THE MIND'S EYE

The collection of fine and decorative arts that Massimo and Francesca Valsecchi have amassed over 50 years has never been publicly displayed. The couple talk to *Apollo* as they prepare to unveil a very personal collection – and one driven by ideas and not ego

By Susan Moore
Photography by Kate Peters

By the time this article is published, the fine and decorative arts illustrated in these pages will have been dispersed. The lion's share will have gone on loan to the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge, with other works sent to the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford and the rest bound for the Palazzo Butera in Palermo, which Massimo and Francesca Valsecchi have recently acquired. Until now, these works of art constituted what was probably the least known private holding of great art in London – an unusually rich and complex assemblage that almost no one had ever seen.

It is only now, and with the greatest of reluctance, that the Italian couple who have so carefully developed this collection over the course of some 50 years are raising their heads above the parapet. The reason for their historic and near obsessive secrecy is simple. For Massimo and Francesca Valsecchi this gathering of art has always been a very personal and low-key affair, and its concerns, they insist, are ideas and not ego. The collection, then, acts as a conduit for ideas, as well as stimulating new ones, and so it is fitting that it will be displayed in two of the world's great university museums and in the new exhibition spaces planned for the Palazzo Butera.

It has taken about 15 years and several twists in the tail to arrive at this point. The seed of these display projects seems to have been sowed in 2002, when Massimo Valsecchi began teaching a course at the University of Milan. When he was shown the university's repository of books and archive that were closed to the students, his response was to ask why he was being shown the treasures when hundreds of students would never have the chance to see them. That conversation led to him being given free rein (he had already curated numerous exhibitions) to stage an exhibition inside the university and a second, more ambitious project in the city's Rotonda della Besana.

He describes opening crates and finding everything from photographs to Egyptian papyri. Books, documents, and photographs lined the glass display cases that formed a jagged central spine under the building's cupola, and these spines led the visitor to explore the holdings of the different departments – agriculture, botany, zoology, medicine, physics, mathematics, paleontology, mineralogy. In dialogue with these displays was contemporary art. 'I wanted to make it inspirational, to encourage people to look at things in a different way,' Valsecchi explains.

'Universities seem to have forgotten the role of their museums. These repositories were not intended just to preserve material but also to use it in a dynamic way. They are there for examining wider issues, and for the exchange of information and ideas between the arts, humanities and sciences.' He continues: 'I believe one of the mistakes made by the modern university is that they have narrowed this exchange, forgotten that everything is interrelated.'

From one of these projects emerged the idea of creating a new permanent museum for the University of Milan that would make use of the Valsecchi collection, but the scheme collapsed in 2007 due to lack of funding. 'It may happen some day,' he shrugs. The couple felt they should make contingency plans to find an alternative use for what they regard as 'a tool of research, a starting point rather than an end in itself'. As Francesca Valsecchi tells me: 'We realised that time was running out and that we had to do something. We really wanted to find a university museum which understood the potential of using the collection in an imaginative way, and a very different sort of house, somewhere in Italy, where we could also show things.'

For all his charm, Massimo Valsecchi is not an easy person to interview. He tends to speak in a kind of verbal shorthand, starting a sentence and then trailing off with a row of silent *etcetera* in his impatience to launch into the next point. Moreover, almost every time I attempt to ask him about a particular work of art, he sighs and says that the individual works of art themselves are not the point, that the collection is more than the sum of its parts. 'If you ask me if I am interested in the collection *per se*, I would answer no. What I am interested in are the ideas reflected in the collection, and what can happen as a result of people looking at the collection,' he insists.

As to the question of how the collection came about, he visibly shudders, exits the room, and leaves his wife to explain, which she does happily, laughing. 'Are you sure you want to continue?' he asks constantly. 'Do you really need us to be photographed?'

