The Steinway grand is forever closed in the gold-lined music room of the Villa Cerruti in Rivoli, near Turin, but a drama of hands plays off every surface to resonate across the silent space. In Dosso Dossi’s “St Jerome” the saint’s agitated fingers clutch a crucifix. Installed below, the nervy elongated hands of Giacometti’s “Standing Nude” are a visual echo. Light darts over sumptuous crimson fabric illuminating the hands of Paris Bordone’s “Lady Holding a Book”. In Pontormo’s “Gentleman with a Book and Glove” one limp hand looks flayed, as if its dangling glove were a skin; the other, grasping the book, gleams firm. Pontormo’s thin figure emerging from darkness finds a modern parallel in Man Ray’s “Harry Melvill”: a photograph of slender white hands gesturing in front of a sheet of black paper.

Federico Cerruti, a recluse who made his fortune as a bookbinder, saw himself in all these portraits of bookish interiority. Cerruti, who died in 2015 aged 93, spent not a single night at his villa — he visited on Sundays — but filled it with hundreds of works, from Renaissance panels to Cézanne’s luminous watercolour “The Spring”, Renoir’s voluptuous/serene “Young Woman with Roses”, Picassos, Warhols, Magritte, Schiele, furniture inlaid with tortoise-shell and mother-of-pearl, fine silver, Persian rugs.

Each object is exquisitely chosen, the best of its kind, and arranged within a series of lively, deeply considered, metaphysical encounters — for the contemplative pleasure of one man.
Most pieces were bought quietly in the past 30 years: the most recent, the Renoir, at Sotheby’s in 2014. Who knew? The villa and collection, worth €500m, were secrets until Cerruti’s death; his will stipulated that the nearby contemporary museum Castello di Rivoli manage and open them to the public. Launching next week, Villa Cerruti joins a lineage of precious, precise, perfectly
preserved, once-private Italian collections still housed in their original interiors: Rome’s Galleria Borghese, Peggy Guggenheim’s palazzo in Venice.

These rare places are exceptional not just for top-quality works and individual flair of conception; more, their finely tuned, intuitive, non-chronological displays give some feeling of how art engaged a particular sensibility, its force as emotional experience, in ways museums cannot do.

The Cerruti mise-en-scène is theatrical. Face-off on the staircase is Bacon’s “Study for Portrait IX”, his caged violent lover Peter Lacey on emerald green ground, versus Modigliani’s brilliant yellow arabesque “La Belle Espagnole”. Eight major early de Chiricos hang in the mirrored dining room, its reflections spinning illusionistic games with the mask and its silhouette “Metaphysical Muse”, the mannequin “Troubadour” against a framed blue exterior, the melancholy “Self-portrait with one’s own shadow”.

Giacomo Balla’s ‘Velocità astratta’ (1913) © Archivio Collezione Cerruti
De Chirico’s famous enigma “The Red Tower” (in Venice’s Guggenheim) inspired the construction, in 1967, of the round copper-hued tower that is the Villa Cerruti’s chief architectural feature and looks out to the city and hills. The collection’s symbolic charge builds through a progression over four floors culminating at the top of this tower, occupied by Cerruti’s never-used bedroom. It is hung with gold-ground quattrocento tempera pieces recording Christ’s life, from Gherardo Starnina’s warmly human mother and baby “Madonna of Humility” to Simone dei Crocifissi’s fluid, decorously refined “Crucifixion” triptych.

The ascension from corporeality to heavenly redemption begins with a Bacchanalia at ground level: a billiard table and wine cellar surrounded by Italian impressionist Federico Zandomeneghi’s Degas-influenced “Couple in a Cafe”, Robert Delaunay’s electric-bright “Portrait of Madame Carlier”, Felice Casorati’s joke “Scherzo: Eggs on a Green Rug”.
On the next floor the tower houses the music room: its piano sustains Dionysian allusions, while the introspective portraits point upstairs, to the Apollonian “Circular Room”, dominated by Pompeo Batoni’s neoclassical diptych “Allegory of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture” and “Apollo, Music and Poetry”. These were essential to Cerruti’s conception: he commissioned copies to hang there whenever the paintings were away on loan.
This metaphorical reading, chiming with the context of Turin as city of the occult — the Turin Shroud; closed collections of esoterica such as architect Carlo Mollino’s “Casa Mollini” — is only one of many paths through Cerruti’s array of delights. Another is the intriguing evolution of his taste, entirely unconcerned with fashion. His first purchase in 1969 of a Kandinsky watercolour of biomorphic forms, delicate as embroidery, was eventually paired on the wall, daringly, with a fierce inky abstraction on paper by Franz Kline, acquired after Cerruti saw Kline’s exhibition next door at Castello di Rivoli in 2004.

Texture, paper quality, the hand’s mark were consistent considerations — from childhood Cerruti helped in his father’s bookbinding workshop, only to transform the business postwar
from artisanal to industrial scale by inventing a new method of mechanical bookbinding. Soon he was supplying all Italy’s telephone directories, and it is a lovely irony that he spent the proceeds of automation on the unique and handmade.

Cerruti’s fascination with the craft of bookmaking is a story too: French illuminated Book of Hours manuscripts; early printed works including the elaborate woodcuts for the arcane allegory “The Dream of Poliphilus”, published in Venice in 1499; and the splendid 11-volume 17th-century Blaeu “Atlas Maior” from Amsterdam.

The books indicate a thinker who travelled the world through knowledge and ideas. This is a global collection whose beating heart nevertheless belongs to 20th-century Italy, demonstrated both in the metaphysical tenor of the installation — rendering the collection greater than the sum of its disparate parts — and in an outstanding group of 20th-century Italian paintings. De Chirico is key, but Cerruti’s choices dramatise beautifully the spiritual thread distinctive to Italian modernism.
It is already there in futurism: Giacomo Balla’s metallic curving lines fragmenting, multiplying, the image of a speeding car into a celestial vision in “Abstract Speed”. It is eloquent in post-1918 return-to-order artists: Mario Sironi’s eerie blend of futurism and classicism “Urban Landscape with Truck”, lyricist Filippo de Pisis’s enormous scalloped pink shells washed up in “Marine Still Life”.

In the 1950s-70s, Giorgio Morandi’s bottles, Alberto Burri’s gaping wounds on woven jute, Lucio Fontana’s rhythmically slashed canvases and Giulio Paolini’s “Ebla”, a trompe-l’oeil painted collage of blue-green marble overlaid on photographs of stone statues, with a slit opening on to an image of a picture frame, all muse on space, time, materiality and immateriality. Ebla is a buried Syrian city, capital of an ancient empire. In his private kingdom conjuring the past, Cerruti, his assistant Annalisa Ferrari says, “found perfection in art, which would not and could not disappoint him”. That enchanted kingdom of the collector’s imagination is embodied in the Villa Cerruti, now, marvellously, open to all.

Opens May 4, castellodirivoli.org

Follow @FTLifeArts on Twitter to find out about our latest stories first. Subscribe to FT Life on YouTube for the latest FT Weekend videos