



THE CARLO GRASSI COLLECTION

ITALIAN AND EUROPEAN MASTERPIECES OF 19TH- AND 20TH- CENTURY ART

This important art collection unit is the outcome of Carlo Grassi's passion for art as well as of his widow Nedda Mieli's generous donation to the City of Milan in 1956, on condition that the works are exhibited in memory of their son Gino, a volunteer killed in the battle of El Alamein (1942) at the age of just eighteen. Carlo Grassi (1886-1950) was an entrepreneur of Italian origins born in Greece who had moved to Cairo, Egypt, at the end of the XIXth century. There he became one of the best known tobacco producers and dealers. He would spend periods in Italy where, besides homes in Rome and Milan, he owned a large villa at Lora, near Como. After he moved back to Italy with his wife towards the end of the 1930s, it is right the Lora house that became the main seat of his by then massive art collections.

After collecting a valuable nucleus of Egyptian antiquities, today donated to the Vatican Museums, C. Grassi devoted himself to paintings, with a predilection for the XIXth and XXth centuries, and gradually built up a wide ambitious collection: the Galleria d'Arte Moderna (Gallery of Modern Art) has chosen and exhibited the most relevant pieces from it since 1958. The collection is inspired by C. Grassi's great openness to different languages and traditions, by his unprejudiced curiosity ranging from ancient to contemporary art, from East to West, and by his keen attention to the quality and the value of the single pieces. Besides some refined objects of Asian art and some paintings from the XIV to the XVIII century, the Grassi Collection boasts a meaningful nucleus of Italian XIXth century artists -Fattori, De Nittis, Boldini, the Milanese "Scapigliati" (*literally meaning 'ruffled'*), just to mention a few of them- and of "Divisionismo": from this art movement two large watercolours by Previati and selected works by Segantini in his 'naturalist' and 'pre-divisionist' phases.

However, the collection includes a wide range of international art too, in contrast to the conservative taste of most Italian critics and of the market in C. Grassi's age. The works by Manet, Van Gogh and Cézanne purchased by the collector actually are the only pieces by these celebrated masters present in Milan museums. C. Grassi's interest in the XIXth century was followed by a passion he developed after getting back to Italy, for the evolution of contemporary Italian painting. This is why we can find works by the "Avanguardie"/*Vanguards* protagonists -mainly Boccioni and Balla- as well as by masters of the years between the two world wars -Morandi, De Pisis, Tosi and many more. Also a rich selection of graphic works -many of which under restoration, therefore not on permanent display- together with a rare collection of manuscripts (diaries and letters) by Italian XIXth century artists and a small clever collection of art books make the Grassi Collection a heterogeneous and multifaceted one indeed.



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Jean-Baptiste Camille Corot (Paris 1796 – Ville-d'Avray 1875)

A Gust of Wind, post 1853-54, Oil on canvas

Corot, considered one of the “en plein air” painting forerunners, depicts a lonely horseman at a gallop; clouds in the sky are heralding a storm. On the left majestic trees bent by the fury of the wind -where from the title of the picture- become the protagonists of the scene, while the horseman's figure just plays the role of a simple detail. The dramatic tone of the narration is enhanced by the theme of man resisting the strength of nature, with references to the “theory of the sublime”.



Giuseppe De Nittis (Barletta 1846 – Saint-Germain-en-Laye 1884)

Lunch at Posillipo, about 1879, Oil on canvas

After the great success of Paris Universal Exhibition in 1878, De Nittis, who has been living in the French capital for ten years, goes back to Naples for some months in one of his more and more frequent returns home and rents a house on the seaside, at Posillipo. There he depicts a cheerful lunch in the open air at sunset, with music and a lot of guests, namely one of the meetings quoted by the artist in his *Taccuini (Diaries)*: “We would gather on the terrace in the lovely full moon evenings. Some artists would come from Naples and sing ancient tunes with a guitar accompaniment; others would dance ‘tarantella’...”



Gaetano Previati (Ferrara 1852 – Lavagna, Genova, 1920)

Quiete, about 1901, Pastel on linen cardboard

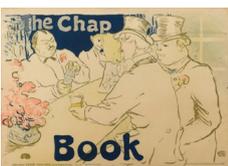
This large pastel is an autograph replica painted by Previati from a previous smaller oil painting. The subject, a pleasant episode of everyday family life, is a common one for the artists of the ‘Scapigliatura’ movement where Previati had taken his first steps as an artist. Like in the oil original, the scene is enriched by modern artistic ideas, as if projected towards the next century. Colour breaks down into tiny filamented fragments, “a technique giving the impression of a larger amount of light” as the painter himself explains.



Vincent Van Gogh (Zundert 1853 – Auvers-sur-Oise 1890)

Breton Women in the Meadow (The Pardon of Pont Aven), 1888, Pencil and watercolour on paper

In 1888 Van Gogh moved to Arles (Provence) where he was joined by Paul Gauguin: this was the start of a short intense period of artistic fellowship between the two. 1888 is also the date of this watercolour, a copy of an oil painting (‘Le Pardon de Pont d’Aven’, private collection) belonging to Gauguin and painted by French artist Emile Bernard. The female figures wearing their traditional Breton costumes are in contrast to the young girl wearing modern clothes and the two elegant ladies with parasols in the background who show that subject is contemporary.



Henri De Toulouse-Lautrec (Paris 1864 – 1901)

The Chap Book, Irish American Bar, 1896, Poster

Henri De Toulouse-Lautrec, a great lover of wines and spirits, was fond of preparing cocktails for his friends. His night ‘pilgrimages’ to cabarets and ballrooms also included bars, of course. Among his favourites: Weber, near La Madeleine, then the Cosmopolitan American Bar and the Irish and American Bar, both in Rue Royale. This poster was meant for the Anglo-American magazine “The Chap Book”: the scene shows two customers and, behind the bar, a barman identified as Chinese-American Ralph, who had come to Paris from San Francisco.



Giacomo Balla, (Torino 1871 – Roma 1958)

Dynamic Expansion and Speed, 1913, Oil on cardboard

The painting dates back to the years of Balla's research on movement and on the representation of speed, when he was a member of the Futurist movement. We can notice how the silhouette car and driver have the function of vanishing point and originate the whole composition. Balla expresses the dynamism of movement by means of a system of planes intersecting according to precise directions. The perception of depth is conveyed by slanting directrices while the perspective lines, vanishing towards the driving wheel, define the planes where the car shape gets fragmented by speed.



Fausto Pirandello (Rome 1899 – 1975)

Self-portrait, 1940-1943, Oil on canvas

Son to renowned playwright Luigi, Fausto Pirandello repeatedly ventures upon self-portraits. In this work he uses colours to convey violent clashes, between the darkness of the clothes gloomy hues and the brightness of the red scarf and the face that stands out against the background. All is concentrated in the face close-up: space as if compressed, viewers come face to face with the magnetic power of the eyes, with the aggressiveness of matter and colour. It is thanks to his powerfully concentrated gaze that this group of self-portraits by Pirandello, though small, look ‘loaded’ with the past and with suffering.