

The estate of Stanley Spencer/Brigitteman Images. Photograph: The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge. Lent to the Fitzwilliam Museum by Massimo and Francesca Valsecchi

Delight and debate

Caroline Bugler admires a collection of extraordinary and beautiful art and furniture that has recently gone on loan to the Fitzwilliam Museum

WHEN Tim Knox, Director of the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge, first set foot inside the Cadogan Square flat belonging to Massimo and Francesca Valsecchi, he was astonished by the sight that greeted him. He had been introduced to the Milanese couple by a mutual friend, the art dealer Martin Levy, who thought that he would enjoy and understand the vast array of art, objects and furniture they had acquired over five decades.

'There was this amazing collection,' recalls Tim, 'with everything from wonderful English Art-and-Crafts and Gothic Revival pieces to strange Art Nouveau ceramics and works by Gilbert & George and Stanley Spencer. These were combined with Old Master pictures, Italian neo-Classical furniture and sculptural ceramics from Doccia.' The way the objects were displayed held plenty of surprises: 'You never knew what you might encounter—in the entrance hall,

a giant Meissen vulture crouched on an Anglo-Indian desk from Vizagapatam.'

The Valsecchis had, at one point, run a gallery in Milan specialising in contemporary art and Massimo had taught at the city's university. Scholarly, eclectic and quirky, the collection reflected their private passions and their desire to gather together objects that were interesting and unusual. Tim's visit was the first of many and marked the start of a friendship and a long-term plan.

'Massimo and Francesca explained that they were giving up their flat and were thinking of a new project and didn't want to take the collection, which they'd formed in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s in London, back to Italy with them,' he explains.

Following their acquisition of the enormous Palazzo Butera in Palermo and the beginning of an ambitious programme of restoration in 2016, they needed to find a new home for the art and objects in Cad-



Top: *Portrait of Patricia Preece and Self Portrait with Patricia Preece* by Stanley Spencer. Above: *Judith with the Head of Holofernes* by Giovanni Cariani

ogan Square. The couple enjoyed discussing the pieces, revealing their stories and juxtaposing them in ways that instigated unexpected conversations between them and were keen that, wherever the collection ended up, it should be used to spark new ideas and research.

For a while, they toyed with the idea of setting up their own museum, but the plan fell through, although Palazzo Butera will eventually have its own space for displays. They had previously collaborated with Italian universities to stage exhibitions and a university museum seemed a natural home because one of the main aims of the collection is to encourage people to look at and think about things in new ways.

As a result, the Fitzwilliam received the lion's share of the collection—the Valsecchis knew and particularly liked Cambridge as Francesca's daughter Silvia studied there—although some works have also been lent to the Ashmolean in Oxford.

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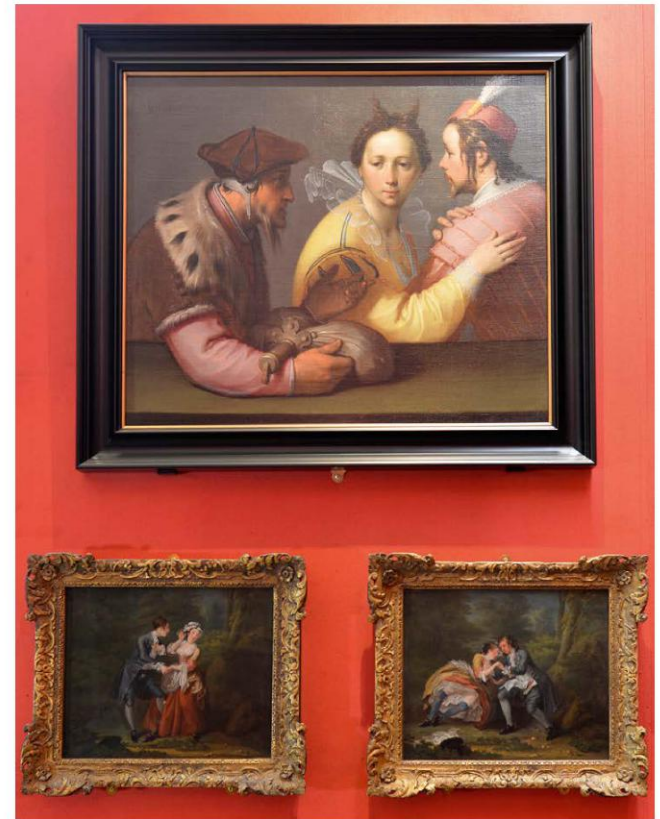
'They said "why don't you come and choose what you want"—I suppose I could have borrowed the whole lot, but I chose about 130 pieces,' Tim reveals. 'They've been very generous in saying "You take it and do what you like with it".'

