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CHAPTER 16
The Art of Acquisition

MARIO’S PASSION FOR PAINTINGS, especially of the Italian schools, was the centerpiece of his life from childhood onward. He had absorbed everything that was available to him in Rome and Florence—museum collections, private holdings, paintings on the Italian and London markets, whatever he could manage to see. He had an excellent visual memory—a prerequisite for a connoisseur—and, due to his work as a restorer, familiarity with the materials and techniques of paintings from every period. Until he went to New York, scope for his talents was limited. While he had been able to buy paintings on the London art market just after the war, he did not have the money to acquire important works—only what the Palma Gallery could sell to their Italian clients, paintings that he had purchased for five or ten pounds. Mario was never a salesman. That was Bardi’s purview.
Mario preferred to stay in the background and was a master at keeping his own counsel.

It is the dream of every great connoisseur to build a collection, and Mario was no exception. One might think that with enough money it is easy to do, but collecting requires more than that. Some knowledge of the school or period is essential, as is taste, in the sense that the collector must possess an aesthetic response to quality and be able to discriminate among similar pieces to choose only the best examples. It is essential to obtain the best expert advice, but ultimately a great collector must follow his own instincts, which requires courage and confidence.

Mario’s opportunity to acquire great paintings came when he went to work for the Kress Foundation. During that period, from 1950 until 1961, extraordinary works of art were available. It has always been the case that wealthy and determined collectors are offered many of the important pieces that come on the market, and the Kress Foundation was then considered a major player. The net earnings of the Kress Company in 1952 were $9,148,011, and the foundation owned 43 percent of the shares. The equivalent amount today would still be a vast amount of money, but now it would not be enough to accomplish what was possible then. The price of old master paintings was much lower in the 1950s than it is today, as important works cost hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of dollars. In those days, the Kress Foundation could buy whatever it wanted, and the dealers beat a path to their door.

Rush Kress was wholly committed to ensuring that his brother’s wishes were carried out, and he pursued new acquisitions with intensity, all the while keeping an eye on the bottom line. The most expensive purchase was the tondo of the *Nativity* by Fra Angelico and Filippo Lippi from the Cook Collection, which had been sent to the United States for safekeeping during the war, after which it was put up for sale. Just as it was about to be sent back to England in 1947, the foundation purchased it from the dealer Francis Drey for $400,000. In 1955, *A Lady in Her Bath* by François Clouet was acquired from Rosenberg & Stiebel for $365,000. Other highly
important paintings purchased in the $150,000–260,000 range included Jacques-Louis David's full-length portrait of Napoleon; Dürer's double-sided *Madonna and Child* and *Portrait of a Man*; Titian's portraits of Doge Andrea Gritti and Vincenzo Cappello; and the Grünewald *Crucifixion*. It was a golden age.

Every five years, the foundation held an exhibition of its recent acquisitions at the National Gallery. The first was in 1946. In preparation for the 1951 exhibition, Rush Kress, William Suida, Guy Emerson, and Mario scoured the premises of every dealer in New York for suitable paintings to add to the list, which already included masterpieces by Botticelli, Mantegna, Sebastiano del Piombo, Cosmé Tura, and Titian.

Two of the paintings that were featured in the 1951 exhibition had a tarnished provenance, although the foundation was not aware of this when they were purchased. In 1949, Wildenstein offered them *The Feast of Herod* by Benozzo Gozzoli, one of the most charming works by this painter, and *Giuliano de' Medici* by Sandro Botticelli, which, like the Clouet, cost $365,000, among the highest prices the foundation ever paid for a painting.

