beautiful portrait by Peter Paul Rubens of the Marchesa Doria Spinola, as well as a small Madonna and Child, called studio of Verrocchio, which I believed was by the young Leonardo. After more negotiating, it was agreed that we could have the two paintings for a small additional payment and the deal was settled. The Rubens is

84. *Madonna and Child with a Pomegranate*, by the young Leonardo, before 1475, according to Mario. Oil on panel, National Gallery of Art, Washington DC, 16.5 × 13.4 cm.

today in the National Gallery as is the little Madonna and Child, which is attributed to Leonardo. I found an antique fifteenth-century tabernacle for the Madonna and Child to replace the charming, though modern, frame designed by Ferruccio Vannoni, with which Duveen had framed the painting.

Mario would forcefully disagree with the present attribution of the little *Madonna and Child* to Lorenzo di Credi, as well as the date assigned, 1475–80. His opinion was that Leonardo, as a young apprentice in Verrocchio's studio, made this little panel before he painted the angel and the distant landscape in the *Baptism of Christ* in the Uffizi, which is dated 1472–75.

The *Doge Andrea Gritti* enjoyed a much happier fate.

One morning, I was working in the studio at 250 West 57th Street when I received a phone call from Mr. [Jack] Henschel of Knoedler Galleries. He said they had just received a Titian, the portrait of the Doge Andrea Gritti, which they had acquired in Vienna, and would I like to see it. My first thought was that it must be a copy of the portrait from the Czernin Collection, but I thought I might as well have a look at it anyway. I met Henschel at Manhattan Storage. The canvas was off its stretcher and had been rolled, face out, fortunately. We unrolled it on the floor. It was in excellent condition under an old discolored varnish. It had never been relined and there was a drawing, a study of the Doge, on the back of the canvas. It was clear that it was the original, and I said to Henschel, "This picture must have been stolen!" "No," he replied, "it has been granted a regular export license by the director of the Vienna Gallery, Dr. Buschbeck, who has studied it and concluded that it is by Palma Giovane, an assistant of Titian."

I could hardly believe my eyes and ears. I immediately called Mr. Kress, who was at the foundation that morning, and told him he must come right away and to bring Suida with him. When they arrived, Suida, who was himself Viennese, was as incredulous as I had been and at first also thought that we were being offered a stolen picture. Mr. Kress was much taken by the strong personality of the Doge that the artist had succeeded in capturing. Needless to say, we bought it there and then.

When the painting arrived in my studio, I reinforced the edges with strips of canvas and mounted it to a stretcher. It is exceedingly rare to find a painting of the sixteenth century that has never been relined. The linen was in good condition and

there was the drawing on the reverse, and for all these reasons I did not wish to reline it. I searched among our collection of antique frames looking for something suitable for this great portrait. I found a sixteenth-century Venetian frame by Luca Mombello, Titian's frame maker, which was about the right size. I had the frame sent to the studio and tried the painting in it. To my wonder and amazement, it fit the picture perfectly. As paintings were not standard sizes in the sixteenth century, this is a semi-miraculous occurrence, and it is possible that this was, in fact, the original frame. The whole affair was serendipitous. The same cannot be said for the fate of Dr. Buschbeck. Sometime later, on one of his frequent visits to Venice, he was walking along the molo when he was swept into the canal by a wave. His body was carried out to sea and

85. Titian, *Doge Andrea Gritti*, 1546–1548, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington DC, 133.6 × 103.2 cm.

never recovered. I have always believed that this was a vendetta on the part of Titian who was angered by the man's presumption and stupidity. In any case, the painting is now one of the treasures of the National Gallery.

When styles and taste change, works of art are sometimes modernized to conform to contemporary preferences, masking their original beauty and it is an occasion for rejoicing when the eye of an expert and the skill of a restorer work in concert to return such altered objects to their initial conception.

In 1948, Count Contini bought two sculptures from the Florentine art dealer Gianni Salocchi. The life-size wooden figures represented the Virgin and the Angel of the Annunciation. Sometime in the seventeenth century, the parish priest of the church who owned them decided to bring them up to date. He must have considered them too severe and he had a sculptor make them look baroque by adding draperies made of gilded papier mâché. Salocchi had bought them from a church near Pisa. No one had understood the importance of the two statues because of the baroque trappings but Salocchi intuited that they were much older than the seventeenth century because of the character of the heads. He had them brought to his gallery and began to remove the applications of papier mâché. Underneath, he found the original drapery, sculpted in wood in a style consistent with the heads.

Before the baroque folds were added, the statues had been repainted numerous times, but some of the original polychrome survived. The count asked me if I would mind cleaning them, and I told him that I could work on them in Rome so he agreed to send them to me. The work took a long time because of the numerous repaintings in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries before the baroque drapes were added. Beneath these, the statues were extraordinary. The count, accompanied by Gualtiero Volterra, came to Rome many times while I was restoring them over a period of six months. When they were finished, I sent them back to Florence.

Roberto Longhi was the first person to see them and he attributed them to Nino Pisano [the most important Italian sculptor of the fourteenth century]. Then [Cesare] Gnudi saw them and said the same. The count wanted to offer them to Kress, his most important client. Gianni Salocchi had obtained export permits before he removed the baroque draperies, so there was no problem about sending them out of the country. At around the same time, the count had prepared a large group of

paintings to sell to Rush Kress, among which were several important works—mainly paintings that Gualtiero Volterra had bought in London and Paris. [The shipment was sent to New York] where the negotiations were long and difficult involving many meetings between the count and Mr. Kress.

Volterra always participated because the count's English was not very easy for Mr. Kress to understand. During one of these encounters, the count must have said to Mr. Kress, in his unique brand of English, something to the effect that, if considered as just a part of the whole package of paintings, the sculptures were practically free. What Kress instead heard was that the count was making a gift to him of the sculptures and he immediately stood up and embraced Contini, thanking him profusely. Volterra, who had understood how the mistake happened, said to the count with exaggerated calm, "My dear count, do you know what you have just done? You have made a gift to Mr. Kress of the two sculptures." Naturally the count could not go back on his word and tell Mr. Kress that there'd been a misunderstanding. He had to make the best of the situation. The mistake cost him $1 million, which is what the sculptures were worth at that time. In fact, Rush gave the two sculptures to the National Gallery shortly afterward and took a deduction of $1 million.

This was not the most extraordinary thing in the story of the two sculptures. [Some years later], when the Kress Foundation decided to publish a catalogue of the entire collection, the sculpture volume was entrusted to Professor Ulrich Middeldorf [University of Chicago and Kunsthistorisches Institut, Florence] who, after examining the sculptures, declared that they were fakes and that was how he intended to catalogue them. I was violently opposed to this ridiculous idea and decided to take myself to Florence where Middeldorf was living to talk to him about the sculptures and tell him what I knew about them. I went to Florence where I had lived for quite some time while I was restoring paintings for the count. Florence is a city that always puts me in a good humor because of all the interesting memories it evokes in my mind. But on this occasion, I was not happy. I was not looking forward to trying to convince Professor Middeldorf to change his mind. I made an appointment and went to see him. I noticed that he received me somewhat coldly, perhaps because he had been informed by Mary Davis of my reaction to his ideas about the sculptures. I began by telling him the story of how I had seen the sculptures when they still had pieces of papier mâché baroque folds nailed to them and of the many layers of repaint that I had removed, the oldest one, in tempera, dating back to at least to 1500, followed by repaintings with oil colors in the seventeenth century.