Some of the works have a resonance with those already in the Fitzwilliam, particularly the museum's glass and ceramics, Italian paintings, Arts-and-Crafts furniture and the great Roman Baroque console table from Mentmore Towers. Others are the kind of objects rarely seen in British museums.

There are objects in the Valsecchi collection that Tim has longed to see in the Fitzwilliam, including a little group of darkly dramatic pictures by the Italian Baroque painters Giuseppe Maria Crespi, Domenico Fetti and Giulio Cesare Procaccini and some bizarre Italian furniture in a variety of whimsical styles.

Many of the pieces have an interesting provenance that undoubtedly formed part of their appeal for the Valsecchis, who enjoy a good story: there are a pair of ornate vases made for the King of Denmark; a Fuseli painting of Ajax that was one of a number of canvases commissioned by the Marquess of Cholmondeley to fill gaps on the walls at Houghton Hall after its art collection was sold to Catherine the Great; a chair made for Napoleon's Minister of Justice; and a little table that the architect-designer E. W. Godwin created for his lover, the actress Ellen Terry.

And there are some objects whose strange appearance stops you in your tracks, such as the Milanese daybed and a hybrid neo-



Cornelis Cornelisz van Haarlem's *The Choice Between Young and Old* (1597) (top)

Classical commode both embellished with Chinese figures, which were made at the end of the 18th century for Villa Silva near Milan, and a 17th-century X-framed folding stool encrusted with carved gilt decoration that would have seated a church dignitary during ecclesiastical ceremonies.

Fortunately for Tim, his hands were not tied by any strict stipulations about the display of the loans, so he was free to rearrange the collection and take an imaginative approach to display. 'One of the things we decided early on was not to group all the objects together by type or chronology—to show all the ceramics in the ceramic section, for example—so there's been a deliberate policy of placing things in thought-provoking contexts,' he says.

Objects of different dates and cultures are displayed together and, following the Fitzwilliam's usual practice, art in the

picture galleries is shown alongside furniture and applied art that complement it. The Valsecchi works have been so deftly integrated with the museum's pieces that, as we walk around the rooms, Tim has to remind himself where some of them are. Luckily for the visitor, they can be identified by their distinctive purple labels.

One of the most perfect examples of a Valsecchi piece that complements one already in the Fitzwilliam is Stanley Spencer's nude portrait of Patricia Preece. It hangs above the museum's own *Self Portrait with Patricia Preece*, which shows a naked Spencer gazing at his sometime muse and second wife. The two canvases were intended to be shown together in a 'Patricia Chapel' that was never realised, where they would have formed a triptych with the Tate's famous Spencer, *Double Nude Portrait of the Artist and his Second Wife*, in which the >





Above: Tiffany glass on display in Gallery Five, which is hung with mainly 19th-century British paintings. Below: A Christopher Dresser (1834–1904) Minton porcelain vase with gilt highlights

nude couple is portrayed alongside a raw leg of lamb. A further Spencer from the Valsecchi collection—a large nude self-portrait drawing on the back of a roll of wallpaper (the very one depicted in the portraits)—is on display in the 20th-century gallery.

It would be perverse not to hang the two Spencer paintings together, but, in other instances, the Fitzwilliam has clearly had fun juxtaposing things out of context to initiate conversations between less obviously connected pieces. Cornelis van Haarlem's *The Choice between Young and Old* (1597)—which shows a young woman choosing between two lovers, the older one holding a suggestively drooping gourd-like object—sits above the Fitzwilliam's much-loved saucy pair of Hogarths showing a young couple before and after a hasty sexual encounter.

