



FRANCESCA AND MASSIMO VALSECCHI (2)

THE GILDED BALLROOM of Palermo's Palazzo Butera, being restored by Massimo Valsecchi and his wife.

ICONS

A Sicilian Palazzo He Couldn't Refuse

Massimo Valsecchi and his wife prepare a vast home for works by Warhol, Richter, old masters and many more

BY JOHN HOOPER

DESPITE HIS REPUTATION as a serious art collector, Massimo Valsecchi agrees with a friend's assessment that he is also "a maniac." "Of course, I am," he says, laughing. "That's why I came to Sicily."

In fact, Mr. Valsecchi has done more than move to an island as famed for its corrupt politicians and organized crime as for its natural beauty. He has bought a princely palazzo with almost twice as much floor space as the White House in one of the most Mafia-ridden quarters of Palermo, the Sicilian capital, and he plans to cram it with artworks, antiques and antiquities valued at hundreds of millions of dollars. All but the second floor should be open by the fall of 2018.

The 73-year-old Mr. Valsecchi, born in the Italian seaport of Genoa, lived in London for many years. He met his wife while working for an insurance broker there. Francesca Frua de Angeli comes from a family steeped in art—she's the granddaughter of one of Italy's greatest collectors—and the couple decided to return to Italy, opening their own gallery in Milan in 1973.

Now the Valsecchis' aim is to provide a home for the collection they put together over a half century—a museum open to the public that will also host temporary exhibitions and offer study facilities to scholars from around the world.

Palazzo Butera, once the seat of an illustrious Sicilian family, has floor space of more than 100,000 square feet. By the time it attracted Mr. Valsecchi and his wife, the property had been on sale for about 50 years and was semiderelict. In Italy, a real-estate transaction concludes with the reading by a notary of the deed of sale. In total, 27 heirs were involved in the deal. "We started at 9 in the morning and finished at 1:30 the following morning. It ran to 260 pages, and each of the princes and princesses had about 25 names. So the notary had to read out every one of them," Mr. Valsecchi recalled.

The Valsecchi-Frua collection ranges widely. "Those are the hats of Naga headhunters," Mr. Valsecchi said as he showed works currently installed at the couple's private apartment in Palazzo Butera—in this case, headgear of an ethnic group distributed over parts of India and Myanmar. The collection also includes William Morris chairs, Zulu masks, art nouveau glass and Chinese tables. Examples of Italian old

masters include "Four Children," an unusual, beautifully rendered group painting by Annibale Carracci (1560-1609), more famous for his frescos.

The couple began, however, by collecting contemporary art. "I have always liked to work with artists who have strong connections with the past: to history, archaeology or whatever," Mr. Valsecchi says. Two of his favorite artists are Anne and Patrick Poirier, a French duo whose work is concerned with themes of memory. Of more celebrated figures like Jean-Michel Basquiat and Jeff Koons, he says: "I always thought that they were manipulators of contemporary themes. There should always be something transcendental—

not just what people want, what is consumable." The collectors also own works by Andy Warhol, contemporary German master Gerhard Richter, offbeat British artists Gilbert & George and English sculptor David Tremlett.

But the most compelling artwork may turn out to be the palazzo itself, built over the remains of a Jewish ritual bath and comprising three grand residences from the 17th and 18th centuries. Gold leaf entirely covers the doors of a mirrored ballroom. A drawing room from the late 18th century features esoteric and Masonic symbols. At any one time, around 100 people are at work on the palazzo restoration.

They have reglazed all 85,000 tiles on the terrace, more than 100 yards long, with views across the Gulf of Palermo.

Sicily has famous Greek and Roman ruins, but in museum offerings, Rome and Florence far outshine it. Still, Palermo is in the early stages of a cultural revival,

attracting tourists for architecture that reflects the successive invasions of Sicily by Greeks, Muslims, Normans, Germans, French and Spaniards.

Mr. Valsecchi hopes to forge links between Palazzo Butera and universities in Palermo and abroad—one reason for current loans to the university museums of Oxford and Cambridge. About 20,000 square feet are being converted into apartments for visiting scholars.

He will be working in a challenging environment. Mr. Valsecchi says that the Mafia hasn't approached him, but six months after his arrival, he was sitting outside the palazzo when shooting broke out. As often happens in Italy in areas gripped by organized crime, local people swarmed into the narrow streets—not to help the police but to shield the Mafiosi they were trying to arrest.



ANNIBALE CARRACCI'S 'Four Children' (1585).

The palazzo is in one of Palermo's most Mafia-ridden quarters.