He listened to me, but I could tell that in his heart he didn't want to believe the evidence I was presenting. As far as he was concerned, all these facts were part of an elaborate ruse by the forger to establish the antiquity of the sculptures. Such an intricate plot was completely absurd, like a James Bond film! To demonstrate how knowledgeable he was on the subject of forgery, he then informed me that the portrait of a woman of the Sassetti family by Domenico Ghirlandaio in the Thyssen Collection was also a fake, done by a clever forger at the end of the nineteenth century. [Mario had cleaned the painting and knew it well.] We discussed fakes and forgers, but he continued to insist on his opinion of the sculptures: according to him, they were copies after an Annunciation in marble in the church of Saint Catherine in Pisa. To this I answered that it was not unusual for sculptors at that time to begin with a wooden model that was later executed in marble. We talked for nearly three hours, and I cannot say that at the end of our conversation I had succeeded in changing his mind. In

86. Nino Pisano, *The Annunciation: The Virgin and The Angel*, 1325–1350, wood, polychromed and gilded, National Gallery of Art, Washington DC, 159.4 × 47.3 × 36 cm.

the Kress catalogue, he compromised and called them copies after a fourteenth-century Pisan artist, and, at the end of his entry, adds that Mario Modestini has shown the copies to be contemporary with the originals. Many years later, I told this story to John Pope-Hennessy who told me that I was right and the two figures are "absolutely" by Nino Pisano.

The two sculptures were featured in the 1956 exhibition of recent Kress acquisitions at the National Gallery[9] along with 83 paintings and over 25 other sculptures. On display were three Titians; two Tintorettos; the Grünewald *Crucifixion*; David's *Napoleon*; the Clouet, as well as works by Cimabue, El Greco, Fragonard, Ghirlandaio, Goya, Memling, Pontormo, Rubens, Saenredam, Paolo Veneziano, Veronese, Watteau, and Zurbarán, to name but a few. The sculptures included Desiderio da Settignano's Tabernacle, Bernini's bust of *Monsignor Francesco Barberini*, and Houdon's bust of *Cagliostro*.

Mario had every reason to be proud. Not only had he been involved with the acquisition and restoration of all the paintings, but he had also installed the exhibition, something on which Rush Kress always insisted, whether for the Kress permanent installation or the special exhibitions, despite the fact that it was a gallery rule that only the director was allowed to do the hang. He looked forward to what would be added within the next five years.

CHAPTER 17

The Last Picture Sale

The 1950's saw the conclusion of Mario's long professional relationship with Count Contini Bonacossi, culminating in the tortuous negotiations for the last group of paintings the dealer offered to the Kress Foundation.

Count Contini had been selling paintings to the Kress brothers since 1927, and despite the haggling, every two or three years, the entire "lot" was always purchased; cherry-picking individual paintings from the group had never been part of the process. After the war, correspondence between Rush Kress and Contini resumed as did acquisitions from the Florentine dealer. In 1948 the foundation purchased fifty-three paintings from Contini for $1,255,000.00, and an even larger deal of $4 million was made in 1950 for 125 works.[1] Contini originally agreed that the unusually large debt could be discharged over time, but suddenly changed his mind and insisted on full payment, so that the foundation was forced for the first time to take out a loan for $2 million. This was

still being paid off in 1952, when Rush Kress made a trip abroad, stopping in Florence to see his old friend, "the Count", as he always called Contini. At the Villa Vittoria, Kress approved a new selection of paintings and signed a preliminary letter of commitment. Later that day he went to Rome and, while relaxing in his hotel room, suffered a small stroke. Mario and Sandrino supervised his care and Kress was able to return to New York a month later.

The foundation's board was opposed to making another large purchase from Contini and, at its December meeting, took the position that the contract was not valid on account of Rush's health at the time he signed it. Contini felt that he had been double-crossed and, not without reason, blamed John Walker, whom he disparagingly referred as "*lo zoppo*," because of his limp.[2]

From that point on, the letters exchanged between the two parties record a cat-and-mouse game in which the count resorted to a variety of intrigues in order to sell all the paintings in the "lot," and the foundation made strenuous efforts to accept only the paintings they wanted. First, the count sent Gualtiero Volterra to New York to act on his behalf. Volterra was an intelligent, worldly man who realized that times had changed and that he was in a difficult position, caught between the foundation's interests—represented by his great friend Mario, who, in this instance, was allied with Walker—and his longtime business associate, Contini, who stubbornly insisted on having his way, hammering Rush Kress with letters telling him what his brother, Samuel, would have done.

Contini went to great lengths, at one point pleading with Delora Kilvert to intervene with Samuel, who was bedridden, paralyzed and mute.[3] Rush, who by now agreed with the board, would not concede and repeatedly refused to send the down payment of half a million dollars the count demanded. Kress informed the dealer that there were only five paintings the foundation was interested in: *The Madonna di Spoleto,* by the Badia a Isola Master, very close to Duccio;[4] two paintings by Tintoretto, a portrait, and *The Conversion of Saint Paul*, which Mario insisted on; Titian's *Saint John on Patmos*; and Veronese's *Saint Lucy.*

The foundation had launched their second phase of collecting, for which they wanted only the best works on the market to fill the gaps in the National Gallery's collection or to satisfy the wishes of particular regional galleries. Allentown, for example, wanted a good representation of German paintings to reflect the history of the Pennsylvania 'Dutch' who had settled the area (the Kress family included). In order to acquire a variety of works, the ad hoc art committee turned to many different dealers. In February 1953, Volterra reported to Contini that the board had just approved the acquisition of the Grünewald ($265,000), four panels by Juan de Flandes ($105,000), and thirteen baroque paintings proposed by Mario ($90,000), and advised the count to seek counsel from Berenson, who may or may not have known about the complex maneuvering taking place. BB was concerned that some of the paintings on the foundation's wish list were of national importance and should never leave Italy. They were, in fact, subject to notification by the state according to a law passed in 1939 to restrict the export of works of art. Others had been purchased on the international art market and were in Italy in temporary importation, in theory at least, qualifying for an export license. Berenson proposed Andrea Solario's *Lamentation over the Dead Christ,* which he rightly considered a masterpiece by the artist. In the course of the negotiation, Berenson seems to have capitulated to pressure from Contini and wrote to John Walker telling him that he should accept most of the paintings the dealer was proposing but on this occasion Walker did not heed his advice.[5]

The wily count continued to harry Rush Kress with scolding letters about his failure to act, saying this would be the last opportunity anyone would ever have of buying from his own collection while at the same time warning Volterra not to disabuse him of this notion. Finally, when Kress's attempts to ward him off had been exhausted, Contini sent a group of seventeen paintings to Huckleberry Hill to be stored and insured at his own expense. The business dragged on into April of 1954, when Contini, accompanied by his new wife, Atala Pampaloni (Vittoria had died in 1949),

Sandrino, and Gualtiero and Patricia Volterra, made a trip to New York in an attempt to seal the deal.[6] The entire party joined Rush Kress at Huckleberry Hill, where Mario was tending to several of the paintings that had been wrested from the private collection—Tintoretto's *Saint Paul*, Veronese's *Saint Lucy*, and Bronzino's portrait of an ailing Eleonora di Toledo.