In the museum's Courtauld Gallery, the Fitzwilliam's Titian showing Tarquin about to ravish Lucretia is accompanied by two Valsecchi paintings in an implicit comment

on the violent scene. 'We thought we'd have a bit of girl power here,' says Tim, so he has placed *Judith with the Head of Holofernes* by Titian's Venetian contemporary, Giovanni Cariani, nearby. This sinister image of the heroine holding a bloody knife in one hand and the head of the Assyrian general in the other is an extraordinary assertion of female strength.

Facing it is another Valsecchi decapitation scene, Andrea Solario's *Salome with the Head of John the Baptist*, in which the bejewelled protagonist holds a dish to catch the drips of blood from the Baptist's head held up by the executioner. A further Valsecchi picture of a severed head, this time belonging to a horse and attributed to the French painter Théodore Géricault, has

been artfully placed above *Isabella Saltonstall as Una in Spenser's 'Fuerie Queen'* by Géricault's hero George Stubbs, which features a lion and donkey, both of which are very much alive.

Then there are the Art Nouveau delights, which are one of the Valsecchi collection's highlights. A showcase in the room hung with mainly 19th-century British paintings contains a shimmering display of large vases created by Louis Comfort Tiffany and another case near the French Impressionist pictures features French cameo glass by the Daum Studio of Nancy.

Francesca Valsecchi has always been drawn to glass and ceramics, valuing them both for their fragility and for their sculptural qualities.



Milanese polychrome daybed of 1780 by Giuseppe Levati and Giuseppe Maggolini

They like that we can use their beloved collection in thought-provoking ways

Nearby are some fantastical ceramics with undulating zoomorphic and organic forms by the Hungarian Zsolnay factory, which is completely unrepresented in museum collections in this country. In the Valsecchis' London flat, these were placed on a large Roman neo-Classical table, but it is not possible to display them this way in a museum, where, for security reasons, loaned objects have to be kept behind glass. Nonetheless, as Tim says, 'the aim has been to preserve something of the zaniness of the original presentation'.

In the ceramics galleries downstairs, a virtuoso model of a barn owl by the Chelsea porcelain factory is, in fact, an extraordinary example of Rococo sculpture; a large white Meissen vulture has been clumsily patched together—but that's part of its story and its charm. 'I love the way that, when you look closely, you can see what a mess it is. At the beginning, the Meissen factory just couldn't make these enormous animals without them exploding in the kiln,' observes Tim.

In another case, a little Vincennes white model of Madame du Barry's lapdog made in the mid 18th century sits beside its coloured

counterpart in the Fitzwilliam's collection and two of the Fitzwilliam's Chelsea tureens in the shape of fighting cocks appear to peck at a Meissen gourd-shaped pot-pourri from the Valsecchi collection.

But what of the ultimate fate of the Valsecchi works at the Fitzwilliam? The museum's collections have been largely built up through the generosity of individuals who have given or bequeathed works over the two centuries of its existence, so might Massimo and Francesca follow suit? 'If this Cambridge experiment proves a great

success they might even consider donating the collection,' says Tim, 'but that's up to them. It's on loan for three years minimum and, in the meantime, they like the idea that we can use their beloved collection in thought-provoking ways.'

The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge (01223 332900; www.fitzwilliam.cam.ac.uk)

Arts-and-Crafts

The Fitzwilliam's collections of 19th-century art are complemented by the Valsecchis' outstanding Gothic Revival and Arts-and-Crafts furniture and objects. Among them is William Burges's first piece of painted architectural furniture, the 'Flax and Wool' cupboard (right) made for the clothes of his patron Herbert George Yatman, with a hinged 'roof' for the storage of his top hats.

Nearby are a mahogany cabinet designed by C. R. Ashbee for the Grand Duke of Hesse and a three-legged eagle 'throne' created by E. W. Godwin for Dromore Castle in Ireland. Two tables by Kolomon Moser, Francesca's particular favourites, reveal how neo-Classical motifs were adapted by the Vienna Secession.

All these are complemented by metalwork and ceramics by Christopher Dresser and an extraordinary clock case by C. F. A. Voysey made out of aluminium.