2. A display of Old Master paintings in the drawing room, including Annibale Carracci's *Allegory* (centre) and *Heads of Four Boys* (bottom left), and a Meissen bust of Saint Teresa modelled by J.J. Kändler

Although the last thing that either of them would wish for is a hagiography, any suggestion that the individual works of art here are not remarkable in their own right seems disingenuous. For the whole point of this wide-ranging collection, only a small part of which is discussed here, is that absolutely everything in it is interesting: there is nothing in the least arbitrary about it. Every single object, down to the Scarpa-designed ashtray, has been chosen specifically because of its history or significance, or for its place in the evolution or dissemination of ideas.

Certainly the first time I walk into the Valsecchi's rooms in Chelsea's Cadogan Square, it is difficult to prevent my jaw from dropping. There are so many works of art that are astounding or seminal and totally unexpected – from the Meissen model of a king-vulture made for Augustus the Strong's famed Japanese Palace that greets you in the entrance hall, to the 'lost' Stanley Spencer nude intended for his aborted Chapel of Love that hits you as you walk down the small staircase into the dining room (Fig. 4). As the many layered connections between objects – historical and formal – gradually become apparent I begin to marvel in a quite different way. Given this impressive collection it seems pertinent to relate something about Massimo and Francesca Valsecchi, to shed light on their approach and their choices.

'I come from a family of savages,' Valsecchi says, smiling. 'My family was not intellectual or artistic.' Interested in science and art as a child, he was breeding orchids – 'a science and an art' – at 13 or 14: 'I have always been a Darwinian person.' Erasmus, that is, not Charles. 'Our contemporary world started in the 18th century with the Lunar Society,' he adds, referring to the group of Midlands Enlightenment natural philosophers, industrialists and intellectuals that included Darwin, Matthew Boulton, and Josiah Wedgwood.

Francesca Valsecchi, in contrast, is the granddaughter of one of Italy's most important 20th-century collectors, the industrialist Carlo Frua De Angeli. 'He had over 100 Picassos. His study was full of Cubist Braque and Picasso; the dining room, de Chirico and Carra; the drawing room

3. An arrangement of Tiffany Favrile glass vases line the chimneypiece in the drawing room, above which hangs *Ajax* by Henry Fuseli. Giuseppe Maria Crespi's self-portrait hangs on the left, beside the C.R. Ashbee cabinet

MASSIMO AND FRANCESCA VALSECCHI

– apart from a Giuseppe Maria Crespi – all Matisse. It was quite fantastic,' she remembers, adding wistfully that the fortune has long gone. He knew all the contemporary artists as well.

The couple met in London, where Valsecchi, an economist and the best friend of Francesca's brother, worked for a broker at Lloyd's. Unfortunately she was already married. 'Francesca said she did not want another businessman for a husband, and wanted us to be able to do something together,' he explains. They left London for Milan where their friends were all writers, artists and architects – 'there were a lot of ideas, a lot of dreams.' Art was one thing they could do together, and so they opened a Milan branch of the Genoa and Turin Galleria La Bertesca which was owned by friends, and which staged the first show of Pop Art in Italy and saw the genesis of Arte Povera. They began to buy contemporary art.

'It was a continuous dialogue,' explains Valsecchi. 'I am obsessive and crazy, and after I had made an initial choice, Francesca would come along and say what interested her.' They opened their own space in 1973. 'I realised my way of thinking about things and doing things was different to others, and I continue to do things in a strange way,' he admits.

'In the 1970s, if you did a show and sold one painting, or no paintings at all, it did not really matter. Your expenses were so low. You could show people who were interesting but not necessarily very commercial. Nowadays this is very, very difficult,' Francesca tells me. Massimo adds: 'It was never a commercial space because we never sold anything! In one sense that has been our luck, as we still have all the Gerhard Richters that we bought in the 1960s and '70s, and the Gilbert & Georges of the '70s. We have kept them all.'

They have always preferred to collaborate on projects with their artists. Currently they are working on a scheme with Anne and Patrick Poirier for a cemetery at Gorgonzola near Milan that looks back to Etruscan necropolises. Massimo Valsecchi has always been most interested in artists whose work has an archaeological or anthropological basis. Art, for him, is a continuum. Moreover, they have never drawn any distinction between 'high art' and decorative arts. 'A small porcelain vase can tell you as much about a particular culture as any painting,' he insists.