On June 7, 1954, the Kress Foundation formally offered Count Contini $2 million for 17 paintings. The foundation received the contract in early July and sent Contini's attorney, Renzo Ravà, a check for $1 million with the balance to be paid in ten quarterly installments. But there was one outstanding matter. Item 17 specified that the count would supply "a painting or paintings from your collection of a value not less than $100,000.00 to be selected … by Messrs. John Walker and Professor Mario Modestini … worthy, in their opinion, to be in the permanent collection of the National Gallery of Art."

87. Huckleberry Hill. From left: Patricia Volterra, Count Contini Bonacossi, a laughing Mario, unknown woman (Virginia Kress?), Sandrino Contini Bonacossi, and Guy Emerson.

88. June 1954, on the steps of the National Gallery. Front row from left: David Finley, Rush Kress, Alessandro Contini Bonacossi, Mario Modestini, Patricia Volterra, Gualtiero Volterra. Back row, from left: Sandrino Contini Bonacossi, Perry Cott, Colonel Henry McBride, Guy Emerson, Huntington Cairns, 'Red' Geiger, Macgill James.

Contini jealously guarded his private collection (perhaps he was pining for the lost Tintorettos, Bronzino, and Titian) and refused to cooperate with Walker and Mario. The count complained bitterly that their list included paintings which "cannot be exported, with the exception of two paintings which—because of their great popularity—could never be granted the necessary export permits."[7] The dealer could act with impunity because he knew that the foundation would not abrogate the contract. They had no appetite for a messy lawsuit and some of the masterworks that the National Gallery wanted might have to be returned. Besides, half of the purchase price had already been paid. The agreed upon quarterly payments continued to be sent to Renzo Ravà until the

89. Jacopo Tintoretto, *The Conversion of Saint Paul*, ca. 1545, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington DC, 152.4 × 236.2 cm.

count's death a little over a year later, by which time a sum of $500,000 was still owed to Contini's estate. In January 1957, the debt was settled by deducting $100,000 for the famous, undelivered "Item 17".[8]

Sandrino's Disappearance

Sandrino Contini Bonacossi would soon become the focus of a scandalous and mysterious disappearance. On July 31, 1955, the seventh anniversary of his marriage to Elsa De Giorgi, Sandrino disappeared along with 30 million lire he had collected on behalf of the count, which he was meant to deposit in the bank. Mario, who had become a close friend of Sandrino and knew how completely besotted he was with his wife, said that he had gone deeply into debt maintaining Elsa's luxurious lifestyle of sable furs, jewels, and Dom Perignon, the only alcoholic beverage of which she would

partake. For months, Italian headlines were filled with the dramatic story as the mystery of the 'Count's' whereabouts continued to deepen. Elsa claimed to be broken hearted and had no idea why he had left. She moved out of the house on the Via San Leonardo that Count Contini had bought for the couple, absconding with the entire contents of Sandrino's office that she used for years to blackmail his relatives. Elsa never admitted that the real reason for his disappearance was her husband's discovery that she was having an affair with the young writer, Italo Calvino (1923–1985).

Elsa had literary ambitions and, ostensibly, Calvino was helping with her first novel, *I Coetanei,* based on Sandrino's courageous career as a partisan behind the Gothic Line during the German occupation. Until her death in 1997, Elsa maintained that she and her husband were profoundly in love and that the reason Sandrino had abandoned her was because of his involvement in a sinister plot hatched by the Contini family and their retainers—including Mario—to cover up some sort of illegal activity, and that it was only after his disappearance, to ease her loneliness, that she began her affair with the young Calvino, which lasted until 1958. This story contradicts the dates on over three hundred passionate letters from Calvino, and the deception was confirmed when Elsa illegally sold them to a popular magazine many years later, to the intense irritation of Calvino's widow and literary executor.[9]

One day, many months after his disappearance, Sandrino telephoned Mario from Paris. He had tried to join the French Foreign Legion but had been rejected and he was alone, broke and desperate. Mario said that he had promised Donna Vittoria that he would protect Sandrino:

On her deathbed, she [Donna Vittoria] sent for me and said, "Mario, send everyone out because I must speak to you in private." She spoke to me of Sandrino, about whom she was very worried, married to an adventuress—for that's what she called her [Elsa De Giorgi]. She asked me to help him when he needed it because she foresaw what, in fact, later happened.

Mario told Rush Kress about Sandrino's plight, knowing that though Rush liked to play the part of a tough businessman, he was tenderhearted and instinctively generous. Rush was very fond of Sandrino and immediately brought him to New York to conduct research for the foundation, a task for which he was well-suited. Sandrino, though brilliant, was never cut out to be an art dealer, the career his uncle had been grooming him for.

He and Mario worked closely together for the Kress Foundation, sorting out the many details involved in the distribution of the collection, researching, and writing catalogue entries. Mario had many stories about Sandrino's frequent visits to Huckleberry Hill. He was a wonderful mimic, witty, and liked to clown around; he seemed to have been happy during that period. Mario and his friend Renzo Ravà loved Sandrino, and he made many friends in New York.

Unfortunately, Sandrino was bedeviled by problems; among other things, he was financially improvident. Before his uncle died, he had given Sandrino an important piece of property, a large building in the Piazza della Repubblica in Florence, as his inheritance. For reasons related to his divorce from Elsa De Giorgi, Sandrino immediately sold the building. He then met a woman who, Mario said, bore an astonishing resemblance to Elsa, and spent all his money on her until he was flat broke. The woman rapidly left him for another man.

The Death of Sandrino

After the Kress Collection was dispersed in 1961 there was nothing for Sandrino to do at the foundation. Rush Kress had died and could no longer protect him. In 1970, the director of the foundation, Mary Davis, sent him to the National Gallery in Washington to become the curator of the photo archive, a task he accomplished with great distinction, acquiring many rare collections and setting up collaborations with other institutions. However, Sandrino had

no friends in Washington. He was lonely, his fortune was gone, and he became depressed. His life came to a tragic end, as Mario described:

There were always attractive secretaries at the National Gallery. Sandrino used to pay compliments to a particularly pretty one. One morning, he met her during the coffee break and couldn't resist giving her a kiss. The girl was extremely offended and complained to her superiors. One of them asked Sandrino to leave the museum[10] *and gave him the minimum pension. He was desperate and didn't know what to do. He came to New York and told the whole story to Renzo and me, I told him not to worry, because I would hire him as the secretary of my [restoration] company. But he had taken the firing from the National Gallery very badly, and there was the problem of finding an apartment in New York. All these things made him very discouraged.*

90. Sandrino Contini Bonacossi.

One evening [October 17, 1975], I had a premonition, and I called him after dinner. There was no answer, and I continued to call him until two in the morning without success. At eight in the morning, I called his [former] secretary and told her that I was very worried about him and asked her to go to his apartment to see what had happened. She went there, and the building manager, who had the keys, said that he wanted the presence of a policeman before he opened the door. Unfortunately, my presentiment was right; he had hanged himself in the bathroom with telephone wire. I called while the police were still there, and one of them answered, saying to me that there had been an accident. I called Renzo and we decided to go to Washington immediately. Identifying the body and the other formalities were deeply distressing.