The paintings had once belonged to Count Vittorio Cini (1885–1977), a Venetian industrialist with complex interests in various sectors of the economy, and an art collector. He had received many honors and favors from Mussolini during the early years of Fascism, but had broken with the dictator after he made a pact with Hitler and entered the war. When Germany invaded Italy in 1943, the SS arrested many anti-Fascists, among them Vittorio Cini, who was sent to the Dachau concentration camp. His son, Giorgio (1918–1949), tried every diplomatic channel to liberate his father, but without success. Finally, he learned that it would be possible to buy his father's release by bribing the German commander with gold. To obtain the precious metal, he
clandestinely sold two paintings from his father’s collection, *The Feast of Herod* and the portrait of Giuliano de’ Medici discussed earlier. He managed to secure his father’s transfer to a prison hospital in Friedrichroda and then, in a dramatic rescue by air, brought him to the safety of Switzerland.¹

When Mario arrived at the Kress Foundation in 1949, these two paintings had already been purchased for the National Gallery from Wildenstein’s, and Mario cleaned and restored them, finding that they were both in excellent state under layers of old, yellow varnish.

When the Italian government learned that an American museum had acquired two paintings formerly owned by Count Cini, one of the most important Italian art collectors, he was charged with illegal exportation, a criminal offense. Although the exportation of works of art without a license is illegal in Italy, the regular importation of art works into the United States is not forbidden by any law, so neither the foundation nor the National Gallery had any obligation to comply with the Italian government’s demands. Their only recourse was to pursue the former owner. Cini asked Wildenstein if he could buy back the paintings but they had already been sold. Federico Zeri, advisor to both Count Cini and Wildenstein at this time, contacted Mario and asked if he would meet with Cini, who was desperate, to discuss if there were any way he might have the paintings back from the Kress Foundation. Mario wrote:

*I was in Rome on my summer holidays and went to see Count Cini at the Grand Hotel where he lived together with his wife, Lyda Borelli, a beautiful woman who had been one of the great actresses of the Italian cinema. He offered to pay the Kress Foundation the price paid to Wildenstein, plus interest, and all the expenses they had incurred in acquiring the paintings. I explained to him that the paintings had already been given to the National Gallery, the transaction completed, and the cost of the paintings accounted for in the tax filings; therefore, it was quite impossible to return them.*² *Count Cini had been pleading with me and was extremely upset. I felt very sorry for him, but I had to represent the position of the Kress Foundation and the*
interests of the National Gallery. Sadly, I bid him farewell and he graciously thanked me for what little I had been able to do for him.

These events followed closely on the heels of a tragedy in Count Cini’s life. His son Giorgio’s private plane crashed as it neared the landing strip in Cannes and he was killed. In his memory, Count Cini purchased the Isola di San Giorgio Maggiore in Venice, where he created a foundation with a rich endowment that is still active today.³

The scandal over the Cini pictures continued until at least 1956, when Nicky Mariano, Bernard Berenson’s companion, wrote to Virginia Kress, pleading Cini’s case, reporting that the attacks in the press had worsened. She asked if Rush would be willing to give the two paintings back in exchange for other works of art, or, if not, to write to Cini “telling him that this is impossible” so that

---

79. Benozzo Gozzoli, *The Feast of Herod and The Beheading of Saint John the Baptist*, 1461–1462, tempera on panel, National Gallery of Art, Washington DC, 9.4” × 13.5” (23.8 × 34.5 cm).
he would have something to prove that he had made every effort to repatriate the two pictures.⁴

Mitchell Samuels of French & Company was one of Rush Kress’s favorite dealers. He was a cordial and charming man with a wonderful sense of humor, always ready with a joke or a story. Rush loved to listen to his tales of the great chases of an earlier generation of collectors, such as Frick and Widener.⁵ The gallery was located on East 57th Street, in a five-story building crammed with every kind of art object: majolica, tapestries, Renaissance bronzes, sixteenth-century Venetian glass, antique cut velvet brocade, paintings, antiquities, and European furniture dating through the eighteenth century. Mario said it was like Aladdin’s Cave. Everyone loved to go there, except for John Walker, who found Samuels’ stories tedious.⁶