The collection soon began to expand. 'Francesca was always interested in fragility – glass and ceramics,' he says. 'She wanted to buy art glass but I said that we had no money and that we had to concentrate on contemporary art. Then one day in 1972, when I had driven to Germany for a museum show of an artist we represented and was coming back through France, I stopped somewhere and bought the first of our French art nouveau vases,' he tells me, gesturing behind him to a windowsill full of Daum and Gallé cameo glass. Some 400–500 pieces followed – Loetz, Zsolnay, Tiffany, Scarpa. Even with 100 Tiffany vases stolen from their summerhouse in 2003, and the majority still in Italy, the gatherings of shimmering, iridescent Favrile glass vases on display here are stunningly beautiful (Fig. 3).

Much of this glass was acquired in New York where they used to spend three months of the year. Another three months were spent in Milan and another three in London, where Francesca's daughter Silvia was at school. 'You have to remember that when we moved here in the late '70s, it was completely bare and that everything has been slowly accumulated over time,' Valsecchi explains. Some of it is site-specific. The English sculptor David Tremlett had wanted to do a wall drawing for them but because the paintwork was new and slightly glossy, he ended up doing a work on paper to fit the space. In *TWIG* (1980), Gilbert & George appear to be walking down the staircase in the room and the one behind (Fig. 5). The

4. *Nude*, 1937, Stanley Spencer (1891–1959), oil on canvas, 61×91.5cm

'We have tried to buy historically interesting things which connect with an idea'

5. In the dining room hangs *TWIG*, 1980, by Gilbert & George. E.W. Godwin's 'Smallhythe' table sits to the left and the first table designed by Philip Webb for William Morris to the right

6. A Doccia porcelain Calvary group, *c.* 1744, based on an earlier model by Giovanni Battista Foggini (1652–1725), 69.9 × 38.1 × 71.1cm

artists also made the postcard piece *HM Queen Elizabeth II and the Parrots* for the couple, in allusion to the room's Morris & Co silvered and ebonised chairs.

Their first furniture acquisition was the Japanese-inspired 'Smallhythe' table (Fig. 5) designed by E.W. Godwin for his muse and lover Ellen Terry. Another Godwin piece stands nearby (Fig. 7). Then followed the prototype of the first table that Philip Webb designed for William Morris – they also have the last Webb table designed for Kelmscott. Most spectacular of all the British furniture is the 'Flax and Wool' cabinet from the first batch of 'medieval' painted furniture designed by the Gothic Revival architect and designer William Burges in 1858 (Fig. 8) which is, incidentally, by far the most expensive work of art that they have ever acquired.

Here is Chippendale made for Garrick, Bullock for Napoleon. We find Wedgwood inventing black basalt stoneware to recreate red-figure vases after the antique; and Voysey experimenting with the innovative – and costly – industrial material of aluminium in the rare 'Tempus Fugit' clock. The C.R. Ashbee cabinet ornamented with lilies (Fig. 3) is representative of the kind of advanced British design disseminated in Germany which led, ultimately to the foundation of the Wiener Werkstätte and the Bauhaus. This takes us to the Secessionist tables in the dining room, which belong to a suite of furniture that includes a 1903 desk and armchair in the Victoria and Albert Museum and chair in the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris. 'It is up to you to make the connections, to draw the different strings together,' says Valsecchi.

'We spent our life in museums,' explains Valsecchi. 'For us, the collection was a way of learning. We have tried to buy things which are interesting historically and which connect with an idea – which I am slowly building on – about how different kinds of things from different cultures can communicate and work together.' They were, however, also buying against the market.

They were, for instance, among the first to begin collecting early 19th-century *plein air* landscape oil sketches some 40 years ago, a wall of which flank the chimneypiece in the drawing room. They began buying predominantly Italian Old Master paintings in 1980: 'It seemed insane that you could buy an historic Renaissance painting for the price of something by a mediocre contemporary artist.' In just five years they amassed a remarkable collection – from Giovanni Cariani's *Judith with the Head of Holofernes* (*c.* 1485), currently on display in the Royal Academy's Giorgione show, to Annibale Carracci's strange *Allegory* and *Heads of Four Boys* (Fig. 2). Works by Domenico Fetti, Sassoferrato and Carlo Dolci also feature. 'After five years, it was over. Everything had become too expensive.'