Ironically, Sandrino believed that he had finally obtained a divorce from Elsa De Giorgi at the time of his death, but the decree had not yet been finalized. Thus, she remained Sandrino's widow for the rest of her life, a position that allowed her to create problems not only for the Contini family, but also for the Italian state in the matter of the donation of the fabled private collection assembled by Alessandro and Vittoria Contini Bonacossi.[11]

CHAPTER 18

Missed Opportunities

The acquisition of great works of art is, by its very nature, dotted with missed opportunities and efforts that fail for a variety of reasons. Mario often regretted what might have been. On occasion, he experienced intense frustration seeing a real prize slip from the Kress Collection's hands.

The Ruspoli Goyas

Odd as it may seem, a Florentine family possessed, by inheritance, three masterpieces of portraiture by the Spanish artist Francisco Goya (1746–1828). These had been painted between 1783 and 1784 for Goya's patron, the Infante Luis de Borbón (1727–1785), who, as the youngest son of Philip V, entered the church and was named Cardinal Archbishop of Toledo when he was barely eight years old. In 1754, he abandoned his vocation and, it is said, enjoyed

a frivolous life as an aesthete and patron of the arts until 1776, when he married the beautiful María Teresa de Borbón y Vallabriga (1758–1820), who came from a noble but not royal family. As a consequence of this morganatic union, the couple and their issue lost certain privileges and rights of succession and were banished to internal exile on an estate far from Madrid and the life of the court.

Luis withdrew to Arenas de San Pedro, a small town nestled at the foot of the Sierra de Gredos mountain range, not far from Ávila. Spectacularly endowed by nature and blessed with a temperate climate similar to that of Tuscany, it was ideal for the Infante's small court, whose members occupied themselves with

91. Francisco José de Goya y Lucientes, *The Countess of Chinchón*, 1783, oil on canvas, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence, 220 × 140 cm.

music, literature, and the other arts. Goya visited in 1783 and 1784 to paint portraits of Luis's family and friends, culminating in an oversized (over 8' × 9') "conversation piece" of the entire group, one of the great masterpieces of the eighteenth century.

One of the figures in the group portrait is a tiny blond sprite, who looks mischievously out from behind her older brother with open-eyed excitement. She is one of Don Luis's three children, called, like her mother, María Teresa. Goya seems to have had a special feeling for this child, later known as the 15th Countess of Chinchón, and painted her twice later in her life. A standing portrait, now in the Uffizi, was painted around 1797—the year that she was maneuvered by the corrupt Queen María Luisa into a humiliating marriage to the hated prime minister, Manuel de Godoy. With this marriage, the queen obtained a wife with royal blood for her favorite, and María Teresa was granted the royal privileges lost by her father. Shortly thereafter, Goya made another touching portrait of his friend, pregnant and seated, adorned with symbols of fertility.[1] María Teresa gave birth to a daughter, Carlota Joaquina de Godoy y Borbón (1800–1886). Don Luis's granddaughter and sole heir,[2] she married the Roman Prince Camillo Ruspoli in 1820. The couple moved to Florence, where Carlota lived until her death. They had two sons. Adolfo, the eldest, returned to Spain and had numerous descendants, while Luigi remained in Florence, where his line was extinguished in 1969 upon the death of Paolo Ruspoli, Marquis of Boadilla del Monte.

The portraits were tightly held within the family. The group portrait was known through a small copy, but the original had not been seen by anyone outside the family until 1902, when Spanish art critic Elias Tormo recorded it hanging in a room together with fourteen other portraits, all but one by Goya, at Boadilla del Monte, Don Luis's palace near Madrid.[3]

The decision to divide the Goya portraits among Carlota's descendants, with branches in Spain, Florence, and Paris, may have taken place in 1904, when a male heir was born to the Spanish Ruspolis. The Florentine Ruspolis took ownership of

María Teresa de Borbón y Vallabriga on Horseback, the group portrait, and the full-length standing portrait of the Countess of Chinchón. The paintings still had not been seen by any scholars apart from Tormo, and no photographs had been published. This is always a crucial matter for families in Italy owning important paintings that they might one day wish to sell, because a published work would risk notification by the state. The potential sale value is higher if the works can be offered discreetly on the open market without export restrictions.

On May 29, 1951,[4] John Walker wrote Mario a cryptic note asking him if, while in Italy for the summer, he would visit Princess Ruspoli in Florence.[5] He said that he had already spoken to her about Mario and she was prepared to receive him. Walker had arranged for Mario to see the Goya, which he had perhaps heard of through his contacts in European high society, because specialists knew nothing of its existence until 1967 when it was published by the scholar José Gudiol.

Walker and Mario hoped that it might be possible to obtain an export license, as the painting was not by an Italian artist and had been imported into Italy from Spain before the stringent restrictions of the 1939 law went into effect. It was a long shot, but a matchless opportunity for the Kress Foundation and the National Gallery, if the painting was, indeed, what they supposed.

Mario told me that he saw the group portrait in a family villa on the Via Bolognese, where it was kept because it was too large to pass through the front door of the princess's house in the city, and that the price was not terribly high—around $50,000. He was not shown the other two Goyas. Mario's friend, the lawyer Renzo Ravà—who knew everything there was to know about the Florentine nobility—looked into the legal status of the painting. To everyone's great disappointment, he learned that the paintings had been essentially smuggled into Italy from Spain in 1904. The owners had not declared them to customs officials or asked for a temporary importation license. There was not even any proof that they had come from Spain. Under the circumstances, there was no

92. Francisco José de Goya y Lucientes, *The Family of the Infante don Luis de Borbón*, 1783–1784, oil on canvas, Fondazione Magnani Rocca, Traversetolo, Parma, 248 × 328 cm.

chance the Goya would be granted an export license. As soon as the paintings came on the market, the state could exercise the right of preemption. Since the painting was so important, its appearance would cause an international sensation and neither the foundation nor the National Gallery could afford to be involved in the illegal exportation of a work of art from Italy.

That was the end of that acquisition. In 1974, *Maria Teresa on Horseback* and *The Countess of Chinchón* were acquired by the Uffizi. The group portrait ended up with a private collector, Luigi Magnani, the son of a rich industrialist from Reggio Emilia, who dabbled in art history, music, and literature. Magnani had a small private museum in his late nineteenth-century villa outside Parma, now known as the Magnani Rocca Foundation. The museum is a bit out of the way and there is no context for the painting in the

oddly assorted collection. The group portrait is too large to be easily moved and is, therefore, rarely loaned to Goya exhibitions. It would have looked magnificent in Washington.

