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She's the Peggy Guggenheim of SoHo

Steward of a collection of 20th century art, Laura Mattioli made a future for the Futurists at the Center for Italian Modern Art in Manhattan.



Laura Mattioli Rossi, the founder of the Center for Italian Modern Art, at her home in SoHo, Manhattan. Above the fireplace are Cy Twombly's "Untitled," two parts, 1976, and ceramics by George Ohr. The artwork at right, seen through a window, is on a neighbor's wall. Credit...Victor Llorente for The New York Times

By Joseph Giovannini

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Think of her as Peggy Guggenheim in reverse. Laura Mattioli Rossi: an Italian, not an American, living in New York, not Venice, near Canal Street, not the Grand Canal. She established and runs a private foundation in New York, the Center for Italian Modern Art (CIMA), which recalls the private, one-woman Peggy Guggenheim Collection in Venice.

Since 2013, Mattioli has exhibited Italian art of the Interwar and Postwar period in the SoHo loft building on Broome Street where she also lives. Guggenheim displayed Surrealists and Abstract Expressionists of the same period in the Palazzo Venier dei Leoni, where she lived. The two heiresses, raised by nannies some 50 years apart, also shared lonely childhoods.

Her father's extensive collection of Italian Futurist art began in 1949, a birth date just before her own, 1950. "When the collection was born, I was born," she said last month. "The collection was my big, more successful sister — famous and more beautiful, and more pleasing to my father."



Early paintings by Giorgio Morandi, top, and a 1996 beeswax sculpture, below, by the German conceptual artist Wolfgang Laib share the space with modern furniture. Credit...Victor Llorente for The New York Times

Over an espresso and chocolates in the large, open kitchen inside the CIMA gallery above her loft, she casually mentions: “My mother tried to kill me when I was six months old. She was unstable and thought, after a long postnatal depression, that I caused her suffering.”

Until she was 12, hired help protected her from her mother’s violent outbursts, as her father, Gianni Mattioli, a successful cotton merchant, traveled for business and escaped emotionally into the sanctuary of his art collection, kept in a second apartment on the Via Senato in Milan. The family apartment was furnished with the antiques and historic paintings that his bourgeois business guests preferred. His daughter considered the collection her “good sister” filled with “good objects”: “They gave me fewer problems than people.”

If Guggenheim, in her winged sunglasses and dangling Calder earrings, was flamboyant, Mattioli dresses quietly, like the academic she is. She wears wire-rimmed glasses, and during a recent visit, her only splash of color was a hand-knit scarf tucked under a cabled burgundy cardigan. With a masters in art and a Ph.D. on the history of collecting, she taught for 15 years, and still has a studious air. When, at 23, she married Giovanni Rossi, an art conservator, she said, “I left with only the shirt on my back — my parents didn’t give me a penny.” (Mattioli and Rossi divorced in 2008.)



An exhibition view of “Staging Injustice: Italian Art 1880-1917,” at the CIMA, from left: a sculpture by Achille D’Orsi, 1876; a Giacomo Balla painting, 1902; a painting by Giuseppe Pellizza, 1907. Credit...Victor Llorente for The New York Times

In 1983, she unexpectedly inherited the collection, which had been promised to an emerging museum in Brera. But the museum was never built, and the Futurist collection, which grew when her father bought another famous collection in 1949, stayed in his ownership. He died in 1977, and her mother, in a surprising deathbed decision, bequeathed the entire collection to her daughter. Mattioli became the bride of the collection.

The collection had a biography of its own. Her father had left high school at 14 to support his penurious mother and work as a delivery boy in a cotton trading company. He found his own way in the 1920s, via Milanese galleries, into an exciting world of avant-garde artists who wanted to change the world. The impoverished aficionado, so malnourished he developed rickets, could afford just a few artworks. Only after ascending in the company did the situation change, especially when he married the daughter of the boss of a competing cotton trading company. The executive knew of his daughter's instability and arranged the marriage: "It was a deal I couldn't refuse," Gianni Mattioli wrote to his brother. Angela Maria Boneschi adored her tall, handsome, solicitous husband.

According to Laura Mattioli, when her family fled the bombardments in Milan to Lake Maggiore in 1943, her father witnessed [Italy's first Nazi massacre of Jews](#), left floating in the lake. Believing art could help make man "less of a beast," he resolved to collect art for its civilizing value. (After the massacre, she said her father clandestinely arranged the safe passage for Jews into Switzerland.) He eventually opened his collection to the public on the Via Senato, with its Futurist and Metaphysical paintings, and a wall of Giorgio Morandis. In 1949, he lent many works to the Museum of Modern Art's show, "[Twentieth Century Italian Art.](#)"

"My father wanted to tell the story of Italian art in the first half of the century," she said. "For me, he set the example of opening his collection to the public and lending it to museums."

