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DOSSIER FONDAZIONI/LAURA MATTIOLI

## ***LEAVING SIGNS OF BEAUTY*** by ELISA BORTOLUZZI



### **INTERVIEW WITH LAURA MATTIOLI, ART HISTORIAN, COLLECTOR, PHILANTHROPIST**

**You are well known as a collector: what experiences or influences in your life have helped shape your passion for art?**

«My passion for art was born within my family, given that my father was passionate about modern art, a friend of artists, an important collector and patron. He was the famous collector... not me! I am known in the Italian art world above all because I inherited his collection and managed it for 35 years. I don't consider myself a true collector, as I have never had a real collecting project like him, who wanted to represent the history of Italian art of the first half of the 20th century through his collection. I simply purchased works by artist friends that I respect and things that, at that moment, aroused emotions in me. This is rather a form of shopping — or patronage, if you consider the acquisition of artworks by artist friends as a gesture of appreciation and friendship.

**What was your personal experience with art and how did you involve your children in this field?**

«In addition to being a 'collector' - as you defined me before - I studied art history, wrote scientific papers, taught at university, curated exhibitions. Let's say that being an art historian/exhibition curator has been my profession throughout my life. Since I did it with passion and I always worked from home, from an early age my children observed their mother working in this field, talking about art, meeting artists, so they became easily acquainted, visiting exhibitions with me, or helping me with exhibition installations. They also grew up with my father's protected collection on display in our home. However, over time, they both distanced themselves from art: now one owns a company that manufactures mountaineering products and the other studies physics. For them, art is a necessary occupation as they manage their inherited collection, but it is secondary to their personal interests".

**Why did you decide to leave Italy and move to New York?**

«I decided to leave Italy above all because I was disgusted by Italian politics and the way the artistic heritage is managed. I settled in New York (after an initial period of five years spent in Switzerland) to be close to the foundation I created there in 2013, the Center for Italian Modern Art (CIMA)».

**What emotions does the word philanthropy awaken in you, and what memories is it linked to?**

«The word 'philanthropy' seems to me to be a difficult word which is not commonly used. It literally means 'love for men', that is, 'love for others'. As human beings, philanthropy to me should be a common commitment.

However, I believe that you use this word to refer to voluntary charitable activities supported by individuals with ample or superior financial means. Such individuals, instead of enjoying their fortune or focusing on earning more and more, decide to use a portion of their money to support a charitable cause. I must say that philanthropy is very widespread in the USA, in part because it allows for important tax advantages, and is embraced by most of the middle and upper middle-class population. It certainly has the aura of an important 'status symbol', but I believe it is part of a mentality steeped in religious tradition, particularly the Protestant tradition, which considers it a social duty to share the material goods that one is fortunate enough to have. However, in Europe, philanthropy is not considered an ordinary activity and does not in itself fall within the normal duties of a citizen."

**What are the philanthropic projects or causes that you are most attached to and that you believe had a significant impact?**

«I believe you are asking which of my philanthropic activities has been the most important and most successful. I certainly consider that to be CIMA, especially for its scholarships that have allowed around 50 young art historians to have an important life and work experience in New York over the course of ten years, contributing in a meaningful way to their personal and professional growth."

**What challenges or difficulties have you encountered in your philanthropic journey?**

«The biggest difficulty I encountered was fundraising. I founded a 'public charity', that is, a type of foundation which by American law must receive at least a third of its budget from more than twelve donors. However, since I had created the foundation, everyone considered it a sort of personal pastime, the little hobby of a rich lady who has nothing to do and who had decided to promote modern Italian art in New York, simply because as the daughter of an important collector of modern art, she would serve her own interests.

As a consequence, no one (not Italian companies with commercial interests in the USA, banks, associations, Italian-American personalities, nor gallery owners) wanted to financially support the foundation. So, after ten years of activity, we had to close."

**In the philanthropic field, good intentions are not enough to make a difference: what elements in your opinion make a patron a good patron?**

«Situations and legislations change a lot over time and over different countries. So, I don't think there can be just one answer that fits all. We must certainly consider a structured philanthropic activity (in the form of a foundation or equivalent type of association) as a for-profit company, with concrete and reasonable objectives, a professional staff and serious economic planning. We must carefully consider the context and the social impact of the activity, hone the communications efforts and pay attention to the network of alliances-collaborations-exchanges that can be developed, as well as to the political situation in which we operate".

**“Does art philanthropy focus exclusively on supporting established artists?” Some argue that philanthropists tend to support well-known artists, while neglecting emerging talent. How do you evaluate this statement?**

«I would say that collecting is often considered a form of alternative investment. Buying works by well-known artists is equivalent to buying solid stocks. This does not seem to me to be neither true collecting nor philanthropy, but rather a form of investment, which in my opinion is much riskier than we think, because taste changes and what is liked and fashionable at a certain moment, can quickly go out of fashion and lose value. I believe that a true collector is a great connoisseur of what he collects and must follow his taste and interests. A patron should support artists on the margins of the market, thus allowing them to pursue their work. Naturally, the challenge is to support good artists... but this is a risk worth taking. Sometimes we focus more on supporting a person in need, rather than thinking of the value of their art... but maybe that's the right thing to do!»

**The Center for Italian Modern Art (CIMA) has been an exhibition and research center located in the SoHo neighborhood of Manhattan, New York, specializing in modern Italian art. You established it successfully. How philanthropic was this initiative and why did you decide to close it?**

«CIMA can be considered a philanthropic institution as it has operated as an educational center on multiple levels: it has benefited the research fellows, who have perfected their professional and academic career, and has impacted the general public, who took the opportunity to learn about topics that are little known to the American culture. CIMA also carried out activities with schools, from younger children to high school students and university students. It was closed due

to economic problems, i.e. due to a lack of supporters from an economic point of view, and due to the cultural climate that established itself in the USA after the pandemic, which has no interest in European art, considered fruit of a colonialist and discriminatory culture, and contests its values."

**How you deal with criticism or doubts regarding your philanthropic choices?**

«I must say that I received very little criticism. Perhaps the most common criticism was that of being a center with too academic an approach. Actually, the experience of the research fellows who joined CIMA in New York was much more meaningful on a human and personal level than on a strictly academic level. Then everyone reacts differently to situations and therefore there are people who have had a more positive experience than others".

**You are a very successful personality: what do you think you have given to the world of art and what to the world of philanthropy?**

«Frankly, I don't think I'm a very successful person. I go against the grain, I always say what I think and thus I make many enemies. I believe I shared OPERE important artworks with the art world, supporting projects that otherwise would not have come to fruition. I think, for example, of Dan Flavin's installation at the Chiesa Rossa di Milano, also made possible by the fundamental contribution of the Prada Foundation. I think that through CIMA I showed the world of philanthropy a new model for a foundation with educational purposes, which did not exist before."

**How would you like to be remembered?**

«I would like to leave behind some signs of beauty. They may be ephemeral like a rose, but they help you live more serenely."