Goya's Painting Technique

Mario had a special passion for Goya, acquired while working on many of his great paintings over the years, and knew that they were particularly sensitive to solvents. In 1983, many years after the events just described, Mario was entrusted with the restoration of the full-length portrait of the Marquesa de Santiago, a sitter with a notorious reputation in her day. The present owner, the Getty Museum, describes her as follows: "Known for her dissolute lifestyle, the Marquesa died at the age of forty-three, three years after Goya made this portrait. An English visitor to Spain once described her as 'very profligate and loose in her manners and conversations, and scarcely admitted into female society and said to boast of her nocturnal revels.'"[6] In the portrait, she looks as if she has had a hard night; she was known to mask her plainness with heavy paint and powder, and her face is grotesquely made-up as she stares almost insolently at the viewer.

The restoration was complex for several reasons. The canvas is made of two pieces of linen, stitched together vertically, with the seam running right through the middle of the composition, transecting the head of the sitter. Though originally it was scarcely visible, a thoughtless, but standard, relining had pushed the seam forward, which Mario felt was particularly disturbing because of its placement. Francis Moro, a professional reliner with whom Mario often collaborated, removed the lining canvas and coaxed the seam back into plane, after which a new canvas backing was adhered with glue paste.

The painting had not been cleaned in many decades. Mario found that the thick varnish had been artificially tinted with dark pigments, a common practice in the nineteenth century. It wasn't

especially difficult to remove, and due to Mario's usual care, the cleaning was going nicely, until he got to the black dress, which, he said, was soluble in everything, even mild mineral spirits. The varnish was thick, brown, and cloudy, muffling the richness of the deep black dress, so that it was necessary to remove it somehow. He tried an old technique, rubbing the varnish in a circular motion with the palm of his hand, creating enough friction to pulverize the brittle resin. Once it began to powder, the resin dust served as a fine abrasive, which continued to wear away the discolored resin

93. Francisco José de Goya y Lucientes, *The Marquesa de Santiago*, 1804, oil on canvas, J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, California, 209.6 × 126.4 cm.

until most of the varnish was removed. Obviously, when getting close to the paint surface, great caution was necessary. Mario said it came out perfectly; the only drawback was that his hands were destroyed in the process.

Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio
Saint John the Baptist

While the *Family of the Infante Don Luis de Borbón* eluded Kress for want of an export license, another painting of capital importance—this time by Caravaggio—was near at hand, and its loss might have the dubious distinction of being the greatest painting the Kress Foundation did not buy. This was Caravaggio's *Saint John the Baptist in the Wilderness*, now in Kansas City. Although their versions of the incident differ greatly, in the end it was a heartbreaking disappointment for both Mario and Johnny Walker.

The opportunity to purchase the painting came through Theodore Rousseau, the chief curator of the Metropolitan, whom Mario had met not long after his arrival in New York, as Mario describes:

During my first year in New York, I went with Mr. Kress and a group from the foundation to visit the Metropolitan Museum. The director, James Rorimer, and Theodore Rousseau, the chief curator, accompanied us. As we walked through the galleries I stopped in front of a painting by an old friend. Rousseau noticed my close attention and said, "How do you like that picture?" I said it was a very good painting by Joni. "Oh," he said, "was he a pupil of Neroccio?" "No, he died twenty years ago." I explained to him that the Neroccio was an excellent forgery, one of Joni's best.

After my discovery of the false Neroccio from the Robert Lehman collection, I became quite good friends with Rousseau. I often lunched with him at his favorite restaurant, the Veau d'Or, where he had a fixed table. Rousseau was of French origin and in fact was a descendent of the school of Fontainebleau painter. Also, I was able to speak French with him, which, at that time, was a bit easier for me than English. One morning he called and asked me to come to the museum to look at a painting and

I went the same day. In his office was a splendid painting of Saint John the Baptist by Caravaggio. By chance I had just come back from Naples where I had seen the copy of this picture in the museum of Capodimonte. He asked me what I thought of the picture. I replied, "It is a masterpiece." "I agree with you one hundred percent" he said, "but unfortunately a book was recently published on Caravaggio by BB in which he considers the Naples version to be the original and, therefore, my trustees cannot approve the purchase."

"My dear Ted" I said, "you know perfectly well that BB has never understood seventeenth-century Italian painting. I can't imagine why he has written a book on Caravaggio. And I must tell you another thing, he is not capable of distinguishing a copy from the original work." "I'll have another try with my trustees," he said, "but I don't think I will succeed in convincing them." I asked to whom the painting belonged and Ted told me it was being offered by Agnew's of London. I said, "Listen, Ted, if you don't buy it, please let me know so that the Kress Foundation can have it." "Fine," he said. Three weeks later Ted called me to report that, unfortunately, he was not going to be able to buy the painting for the Metropolitan and he had spoken with Mr. Geoffrey Agnew who agreed that it could be sent over to the Kress Foundation.

The painting arrived the next day and I showed it to Mr. Kress with great excitement. Finally, we would have a Caravaggio for the National Gallery. Mr. Kress was delighted and said he would ask Johnny Walker to come and see it. I had to agree to this but in my heart I was very worried because of the relationship between Walker and BB. In fact, Mr. Walker came and immediately pronounced it a copy of the Naples picture. I defended the attribution saying that this picture was the original and the one in Naples was a copy. At that point, Walker said to Rush Kress, let's call BB at I Tatti and you can talk to him about it. It was ten in the morning in New York, therefore four in the afternoon in Italy. Walker phoned BB, told him the reason for the call, and Mr. Kress got on the line to talk directly with Berenson. After he hung up Mr. Kress said that with BB against it, the foundation could not buy the painting. I told Walker that he was making a terrible mistake, that the National Gallery would not have another opportunity to add a Caravaggio of that importance to its collection. In fact, the Gallery does not possess a painting by the master even today.

I went back to my studio but was so angry and upset that I couldn't concentrate on my work. Finally, it was five-thirty and everyone had gone home except for me, stewing over the events of that miserable day, and Mr. Kress, writing his daily memorandums. Mr. Kress came into the studio[7] and said, "Mario, you really believe

in that picture, don't you?" "Oh yes, Mr. Kress, one hundred percent." "How much are they asking for it?" "Eighty thousand dollars." "Offer them sixty."

This was a great moment that demonstrated that Mr. Kress had more faith in my judgment than in Berenson's. It was too late to call London and there was nothing I could do until Monday morning. At six a.m. I phoned Mr. Agnew, whom I did not know at that time, and communicated Mr. Kress's offer. I was heartbroken when he replied that the painting had been sold to the museum in Kansas City over the phone on Friday. In John Walker's memoirs, he admits that missing the Caravaggio was perhaps his greatest curatorial error. In his version of the story he says that his wife

94. Michelangelo Merisi, called Caravaggio, *Saint John the Baptist in the Wilderness*, 1604–1605, oil on canvas, Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, 172.72 × 132.08 cm.

was related to the owners of the painting and she was sure that it was the original, but, unfortunately, he did not listen to her. He doesn't mention that Friday at the foundation and my attempt to persuade him to accept the painting, which could and should be in the National Gallery today.