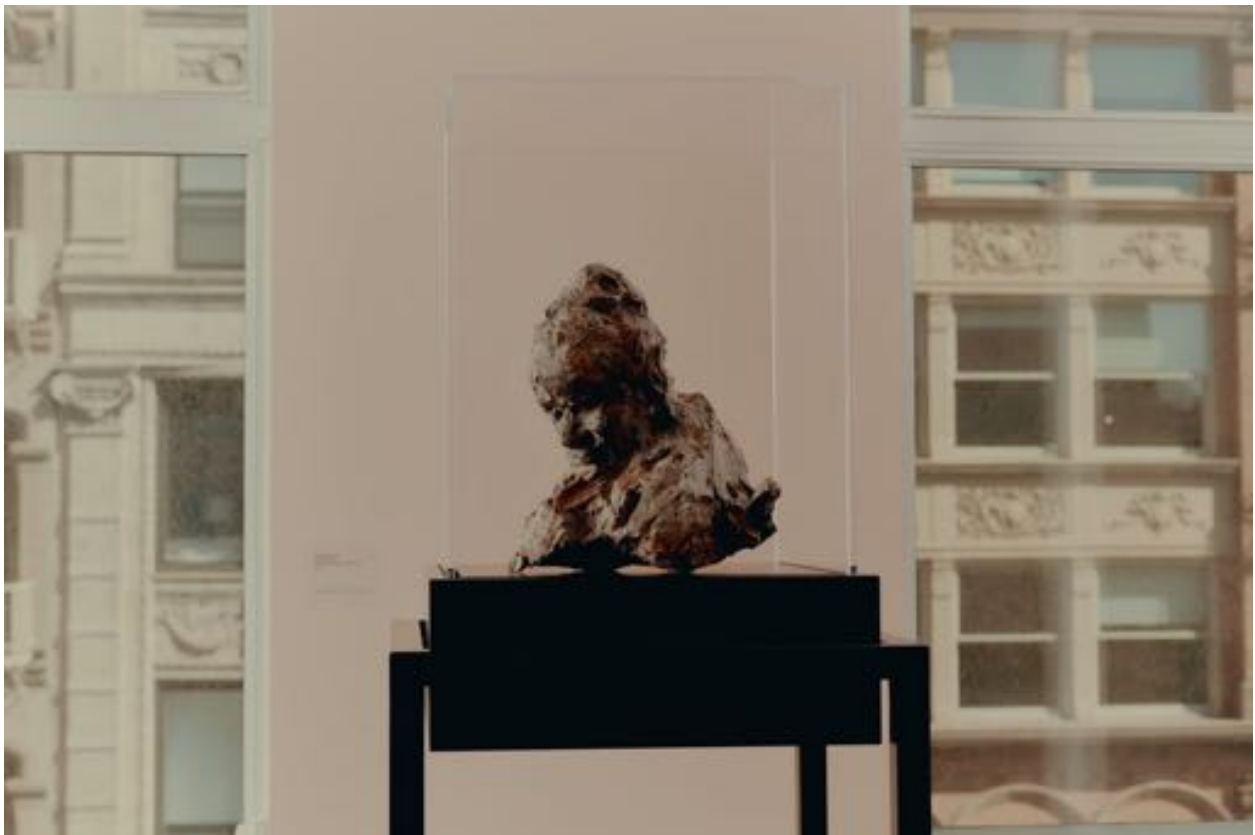


Mattioli's parents, Gianni Mattioli and Angela Maria 'Cici' Boneschi on their wedding day, Oct. 24, 1940. Her father's collection told the story of Italian art from the Futurist period. Credit...via Laura Mattioli

Because of export restrictions on art over 50 years old and other legal measures, the Italian Futurist collection cannot leave Italy as a whole or be broken up for sale. (She is allowed by law to export a limited number of works for exhibition.) In 1997, Laura Mattioli succeeded in arranging a long-term loan with the Peggy Guggenheim Collection, freeing her to work as an independent scholar and curator.

