

THE ART OF COLLECTING

A family shares its treasures again

VENICE

The Grimani collection, donated centuries ago, has come back home

BY ELISABETTA POVOLEDO

Visitors to this city have plenty of opportunities to explore the tastes of deep-pocketed, visionary collectors like Peggy Guggenheim, whose Grand Canal palazzo is a treasure chest of 20th-century American and European art, or François Pinault, who rotates his contemporary art collection between two Venice venues.

But that was true even hundreds of years ago. Take the case of the Grimani family.

In the 15th century, the family's palazzo near the church of Santa Maria Formosa, a short stroll from St. Mark's Square, became something of a must-see for A-list visitors to Venice (including Henry III of France), thanks to the rare and prestigious antique statuary collected by Giovanni Grimani (1506-83), patriarch of Aquileia, and before him his uncle Cardinal Domenico Grimani (1481-1523).

It is the good fortune of modern visitors that both Domenico and Giovanni did something practically unheard-of at the time, donating a significant part of their collection to the Republic of Venice on the condition that it be shown in public in a suitable setting.

"It's a marvelous gesture," said Stefano



On view Above, a bust of Cassius, center, in the "Room of the Doge." Left, works by Georg Baselitz in the palazzo's portico, in frames originally used for Giovanni family portraits.



This way Above left, detail of a stairway in the palazzo. Above, the entrance to the palazzo, on the San Severo canal.

Family history Below, detail of a ceiling fresco in Palazzo Grimani, a public museum in Venice. Right, the so-called Tribuna, a room built by Giovanni Grimani (1506-83) to showcase his collection.



Mason, the author of several books on Venetian collectors.

"It's the first case of a donation for public consumption," she said. "They wanted everyone to see it. It was an exceptional gesture in every way."

In 1590, the entrance hall of the Marciana Library, in front of the Doge's Palace, was earmarked to host the Grimani collection, and the public museum opened six years later. The Grimani donations eventually came to form the core of Venice's Archaeological Museum, now housed in an elegant 18th-century building on the south side of St. Mark's Square.

The recent restoration of the ceiling of the entrance hall and the redesign of the museum's layout provided an excuse to bring a number of those classical sculptures back to the Palazzo Grimani after nearly 400 years.

A first lot of sculptures was installed in 2019, in nooks and crannies and on pedestals in the so-called Tribuna, a

room built by Giovanni to showcase his collection. They were part of an exhibition titled "Domus Grimani," curated by

Toto Bergamo Rossi, director of the nonprofit Venetian Heritage Foundation, and Daniele Ferrara, who oversees the Veneto's Regional Directorate for Museums.

The palazzo had been open as a public museum since 2008, much restored but scantily decorated. Covid notwithstanding, once the statues went on display, visitors to the palazzo multiplied many times and the Tribuna became an Instagram darling.

Last year, another wing of the palazzo was refurbished, and about 20 statues were installed in the "Room of the Doge," originally an art-rich hall honoring the family patriarch Antonio Grimani (1434-1521). He was a spice merchant whose military and political acumen led to his selection as doge in 1513.

"I have to say that I didn't expect that kind of wow," Mr. Bergamo Rossi said

during a walk-through a few months ago.

In time, some works will return to the archaeological museum in exchange for other pieces from the Grimani collection, while copies are also being made of some works essential to both places. "Through collections such as this, we can reconstruct the history of the republic," Mr. Ferrara said.

The Grimani family had a leg up when it came to collecting. Domenico lived in Rome for many years, mediating between the pope and the Venetian republic. Many ancient sculptures were found on land the family had bought on the Quirinal Hill, once site of an ancient Roman bath and garden. All Domenico had to do was dig.

The family's economic ties in the Adriatic, on the other hand, gave them access to Greek originals. Later, Giovanni dedicated his life to buying ancient works of art, filling the collection with purchases from traveling merchants

and local antiquarians.

When Giovanni decided to renovate the palazzo in the second half of the 16th century, he called upon a stable of Tuscan and Roman architects, decorators and painters, like Giovanni da Udine, who worked with Raphael in the Vatican, and Federico Zuccari, who painted a monumental staircase. The palazzo is "really an anomaly," said Ms. Mason, the art expert.

Last year, the palazzo's portico — a ceremonial hall on the piano nobile, or main floor — got a new look when 12 large works by the German painter Georg Baselitz were installed in large stucco frames originally used for portraits of the Grimani family. Visiting the palazzo last fall, the galleryist Lorran O'Neill remarked that the Baselitz paintings, which will remain on long-term loan, were "so modern, but they completely look as though they have been here forever."

Gagosian Galleries and Venetian Her-

itage are producing an exhibition of works by the American artist Mary Weatherford, in open at the museum on April 20 during the Art Biennale. Titled "The Flying of Marryas," the paintings are inspired by the Titian painting of the same name.

The relationship between Venetian Heritage and state culture officials "has been very interesting" and fruitful, Mr. Ferrara said.

In 2020, a private collector decided to sell a portrait of Giovanni Grimani attributed to Domenico Tintoretto. The state did not have "immediate resources" to buy it, said Mr. Ferrara, so he turned to Venetian Heritage, which raised the funds, bought the painting, and donated it to Italy. Naturally, it ended up in Palazzo Grimani.

"It's so nice to have it. After all, he is what the Venetians call the "patrio de casa" or head of the household, Mr. Bergamo Rossi said of the portrait. "And I think he is very happy to be here."