Walker wrote, "The mistake still haunts me."[8]

In 1948, Bernard Berenson took a sudden interest in Caravaggio, whom Roberto Longhi had been studying for many years. Seventeenth-century painting had never been Berenson's specialty, but Longhi was organizing a historic exhibition in Milan, which opened to great acclaim in 1951, and perhaps Berenson didn't want to be left out. In 1951, he published a small book, *Del Caravaggio. Le sue incongruenze e la sua fama*[9] in which he noted that there were two versions of this particular painting: one in Naples at the Capodimonte Museum and a second on the English art market. He considered the Naples version to be the original and the other a copy. He later changed his mind and subsequent editions of the book reflect this.

Caravaggio was one of the most innovative painters in history; his work enjoyed enormous success and influenced painters all over Europe. During his lifetime, his fame was so great that, in order to satisfy the demands of collectors for his rare canvases, they were copied—often by excellent contemporary painters—even before his death, which caused, and continues to generate, a great deal of confusion about which version is original. The question of whether Caravaggio himself created replicas of his own work is still hotly debated. Mario believed that he did not.

The Cardsharps

Caravaggio had so many followers that there is difficulty in identifying the originals and the muddle has been compounded as his style went out of fashion in the eighteenth century. Tantalizing descriptions of originals lurked in inventories, writings by his

contemporaries, descriptions in old guidebooks, and sometimes in photographs. One of the most famous of the missing paintings by Caravaggio was an early work, painted around 1594–95, *The Cardsharps,* the picture that brought the young artist to the notice of his first patron, Cardinal Francesco Maria del Monte (1549–1627). Its movements from one proprietor to another were perfectly documented until 1899, when the collection belonging to Prince Maffeo Barberini-Colonna di Sciarra, scion of several important Roman families, was sold in Paris. The Paris firm, Braun, made an accurate photograph of the painting at the time of the sale.

The painting was very popular in its time and there are dozens of copies; the earliest one that is recorded was made in 1615, just a few years after the artist's death. With the documented original missing, the better copies could be very misleading. In 1950, the Kress Foundation thought it might be on the verge of acquiring the original, but once the picture was subjected to Mario's exacting eye, it proved to be no more than a copy, to everyone's great disappointment.[10] The incident, however, helped cement Mario's reputation as a keen connoisseur with the likes of Rudolf Heinemann (1902–1975), one of the most revered art experts of the day and part-owner of the painting. As Mario remembered the event:

One day, Mr. Henschel from Knoedler's telephoned the foundation offices asking us if we would come and see an important painting, the lost Sciarra Caravaggio. The next day, a group of us—including Mr. Kress, Dr. Suida, Guy Emerson, and John Walker—went to the gallery. It was displayed in a private room, on an easel, and was newly restored by William Suhr, with a beautiful antique frame. It made a magnificent impression against the red upholstered walls, and everyone was greatly excited. I went up to it to examine it closely, and my sense was that it was not the quality of the master. Mr. Henschel showed me an old photograph taken by the famous Parisian photography firm Braun, while it was still in the Sciarra Collection. As I compared the photo with the painting in front of us, I realized that they were not the same picture. I pointed out to Mr. Henschel and Mr. Balaÿ that the cards on the table were at a slightly different angle and, most telling, that the pattern of age cracks, which was perfectly visible in the Braun photograph, was different from that of their

painting. As paintings age and the different layers dry and move according to changes in humidity and temperature, the ground and the paint layers crack. Every painting has its own distinct pattern. No two are the same. This meant, of course, that the painting was not the lost original. There was extreme consternation and embarrassment all around as this news sank in. They had bought it in Paris, believing that it was the Sciarra painting, and had clearly presented it in good faith—otherwise they would not have shown it together with the Braun photo. Unfortunately, in their excitement, they had not looked closely enough. Johnny Walker was terribly disappointed.

This was around 1960. Sometime later, a friend of mine from Rome, Leopoldo di Castro, a sculpture dealer on 57th Street, called me to say that Dr. Rudolf Heinemann would like to meet me. I, of course, knew of him. He was the most important authority [on paintings] in the international art world, and his pronouncements were considered infallible. I went along to the Ritz Tower, where he had an apartment. Although he was a dealer, he never kept business premises, but worked with a few select galleries, chiefly Knoedler's in New York and Agnew's in London. We made small talk and then he said to me, "Congratulations!" "For what?" I asked. "The Caravaggio. You were right." After that, he called me often to show me paintings he wanted to buy.

Many years later, in 1986, the autograph Caravaggio turned up. When it first appeared, several eminent art historians disregarded it as another copy. Through the insistence of a French restorer, Gilles Panhard, at the time a Fellow at the Metropolitan Museum, who knew the painting's provenance, two experts, John Brealey and Keith Christiansen, went to see it armed with the Braun photograph, and had it sent to the museum for examination and restoration. When the old lining canvas was removed, Cardinal del Monte's seal was revealed on the reverse of the original canvas.

As was common in the seventeenth century, the composition is closely cropped, especially along the upper edge. For later taste, this placement seemed suffocating, and it was common practice in the eighteenth century to extend compositions with a five- or six-inch addition at the top and sometimes also on the right and left sides. *The Cardsharps* had such an addition, as could easily be seen in the x-rays. During the restoration, the addition was removed and

the painting lined and mounted on a smaller stretcher. The work was acquired by the Kimbell Art Museum.

There are dozens of copies of *The Cardsharps.* In 2006, another one appeared in a Sotheby's sale in London, catalogued as a seventeenth-century follower of Caravaggio. The composition included the extra space in the upper part of the painting that was provided by the later addition to the Kimbell painting, but it was painted on a single piece of canvas. It was sold for £42,000 ($80,000), and the buyer turned out to be an eminent art historian and an expert on Caravaggio, Sir Denis Mahon, who was, at that time, ninety-two years old. Sir Denis, together with another Caravaggio expert, Professor Mina Gregori, published the painting as the first version of *The Cardsharps* and arranged for it to be exhibited in several small Italian cities. Gregori is what is known as an "expansionist"—that is, she believes that Caravaggio made more than one version of his paintings, and she has accepted

95. Michelangelo Merisi, called Caravaggio, *The Cardsharps*, ca. 1595, oil on canvas, Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth, Texas, 94.2 × 130.9 cm.

many of these in the past. Her views are often not widely accepted, however, in Italy the discovery was breathlessly reported, with its value touted as being up to $50 million.

Unsurprisingly, the previous owner of the painting, who had consigned it to Sotheby's, sued the auction house for negligence and breach of contract. The trial was held in October 2014 and was widely covered by the press. Dr. Richard Spear, another art historian who has spent a lifetime studying the artist, was the expert witness for the defense. At a late stage, not long before the trial began, Sotheby's asked if I was willing to address a few technical points. The prosecution's two experts had produced a bewildering amount of technical evidence to prove that not only was the painting by Caravaggio's own hand, but that it preceded the Kimbell painting, the only way to account for the difference in format. Some years earlier, when I first saw a reproduction of the Mahon painting, as it was called, the fact that it included the addition immediately convinced me that it was a copy made after the extra strip of canvas had been applied to either the Sciarra painting or some early copy. I dismissed it out of hand. The frame was eighteenth-century, which is when I assume it was painted.