Mario’s first visit to French & Company was in late 1949. That day, ten paintings were purchased, ranging from $4,000 to $155,000. They included Tiepolo’s Queen Zenobia Addressing Her Soldiers ($40,000) and El Greco’s Holy Family ($30,000). The highest price was $155,000 for a large panel by the Master of the Saint Lucy Legend. The story of that acquisition, as recounted by John Walker, reflects the give and take that went on between the foundation and the National Gallery.⁷

The major painting this dealer still possessed, and which he had been unable to sell to these giants of collecting, was a large and very darkened panel of uncertain authorship for which he wanted half a million dollars. I thought the price ridiculous and the panel, an “Assumption of the Virgin,” not particularly desirable; but Rush Kress loved bargaining with his friend, always beginning his negotiations with the phrase “You’ll have to sharpen your pencil.” How sharp the pencil became in the case of this particular painting I do not know, but it was
acquired against my advice and contrary to my better judgment. When it was cleaned, however, I recognized that I was entirely wrong. It proved to be in miraculous condition. Although its authorship remains uncertain, it is generally considered to be by the Master of the Saint Lucy Legend, whoever he is, but I ruefully admit it is one of the most beautiful Flemish pictures in the entire National Gallery.

The foundation asked musicologist Emanuel Winternitz from the Metropolitan Museum to study the instruments the angels are playing. He found that each is an accurate rendering of a known
fifteenth-century example, and the painting actually cleared up confusion about some of them.

Carpe diem: Grünewald and Jacques-Louis David’s Napoleon in His Study

After the 1951 exhibition, a moratorium was declared on new purchases until suddenly, in 1952, John Walker learned that a painting by the rarest of masters, the mysterious German mystical painter Matthias Grünewald, a privately-owned Crucifixion, had been

81. Mattias Grünewald, The Crucifixion, 1511–1520, oil on panel, National Gallery of Art, Washington DC, Samuel H. Kress Collection, 24.1” × 18.1” (61.3 × 46 cm).
released for sale in Vienna. Guy Emerson broached the matter to a skeptical Rush Kress: “An emergency matter has come up which I hesitate to lay before you … however our policy of not buying paintings at the moment always had the qualification that we must consider exceptional items when they came on the market.” The price was $260,000, and if they did not act quickly there were other buyers, including dealers, who would snap it up. Rush Kress was not particularly impressed by the photograph—Grünewald was not his cup of tea—but, luckily, he went along with his advisors.

In 1954, the Kress Foundation acquired a life-size, full-length portrait of Napoleon, Emperor of France, by Jacques-Louis David. He is shown in his study in the Tuileries, standing in front of his desk, the legs of which are adorned with gilded cat-like heads.

82. Jacques-Louis David, *Napoleon in His Study*, 1812, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington DC, 80.3” × 49.2” (203.9 × 125.1 cm).
The imposing throne chair was designed by David. The clock reads 4:13, which is probably in the early morning, since the candles have burned down. The overall effect of the painting is very colorful, with red velvet, green plush carpet, gilding, and the magnificently painted red, white, and blue uniform adorned with large medals and epaulets. It is the first version of this composition, of which the artist made at least four replicas, and was painted for a Scottish Catholic nationalist and admirer of Napoleon, the immensely wealthy Alexander Douglas, 10th Duke of Hamilton. The scholarly consensus is that the painting is entirely by David with the possible exception of some of the background. Often the artist would assign parts of his larger works to one of his able assistants, who included Ingres and Baron Gros.

After the painting had passed through various English collections, Wildenstein’s purchased it in 1951. To celebrate the arrival of the painting at the National Gallery, the dealers hosted a formal dinner. Georges Wildenstein had managed to acquire a Napoleon brandy for the occasion, bottled in 1812, the same year the portrait was painted. After dinner, the guests eagerly awaited this nectar. A taste was poured into tiny glasses so that everyone could have a sip. Mario recalled that it was a strange, grayish, turbid liquid that, when everyone raised their glasses, tasted like dishwater. Such a disappointing end to the story of this great acquisition!