“In one stroke the Mattioli collection made the Peggy Guggenheim Collection the number one museum of Italian Futurism,” said Philip Rylands, then the director of the Guggenheim in Venice, and now head of the [Society of the Four Arts in Palm Beach, Fla.](#)

Her father, however, sent to Switzerland parts of the collection that didn't fall within Italy's rules, and in 2010, she sold several pieces, including a Picasso and a bronze cast of [Umberto Boccioni's "Unique Forms of Continuity in Space" \(1913\)](#), in order to open CIMA. In 2015, in a spectacular Christie's auction, [she sold Amedeo Modigliani's "Nu Couché" for more than \\$170 million](#), most of which she gave to her two sons as part of their patrimony.



Medardo Rosso's "La Portinaia (The Concierge)," 1890-1893. Credit...Victor Llorente for The New York Times

Her father's attitudes toward art and money helped shape her own. "He had a liberated attitude toward money, and consciously used it for spiritual and cultural needs and the common good," she said. "His social empathy came from the stinging poverty of his childhood." As part of its cultural outreach, CIMA funds scholars, mostly foreign, for research sojourns in New York.

For Mattioli, CIMA is a corrective. Italian Modernism had always been seen through a French lens, and her New York shows shed that perspective to better establish avant-garde Italian art as an independent rather than derivative movement. The first was [Fortunato Depero](#), the Futurist artist who had become a father figure for her father, followed by a show on Medardo Rosso, the sculptor and photographer.

"I'm full of admiration for her campaign to raise the profile of 20th-century Italian art stressing its originality, and to do so with such rigorous scholarship," said Rylands, adding, "The Depero and Rosso exhibitions brought attention to artists who generally aren't sufficiently understood."

In SoHo, as in Milan, there are two apartments, her own and the tall, open, Minimalist loft gallery. On Fridays and Saturdays, visiting days for the public, guests are welcomed with an espresso, as in a home; scholars guide visitors on Friday tours.



Antonio Mancini, "Venditore di cerini (The Match Seller)," 1872-78.
Credit...Victor Llorente for The New York Times

The current show of social realism, "[Staging Injustice: Italian Art 1880-1917](#)," embodies her father's notion of art with a social message. The face of "La Portinaia" ("The Concierge"), a sculpture by Rosso, a contemporary of Rodin, expresses the anguish of protracted poverty. In "Il Minatore" ("The Miner"), Ambrogio Alciati painted a Caravaggio-esque deposition from the cross, the body of a miner being mourned by a widow after an accident in the mine. He reinvents chiaroscuro with brisk, wispy, contemporary brush strokes. A haunting, tightly focused portrait, "Venditore di Cerini" ("Match Seller") by Antonio Mancini, depicts a mendicant boy peddling matches, with dashes of paint that John Singer Sargent would have applied to silk, here giving the effect of wistful sadness.

In her own loft downstairs, Mattioli collects the art of her time, like her father (and Peggy Guggenheim). Perfect visual pitch and daring seem to be the legacy she absorbed at home. Two startling sculptures by the New York sculptor Barry X Ball stand ten feet high, one a ghostly distortion of Michelangelo's Rondanini Pietà, carved in translucent onyx. Two faint and fragile pencil-and-watercolor drawings by Cy Twombly on torn paper hang over the gas-fed fireplace. Six early Morandis — from what Mattioli calls his "pudding" period because of the thickly applied oils — line a wall.

The furniture is Italian modern. Two Gio Ponti side tables stand beside the low-slung, midcentury Lady Armchair, in shaggy upholstery, by Marco Zanuso for Cassina. An inlaid Lombard-style desk and dresser from the family's Milan apartment line the entry hall.



Like her father, Mattioli collects the art of her time: Barry X Ball, "Pietà," 2011-18, after Michelangelo's Rondanini Pietà (1552-64). Credit...Victor Llorente for The New York Times

Besides her taste and sense of social mission, the legacy she brought from her father's collection was detachment. Since it was located outside her home, she came to feel the collection was something "I could live with, but also without." In 2018, she gave the entire Futurist collection to her younger son, Jacopo Rossi, a Roman Catholic priest. She gave the collection in Switzerland to her other son, Giovannibattista Rossi, an Alpinist who lives there.

"I don't know what the future of the Futurist collection could be," she said. "But my son has more energy, and he will run it for the third generation."

Under the auspices of the Italian Foreign Ministry, the Futurist collection was sent last year in a diplomatic pouch for exhibition to the State Russian Museum in St. Petersburg and the Pushkin Museum in Moscow. The movement had greatly impacted the Russian Avant-Garde in the early 20th century. The collection returned to Italy just 10 days before the recent start of the war in Ukraine.

Had it still been in Russia after the start, "We don't know what would have happened to the collection," she said. It is now headed to Milan on a five-year loan to the Museo del Novecento (Museum of the Twentieth Century), next to the cathedral.