Technical analysis has an important role in the examination of paintings and provides valuable information about the artist's working process. It can prove beyond a doubt that an artwork was made with modern materials and is therefore a copy or a deliberate forgery. It cannot prove that a painting is by the hand of the artist, although it can help to shed light on a difficult attribution when comparative evidence is available. The interpretation of technical evidence is not always straightforward and requires expert knowledge of painters and painting technique. In the Sotheby's case, the judge came to a decision based on visual evidence such as brushwork, the build of layers, the draughtsmanship, and the skill with which details such as feathers were rendered, in other words, the methods of traditional connoisseurship.[11]

The Barberini Tapestries and Bernini

Around 1951 Mitchell Samuels of the firm French and Company invited Mr. Kress to visit the gallery because he had some interesting paintings to show him. As usual Rush asked me, Guy and Suida to accompany him. Samuels was also an excellent connoisseur, particularly of tapestries for which he had a true passion. In fact, that day he showed us a series of tapestries which had been made for the Barberini Palace in Rome, based on designs by Rubens and Pietro da Cortona. There were thirteen, of different sizes, depicting episodes from the Life of Constantine. Seven were of French manufacture based on Rubens sketches commissioned by Louis XIII and presented as a gift to Cardinal Francesco Barberini. He in turn commissioned the missing five episodes from his court painter, Pietro da Cortona who was responsible for the ceiling fresco of the Great Hall of Palazzo Barberini, The Apotheosis of the Barberini Family, one of the masterworks of seventeenth-century painting. The twelve tapestries and a baldachino for the traditional papal throne completed the decoration of the Hall. Mitchell Samuels explained the history of the series and recounted how he had spent years reassembling the group that had been dispersed in the nineteenth century.

Mr. Kress immediately grasped the importance of the tapestries and asked the price. Some needed work, which gave Mr. Kress an excuse to haggle, a practice that he had learned from his brother Samuel and which amused him enormously. I don't recall exactly what we paid for the series, around two hundred thousand dollars, more or less. After concluding this transaction we continued on through the gallery where we discovered three beautiful paintings: a Madonna in glory attributed to the Flemish painter called the Saint Lucy Master, a Giovanni Battista Tiepolo, a subject from Roman history, and, finally, a large, signed painting by Largillière, a double portrait of a boy with his tutor, which is an unusually penetrating character study of the older man but painted with the usual flourish and panache of the great eighteenth-century court painter. All three are now in the National Gallery. The prices in comparison to what these paintings would bring today were ridiculously low. The large Tiepolo cost thirty thousand dollars, the Largillière twenty-five and the Saint Lucy Master fifty, a total of one hundred thousand dollars for three paintings of exceptional quality.[12] *Mr. Kress was delighted with his acquisitions and, in fact, he had made a very good deal. He thought that the tapestries would be perfect at the National Gallery and shortly thereafter he showed them to Johnny Walker who, after a discussion with David*

Finley, refused them. They were then sent for restoration to Florence where there was an excellent workshop that specialized in this.

After the National Gallery turned them down it occurred to me that there might be a way to return the tapestries to the Palazzo Barberini in Rome so that they could be hung in the space for which they were designed. According to its statute, the Kress Foundation could not give them to the Italian State; however an exchange would be possible. As I thought the problem over, I remembered a Bernini sculpture, representing Truth, which stood in the courtyard of Bernini's former home, a palazzo in the Via della Mercede in Rome, and was for sale by the heirs of the sculptor for about fifty thousand dollars. I had not previously thought it would be possible to get permission to export the work. However, I thought that if the Kress Foundation offered to give the Barberini tapestries back to Italy in exchange for an export license for Truth, we

96. Gian Lorenzo Bernini, *Truth Unveiled by Time*, 1646–1652, marble, Galleria Borghese, Rome, h. 280 cm.

97. Pietro da Cortona, *The Apotheosis of the Barberini Family*, 1633–1639, Palazzo Barberini, Rome.

might be able to come to an agreement that would benefit everyone. I proposed this to Mr. Kress who thought it was an excellent plan but first he wanted to make sure that John Walker was interested in the Bernini for the gallery. Naturally, this time, Walker thought it would be a magnificent addition to the collection. There was not a sculpture by Bernini in any American museum.

When I next went to Italy for my summer holidays I brought with me a whole slew of photographs of the Barberini tapestries. I met with my old friend Federico Zeri who was enthusiastic about restoring the great hall of the Palazzo Barberini to its former glory. In fact, Federico campaigned all his life for the integrity of the Palazzo Barberini, which had been partially assigned to military use and other inappropriate functions. With his backing, we began to plan how to present the proposal, which would have to be approved at the highest levels of the ministry. I decided first to talk to the Superintendent of Fine Arts for the City of Rome. When he saw the photos of the tapestries he immediately understood the significance of my proposal but the idea of granting an export license for an important sculpture by Bernini was for him an insurmountable obstacle. He did not act on behalf of the export license and the whole idea finally fizzled out. It was perhaps naive of me to think that an Italian official would agree to export a Bernini sculpture for whatever reason. In fact, eventually

98. One of the Barberini tapestries, after a design by Peter Paul Rubens, *The Battle of the Milvian Bridge*, 1623–1625, wool and silk, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 492 × 737 cm.

the sculpture was purchased by the government and is now in the museum of the Villa Borghese where it keeps company with several other, far greater, sculptures by the same master such as Apollo and Daphne and the David. Still today I cannot help but believe that it would have been better for the City of Rome to have the complete set of Barberini tapestries back in their original context rather than to add one more very good, but not first rate, sculpture to a collection which already boasted the greatest works by Bernini. Not only that, but Truth Unveiled had never been properly sited at the time it was made and, for some reason, had languished for three centuries in the corner of the courtyard where the sculptor left it. The Barberini tapestries were ultimately given to the Philadelphia museum where, for lack of a better alternative, they were hung on a balcony and are seldom seen.

CHAPTER 19

Endings

Huckleberry Hill might have been conducive to intense and demanding work with its isolation and lack of distractions, but it was perhaps surprising that the restorers and assistants put up with the distance from friends and often family for so long. Finally, the cracks began to show as Mario relates.

I was often in and out of the city to visit dealers, attend foundation meetings, and go to Washington. In order to be able to work on as many paintings as possible, after the fire, we took a studio at 16 East 52nd Street, where I and some of my assistants worked, while we continued to commute much of the time to Huckleberry Hill, preparing for the 1956 Exhibition at the National Gallery. My assistants and I had spent all those years working in the Pennsylvania mountains while we were preparing the paintings for the regional galleries. One day, my assistants decided that they had had enough bosky solitude and went on strike to make the point that it was time to go back to New York. I talked the situation over with Guy Emerson, who said he would bring it up with Mr. Kress.