Serendipity and Chance: Marchesa Doria Spinola, Doge Andrea Gritti and Nino Pisano

Mario remembered each thrilling discovery made in the 1950s as if it had happened just yesterday, and his memoir is rich with such stories. Sometimes ingenuous errors could lead to happy outcomes when skill and intuition combined in evaluating a painting.

Not long after I arrived in New York, Mr. Kress asked me to come to the apartment at 1020 Fifth Avenue and have a look at the paintings that were displayed there. As
we looked around, Mr. Kress stopped in front of a portrait of a woman and asked me what I thought of his Leonardo. I looked at the painting and said, “I’m sorry, Mr. Kress, but this painting is not by Leonardo, it is by Giampietrino.” Giampietrino was a Milanese follower of Leonardo. I don’t know if he was ever his pupil. I asked Mr. Kress where they had acquired the painting and he told me Duveen’s. He was naturally very upset and immediately called the Kress Foundation’s lawyer, Mr. Hawkins. Mr. Kress, Mr. Hawkins, and I went to Duveen’s, which at that time was still in its original premises on Fifth Avenue and 56th Street, a magnificent Beaux-Arts building by Carrère and Hastings, the architects of the Frick mansion, which Duveen had commissioned for the New York gallery. It has since been torn down and the site is now occupied by the Steuben Glass building.

83. Peter Paul Rubens, The Marchesa Doria Spinola, 1606, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington DC, 60” × 39” (152.5 × 99 cm).
We explained to Mr. Edward Fowles that the Kress Foundation believed he had sold them a painting that was not by Leonardo but by Giampietrino and we would like him to take it back. Mr. Fowles was consternated and pointed out that the picture had been published as a Leonardo by William Suida, the curator of the foundation. We insisted and much discussion among the lawyers ensued. Finally, not wishing to lose an important client, Mr. Fowles agreed that we could choose something else from their stock. Mr. Kress asked me to have a look around, and I immediately spotted a beautiful portrait by Peter Paul Rubens of the Marchesa Doria Spinola, as well as a small Madonna and Child, called studio of Verrocchio, which I believed was by the young Leonardo. After more negotiating, it was agreed that we could have the two paintings for a small additional payment and the deal was settled. The Rubens is

84. Madonna and Child with a Pomegranate, by the young Leonardo, before 1475, according to Mario. Oil on panel, National Gallery of Art, Washington DC, 6.5” × 5.3” (16.5 x 13.4 cm).
today in the National Gallery as is the little Madonna and Child, which is attributed to Leonardo. I found an antique fifteenth-century tabernacle for the Madonna and Child to replace the charming, though modern, frame designed by Ferruccio Vannoni, with which Duveen had framed the painting.

Mario would forcefully disagree with the present attribution of the little Madonna and Child to Lorenzo di Credi, as well as the date assigned, 1475–80. His opinion was that Leonardo, as a young apprentice in Verrocchio’s studio, made this little panel before he painted the angel and the distant landscape in the Baptism of Christ in the Uffizi, which is dated 1472–75.

The Doge Andrea Gritti enjoyed a much happier fate.

One morning, I was working in the studio at 250 West 57th Street when I received a phone call from Mr. [Jack] Henschel of Knoedler Galleries. He said they had just received a Titian, the portrait of the Doge Andrea Gritti, which they had acquired in Vienna, and would I like to see it. My first thought was that it must be a copy of the portrait from the Czernin Collection, but I thought I might as well have a look at it anyway. I met Henschel at Manhattan Storage. The canvas was off its stretcher and had been rolled, face out, fortunately. We unrolled it on the floor. It was in excellent condition under an old discolored varnish. It had never been relined and there was a drawing, a study of the Doge, on the back of the canvas. It was clear that it was the original, and I said to Henschel, “This picture must have been stolen!” “No,” he replied, “it has been granted a regular export license by the director of the Vienna Gallery, Dr. Buschbeck, who has studied it and concluded that it is by Palma Giovane, an assistant of Titian.”

