The Secret Art Collection of a Reclusive Italian Tycoon Is Unveiled

The study of Francesco Federico Cerruti's villa in the hills above Turin, Italy. Few knew that Mr. Cerruti, who died in 2015, owned artwork that would later be valued at $600 million. Alessandro Grassani for The New York Times

By Scott Reyburn
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TURIN, Italy — The room is lined with dark red paneling and gold-framed mirrors. The 18th-century Italian furniture is opulently rococo. A sentimental late Renoir painting, “Young Woman with Roses,” hangs in front of shelves filled with finely bound bibliographical volumes. There are gilded knickknacks everywhere.

To today’s eyes, used to looking at art in bare interiors, the villa of the reclusive Italian collector Francesco Federico Cerruti, which houses his eclectic belongings, makes for an unusual setting. What would the contemporary art world make of it?
A Renoir painting, “Young Woman with Roses,” hanging in the study.
Alessandro Grassani for The New York Times

“I love it. It’s like an installation by an artist,” said Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, director of the Castello di Rivoli Museum of Contemporary Art, standing in the study of the newly restored villa that was owned by Mr. Cerruti. “Artists can’t stand white cubes any more,” she added. “You have to take the aura of the museum away so art can come alive again.”
Mr. Cerruti died in 2015 at 93. After his death, an agreement was reached between a foundation he set up and the Castello di Rivoli, just outside Turin in northwestern Italy, to make his remarkable collection accessible to the public. A few selected masterworks have been previewed at the Castello, the country’s first museum of contemporary art.

Mr. Cerruti’s “provençal” villa, which housed his collection, in the hills above Turin, Italy. Alessandro Grassani for The New York Times

Francesco Federico Cerruti during the construction of his villa in the late 1960s. via Castello di Rivoli Museo d’Arte Contemporanea, Rivoli-Turin

But the home of Mr. Cerruti’s collection, consisting of about 1,000 items from across the centuries, is the quirky Provençal-style villa he built in the 1960s, not far from the Castello, in the hills above Turin. Distinguished by its observation tower, which may have been inspired by the 10 Giorgio de Chirico paintings he owned — de Chirico had a major influence on the Surrealists — the house has been tactfully restored by the architects Baietto Battisti Bianco and Con3Studio and is now managed by the Castello. It officially opened to the public on Saturday; a minibus shuttles visitors from the Castello to the villa every hour.

“We’re in the era of collectors, and now we’ve collected a collector,” said Ms. Christov-Bakargiev, who was the artistic director of the 2012 Documenta festival of contemporary art before being appointed director of the Castello di Rivoli. She said she regarded Mr. Cerruti as a model of how wealthy individuals should acquire, enjoy and ultimately share their art. “He wanted his collection to become a public museum that was accessible to everyone,” she noted.
Mr. Cerruti was an extraordinary character, seemingly more late-19th-century fiction than early 21st-century fact. He was the chief of the family business, Legatoria Industriale Torinese, which held the contract to bind Italian telephone directories from the 1930s through the 1990s.

He never married. During the week, he lived in a drab apartment block near his factory in Turin. On Sundays, he would lunch alone at his villa, accompanied by orchids on the terrace in the summer or by the de Chirico works in the dining room in the winter, but he almost never stayed the night.

Mr. Cerruti had planned to die in his bedroom at the top of the tower, surrounded by medieval Italian paintings, but in the end, he passed away in a hospital in Turin. At the time, few knew that he owned art, books, carpets, ceramics, furniture and silver that would later be valued at $600 million. The public knew nothing of his personal life.
"His collecting was an expression of inner necessity," said Ms. Christov-Bakargiev, moving on to the music room and pointing to an early 16th-century painting by Dosso Dossi of the hermit St. Jerome, who conquered the temptations of the flesh, but who is also the patron saint of bibliophiles. Mr. Cerruti had a thing about images of reclusive men with books. Jacopo Pontormo's superb "Portrait of a Gentleman with Book and Gloves," from about 1540, is probably the finest.
Mr. Cerruti’s penchant for old-master paintings and luxurious 18th-century furniture harks back to the elaborate “Rothschild taste” of interior decoration, as found in the Nissim de Comondo museum in Paris and the Wallace Collection in London. To many, that might feel like an aesthetic that is jarringly out of our time, particularly as a home for modern art.

But Mr. Cerruti, who for decades was discreetly buying works from auctions and dealers, also had a discerning eye for 20th-century works.

The modest staircase of the villa, for instance, is lined with an astonishing group of paintings by Francis Bacon, Amedeo Modigliani, Paul Klee, Joan Miró and Fernand Léger. The walls of Mr. Cerruti’s mother’s bedroom (though she hardly ever slept there) are hung with Surrealist, Futurist and Expressionist masterworks, virtually all of which could grace the walls of the greatest museums of modern art.

All this poses a challenge for the Castello di Rivoli, which is currently showing “The City of Broken Windows,” a multimedia installation by the German artist Hito Steyerl. Are the two museums too much of a contrast?
“We’ll keep them in poetic tension,” Ms. Christov-Bakargiev said of the two venues. She has resisted inserting contemporary works in the Villa Cerruti, but has started an extensive program of commissions in which contemporary artists are invited to respond to the house and collection. A new piece by the British sound artist Susan Philipsz has been installed in the villa’s garden, and, back in the Castello, the Chinese artist Liu Ding has created an installation called “The Orchid Room: Cerruti’s Attic and the Earthly World” that was inspired by the collector’s solitary lunches.

Ms. Christov-Bakargiev pointed out that many museums displaying older material had turned to contemporary art to refresh their appeal in recent years. “We’re opening up to the past. That’s the novelty,” she said. “We’re doing an experiment, and the artists are embracing it.”

But is the Castello di Rivoli museum compromising on the mission of contemporary art to continually reinterpret and reinvent our sense of “now,” rather than that of “then” by embracing the partnership?

Ms. Christov-Bakargiev said she had asked the veteran Arte Povera artist Michelangelo Pistoletto for his opinion.

She said that Mr. Pistoletto had replied that if works by long-admired old masters cost less than one of his own early mirror works, then something had gone tremendously wrong. “He said it’s our fault, and we are the only ones who can fix it,” Ms. Christov-Bakargiev said.
The view over Turin from the Castello di Rivoli museum. Alessandro Grassani for The New York Times

Actually, as Mr. Cerruti would have pointed out, if he were still around poring over his sale catalogs, a major old master painting, say by Pontormo now costs tens of millions, while Mr. Pistoletto's current auction high is a slightly less giddy $4.9 million.

Still, he had a point. Today's digital age puts less and less value on the art of the past. And curators, artists — and one extraordinary collector — are trying to fix that in the hills above Turin right now.

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