After many meetings, it was decided that we would bring everyone back to New York, where we would look for a new studio. This news was greeted with great jubilation by my staff. The studio at 16 East 52nd Street was also more convenient for the directors and curators of the regional museums who visited New York to follow the final work on what were ultimately to be their collections. Reframing and panel work continued to be done at the studio in Pennsylvania. Angelo Fatta, the carpenter, and Emilio Quarantelli were both men of a certain age, one with grown children, and the other a widower who didn't mind being in an out-of-the-way spot, whereas the younger restorers wanted to live in the decidedly more vibrant atmosphere of the city. After the move, the atmosphere in the studio improved greatly, and there was a return to the easy, friendly, and sociable relationships that we previously enjoyed and which are essential to any group of people who work closely together.

The National Gallery Opening and the End of Kress's Original Mission

The conclusion of the intense effort to build the Kress Collection arrived somewhat suddenly, brought on by unexpected financial reversals. Around 1960, the stock of S. H. Kress & Co. declined precipitously as consumers embraced the new malls that began to replace the urban five-and-dime store, putting the continued existence of the foundation in jeopardy. The trustees, all businessmen, believed that Rush Kress, who was apparently becoming somewhat confused,[1] was incapable of facing the problem and making a decision. The fortunes of the foundation depended on the value of the shares of S. H. Kress & Co., of which it owned 42 percent. These holdings represented over 70 percent of the foundation's assets, and dividends were declining.[2] Spearheaded by Franklin Murphy (1916–1994), who had been appointed trustee in 1953,[3] a strategy was devised in early 1958 to take over the company in a proxy fight, a precedent-setting maneuver that, as the *New York Times* wrote, was to "affect the status of six thousand other nonprofit foundations and trusts with some $7.5 billion in assets."[4] An angry Rush Kress reacted, demanding the resignations

of the trustees involved. An emergency board meeting in March ended in a stalemate, and Rush, after much anguish, suddenly reversed himself and surrendered control of the company to the trustees, who reorganized the foundation, paid its outstanding debts, and made a settlement with the Kress family that included the apartment at 1020 Fifth Avenue and a group of paintings. All the other properties were sold, including Huckleberry Hill. The foundation sold its shares of S. H. Kress & Co. to Genesco in 1964 for $27 million.[5]

Following the death of Rush Kress in 1963, Franklin Murphy became chairman of the executive committee and president of the foundation, a position he held until his death.[6] Murphy was intelligent, erudite, and aggressive. A medical doctor by training, his administrative abilities had propelled him to the role of chancellor of the University of Kansas, his home state, at the age of thirty-five, after which he went on to become the chancellor of UCLA and chairman of the board and chief executive officer of the *Los Angeles Times.* He played an important role in Los Angeles's burgeoning cultural scene and was on the boards of the Ahmanson Foundation and the Getty Trust, and a founder of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Because of the historic relationship between the Kress Foundation and the National Gallery of Art, he also became a trustee of the National Gallery. Over the years, Murphy frequently sought Mario's advice about prospective acquisitions for the Los Angeles County Museum.[7] Mario was always cordial but considered him ruthless after the way he had treated the elderly Rush Kress. The old master paintings world is a small place, and the two men had many encounters over the years. I doubt Franklin Murphy was ever aware of how Mario felt about him.

With diminished resources, the mission of the foundation had to be redefined. It withdrew from the business of acquiring works of art, as well as its other focus, medical research. It concentrated its philanthropy on the advancement of scholarship and connoisseurship of European art by giving study and travel

99. Franklin Murphy extending a Deed of Gift to Phyllis de Young Tucker, president of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco.

grants to American art historians engaged in research in this field. Benefactions to the National Gallery continued. The collection had become all that Samuel Kress had ever dreamed and was already enriching the lives of Americans, not only in Washington but across the land. The final deeds were drawn up and, in December 1961, the collections were formally donated to the various museums. *National Geographic* and *Life* magazine featured stories about the "The Great Kress Giveaway."[8]

An anthological exhibition was held in Washington in 1961. Everyone involved was very proud of what had been accomplished. The collection had been dispersed far and wide across the nation, according to Samuel's original idea that man did not live by bread alone, and art and beauty were essential for the education of young Americans and the formation of good character and values. Many important government figures attended the opening, including

100. John Walker talking to John F. Kennedy.

President John Kennedy and his wife, Jacqueline. Cabinet members, senators, congressmen, and ambassadors assembled to honor the Kress gift. It was a memorable evening. Mario went to the opening with Guy Emerson, and they were among the first guests to arrive. It was a formal occasion, and even the checkroom attendants were in black tie, giving rise to an amusing incident recounted by Mario.

As I entered the rotunda entrance, I saw a man in black tie hanging up a coat, and so I handed him mine. He kindly took it from me with a half-smile and hung it up. Guy was next to me, and as we walked toward the galleries, he said, "Mario, do you know to whom you gave your coat at the checkroom?""No.""It was the chief justice of the United States, Earl Warren." What a tremendous gaffe! I was speechless.

President Kennedy thanked Rush and Virginia Kress and congratulated them on the beauty and importance of the works

exhibited. Rush had been ill for some time and was in a wheelchair. Nevertheless, he stayed all evening, until the end, accepting universal compliments. Mario reflected later:

The end came rather abruptly and left me with some regrets. Especially that there was not time to restore all of the paintings, particularly those in Washington—something we had always intended to do. Consequently, many important works still have the thick and discolored varnishes added by Pichetto, now dull, dusty, streaky and full of blanched retouches.

Another project we often discussed was a Kress institute to train conservators of paintings and, in particular, young Americans, because, at that time, most restorers came from Europe. Although there are several restorers whom I consider my pupils, the frenetic activity from 1949 to 1961 did not allow time to realize this dream, which is a pity, since it would have had a great influence on the approach to the restoration of works of art in this country and perhaps avoided some of the controversies that later ensued.

101. Mario and Rush Kress at the National Gallery with El Greco's *Laocoön*.

I remained consultant to the Kress Foundation and also to the National Gallery for many years, working closely with Mary Davis, the president of the foundation, Fern Shapley, Colin Eisler, and Ulrich Middeldorf on the Kress catalogues and various Kress restoration projects in Europe.

On Mario's retirement, he received a gracious letter from Franklin Murphy. It is dated April 2, 1962.

> Dear Mario,
> Now that the Kress Gift to the Nation has been consummated and this project draws to a close, I want to express to you personally and on behalf of all of the Trustees our enormous gratitude for your dedication in making this whole thing possible. It is my own view that you have been a crucial enzyme in this entire process. Your competence—indeed, virtuosity—in restoration has been the central fact in this project, and, in a way, the collection is as much a monument to you as to anyone else.
> Jackals may snarl and vultures may swoop but the reality remains serenely unaware of both.[9]
> All of us in the Kress Foundation and, in fact, the American public generally, will always be in your debt.
> Sincerely,
>
> Franklin D. Murphy
> Chancellor (UCLA)

Mario played many roles during his years at the Kress Foundation in addition to restorer: expert, connoisseur, curator, manager, diplomat, and negotiator all come to mind. He was fifty-five years old and briefly considered returning to Europe, perhaps to open a studio in London, but soon he had more work than he could handle in his new studio at 434 East 52nd Street. Thus, began yet another chapter in his professional life.