I could hardly believe my eyes and ears. I immediately called Mr. Kress, who was at the foundation that morning, and told him he must come right away and to bring Suida with him. When they arrived, Suida, who was himself Viennese, was as incredulous as I had been and at first also thought that we were being offered a stolen picture. Mr. Kress was much taken by the strong personality of the Doge that the artist had succeeded in capturing. Needless to say, we bought it there and then.

When the painting arrived in my studio, I reinforced the edges with strips of canvas and mounted it to a stretcher. It is exceedingly rare to find a painting of the sixteenth century that has never been relined. The linen was in good condition and
there was the drawing on the reverse, and for all these reasons I did not wish to reline it. I searched among our collection of antique frames looking for something suitable for this great portrait. I found a sixteenth-century Venetian frame by Luca Mombello, Titian’s frame maker, which was about the right size. I had the frame sent to the studio and tried the painting in it. To my wonder and amazement, it fit the picture perfectly. As paintings were not standard sizes in the sixteenth century, this is a semi-miraculous occurrence, and it is possible that this was, in fact, the original frame. The whole affair was serendipitous. The same cannot be said for the fate of Dr. Bushbeck. Sometime later, on one of his frequent visits to Venice, he was walking along the molo when he was swept into the canal by a wave. His body was carried out to sea and

85. Titian, *Doge Andrea Gritti*, 1546–1548, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington DC, 52.6” × 40.6” (133.6 × 103.2 cm).
never recovered. I have always believed that this was a vendetta on the part of Titian who was angered by the man’s presumption and stupidity. In any case, the painting is now one of the treasures of the National Gallery.

When styles and taste change, works of art are sometimes modernized to conform to contemporary preferences, masking their original beauty and it is an occasion for rejoicing when the eye of an expert and the skill of a restorer work in concert to return such altered objects to their initial conception.

In 1948, Count Contini bought two sculptures from the Florentine art dealer Gianni Salocchi. The life-size wooden figures represented the Virgin and the Angel of the Annunciation. Sometime in the seventeenth century, the parish priest of the church who owned them decided to bring them up to date. He must have considered them too severe and he had a sculptor make them look baroque by adding draperies made of gilded papier mâché. Salocchi had bought them from a church near Pisa. No one had understood the importance of the two statues because of the baroque trappings but Salocchi intuited that they were much older than the seventeenth century because of the character of the heads. He had them brought to his gallery and began to remove the applications of papier mâché. Underneath, he found the original drapery, sculpted in wood in a style consistent with the heads.

Before the baroque folds were added, the statues had been repainted numerous times, but some of the original polychrome survived. The count asked me if I would mind cleaning them, and I told him that I could work on them in Rome so he agreed to send them to me. The work took a long time because of the numerous repaintings in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries before the baroque drapes were added. Beneath these, the statues were extraordinary. The count, accompanied by Gualtiero Volterra, came to Rome many times while I was restoring them over a period of six months. When they were finished, I sent them back to Florence.

Roberto Longhi was the first person to see them and he attributed them to Nino Pisano [the most important Italian sculptor of the fourteenth century]. Then [Cesare] Gnudi saw them and said the same. The count wanted to offer them to Kress, his most important client. Gianni Salocchi had obtained export permits before he removed the baroque draperies, so there was no problem about sending them out of the country. At around the same time, the count had prepared a large group of
paintings to sell to Rush Kress, among which were several important works—mainly paintings that Gualtiero Volterra had bought in London and Paris. [The shipment was sent to New York] where the negotiations were long and difficult involving many meetings between the count and Mr. Kress.

Volterra always participated because the count’s English was not very easy for Mr. Kress to understand. During one of these encounters, the count must have said to Mr. Kress, in his unique brand of English, something to the effect that, if considered as just a part of the whole package of paintings, the sculptures were practically free. What Kress instead heard was that the count was making a gift to him of the sculptures and he immediately stood up and embraced Contini, thanking him profusely. Volterra, who had understood how the mistake happened, said to the count with exaggerated calm, “My dear count, do you know what you have just done? You have made a gift to Mr. Kress of the two sculptures.” Naturally the count could not go back on his word and tell Mr. Kress that there’d been a misunderstanding. He had to make the best of the situation. The mistake cost him $1 million, which is what the sculptures were worth at that time. In fact, Rush gave the two sculptures to the National Gallery shortly afterward and took a deduction of $1 million.