Valsecchi regards the Frans Floris *Self-Portrait with Willem Key in discussion with Titus, Calus and Vitellius* as a kind of manifesto, an ideal of a classical Academy: 'It is about the importance of the roots of their culture, any culture.' As we talk, it is clear he is distressed by the missing Cariani, about the loss of balance in a group linked by heads in every medium that also extends to a rare New Ireland reliquary skull.

Some of the acquisitions reflect Valsecchi's persistence. It took about 20 years, for instance, to gather all three separated parts of the bravura Doccia porcelain Calvary group modelled by Giovanni Battista Foggini, a gift from

Marchese Carlo Ginori for the expected election of his wife's uncle, Cardinal Corsini, to the papacy (Fig. 6). 'Massimo is like a terrier who never lets go,' laughs Francesca. It belongs to a group of sculptural, largely monochrome white porcelains here. Another is the great Chelsea barn owl modelled by Nicholas Sprimont around 1750.

Other major purchases involved a generous measure of luck, like finding the fabulous Lombard commode in a strange hybrid neoclassical chinoiserie style – designed by Giuseppe Levati and made by Giuseppe Maggiolini around 1780 – in a small saleroom in Frankfurt. In the case of the Spencer nude of Patricia Preece, its acquisition process makes for a remarkable story. Valsecchi had always suspected that there was another horizontal nude of Preece that Spencer had painted for his Chapel of Love. One day he walked into Agnew's and discovered that the firm had just been offered the painting by the heirs of Sir James McGregor in Australia. After it was shipped over, Valsecchi took the painting back to Cadogan Square and hung it up on a nail without even asking the price, refusing to relinquish it again for framing or cleaning. 'I told them this would never happen to me again even if I have another 20 lives,' he remembers.

It is particularly pleasing that the loan to the Fitzwilliam in its bicentenary year will for the first time reunite this still slightly shocking nude with the museum's poignant 1937 *Self-Portrait with Patricia Preece*, a testimony to the frustration at the heart of the fraught relationship between Spencer and Preece. Alongside them will also hang the nude self-portrait drawn in pencil on the back of a roll of wallpaper – the very wallpaper depicted in these paintings. The loan will also allow for a display of Italian furniture spanning 1770–1840, unrivalled by any other British museum.

About 10 years ago, Francesca Valsecchi began looking for a suitable house in Rome, then Naples, but finally the couple decided on Palermo. 'It is a forgotten city – Sicily is a forgotten region – and a very pleasant city,' explains Francesca, 'but it is also a multicultural city which, after 10,000 years of invasions and exchange, can teach the rest of Europe something about tolerance and hospitality.' Valsecchi continues: 'We should view Palermo as a kind of laboratory for understanding our European identity, and learn from the past how to take the best of different cultures and blend them.'

They found the historic Palazzo Butera – two palaces in reality – built on the ancient city walls and boasting lush courtyards and a vast terrace looking out over the Gulf of Palermo. After the restoration, one part will be let as apartments. The Valsecchis intend to live on the *piano nobile*; the top floor will house their permanent collection, the ground floor will be a temporary exhibition space. 'We hope it will be ready in two years, and the ground floor will certainly be ready for Manifesta in Palermo in 2018,' says Francesca. As for the adjoining Palazzo Piraino: 'Our dream is to find a foreign university or foundation that would like to have a place in Sicily and let it on a long lease.'

'I have no idea what will come out of this crazy "Enlightenment" project,' Valsecchi says. 'It could be interesting.' So could their apartment: they will, of course, be starting from scratch once again. Ⓐ

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7. A silver plate mounted ebonised and Japanese lacquer cabinet, *c.* 1875, attributed to E.W. Godwin sits in the dining room

8. The 'Flax and Wool' Gothic Revival cabinet, 1858, by William Burges sits in the bedroom