This was not the most extraordinary thing in the story of the two sculptures. [Some years later], when the Kress Foundation decided to publish a catalogue of the entire collection, the sculpture volume was entrusted to Professor Ulrich Middeldorf [University of Chicago and Kunsthistorisches Institut, Florence] who, after examining the sculptures, declared that they were fakes and that was how he intended to catalogue them. I was violently opposed to this ridiculous idea and decided to take myself to Florence where Middeldorf was living to talk to him about the sculptures and tell him what I knew about them. I went to Florence where I had lived for quite some time while I was restoring paintings for the count. Florence is a city that always puts me in a good humor because of all the interesting memories it evokes in my mind. But on this occasion, I was not happy. I was not looking forward to trying to convince Professor Middeldorf to change his mind. I made an appointment and went to see him. I noticed that he received me somewhat coldly, perhaps because he had been informed by Mary Davis of my reaction to his ideas about the sculptures. I began by telling him the story of how I had seen the sculptures when they still had pieces of papier mâché baroque folds nailed to them and of the many layers of repaint that I had removed, the oldest one, in tempera, dating back to at least to 1500, followed by repaintings with oil colors in the seventeenth century.
He listened to me, but I could tell that in his heart he didn’t want to believe the evidence I was presenting. As far as he was concerned, all these facts were part of an elaborate ruse by the forger to establish the antiquity of the sculptures. Such an intricate plot was completely absurd, like a James Bond film! To demonstrate how knowledgeable he was on the subject of forgery, he then informed me that the portrait of a woman of the Sassetti family by Domenico Ghirlandaio in the Thyssen Collection was also a fake, done by a clever forger at the end of the nineteenth century. [Mario had cleaned the painting and knew it well.] We discussed fakes and forgers, but he continued to insist on his opinion of the sculptures: according to him, they were copies after an Annunciation in marble in the church of Saint Catherine in Pisa. To this I answered that it was not unusual for sculptors at that time to begin with a wooden model that was later executed in marble. We talked for nearly three hours, and I

86. Nino Pisano, *The Annunciation: The Virgin and The Angel*, 1325–1350, wood, polychromed and gilded, National Gallery of Art, Washington DC, Samuel H. Kress Collection, 62.7” × 18.6” × 14.1” (159.4 × 47.3 × 36 cm).
cannot say that at the end of our conversation I had succeeded in changing his mind. In the Kress catalogue, he compromised and called them copies after a fourteenth-century Pisan artist, and, at the end of his entry, adds that Mario Modestini has shown the copies to be contemporary with the originals. Many years later, I told this story to John Pope-Hennessy who told me that I was right and the two figures are “absolutely” by Nino Pisano.

The two sculptures were featured in the 1956 exhibition of recent Kress acquisitions at the National Gallery along with 83 paintings and over 25 other sculptures. On display were three Titians; two Tintorettos; the Grünewald Crucifixion; David’s Napoleon; the Clouet, as well as works by Cimabue, El Greco, Fragonard, Ghirlandaio, Goya, Memling, Pontormo, Rubens, Saenredam, Paolo Veneziano, Veronese, Watteau, and Zurbarán, to name but a few. The sculptures included Desiderio da Settignano’s Tabernacle, Bernini’s bust of Monsignor Francesco Barberini, and Houdon’s bust of Cagliostro.

Mario had every reason to be proud. Not only had he been involved with the acquisition and restoration of all the paintings, but he had also installed the exhibition, something on which Rush Kress always insisted, whether for the Kress permanent installation or the special exhibitions, despite the fact that it was a gallery rule that only the director was allowed to do the hang. He looked forward to what would be added within the next five years.