

The Panza Collection of Contemporary American Art at Biumo by Milton Gendel

Like the vanguard movements themselves, the Panza di Biumo collection of contemporary art, mainly American, is an established institution. The largest collection of the art produced in America in the last twenty years – no less than six hundred pieces – has its unlikely headquarters in an 18th-century villa at Biumo, a hill on the outskirts of Varese; north of Milan, equidistant from lakes Maggiore, Como and Lugano, the city otherwise has not been known for much besides its shoe factories and textile mills. Perhaps less unlikely, the collector, Giuseppe Panza, is a neat, quiet man with grizzled hair and a steady level look. “Art is the communication of an institution. That’s it in a nutshell. And ownership of a work of art is a way of having a part in that institution. You identify yourself completely with the work of a truly great artist.”

He has a measured flow of commentary, with the clear articulateness of an educated orderly mind. Like his father, a businessman who was successful enough to have been ennobled under the late monarchy, the second Count Panza di Biumo makes his money in real estate and distilling. Unlike anyone else in his world, he has put a great deal of it into works barely accepted as art by his Milanese and Varese peers. “*Cretino*, they called me when my house started filling up with contemporary art. They said I was throwing my money away.”

Not the first to become fixed on immaterial values through illness – notable precedents range from St. Paul to Marcel Proust – he was thirteen when he took to reading art history while bedridden for a long spell. His formal studies, though, followed a more practical course and he took a degree in law at the University of Milan. In 1956 he inherited his business interests and a substantial amount of money. The same year he decided to make a collection of contemporary art. “What I myself would have liked to express I tried to identify in others. At that time Paris was still the capital of the arts, so I went there and bought works by Fautier and Tapiés. Wols and Dubuffet also interested me but by then were too expensive for my collecting budget. That year I happened to see some photographs of paintings by Klein in the magazine *Civiltà delle Macchine*. I found out that Klein’s dealer was Sidney Janis, and wrote to him. He sent me more photos and in the course of some months I bought ten Kleins by mail.”

As assiduous frequenter of exhibitions, he was struck by Rothko’s painting in a group show at the Museum of Modern Art, during a trip to New York, and at the Venice Biennale of 1958. Again he mail-ordered from Janis and acquired several canvasses from dealers in Milan. The next year he veered toward new departures – on an alternating course of tacking and running before the wind that he has continued to follow – when Rauschenberg caught his eye at *Dokumenta II*.

His policy has always been to ponder over the work that attracts him, reading up on it, talking to the artist, critics (notably Germano Celant, who has catalogued his collection) and dealers, feeling his way sometimes for months until he reaches a decision. Generally when he takes one, it is wholesale. To the scandal of his friends, he acquired eleven Rauschenbergs in 1959 and 1960. “They thought it was an insult. Rothko they had already digested, and they couldn’t understand how I could go from his luminous mysticism to the “vulgarity” of old shoes, dirty pants and shirts – garbage, as none of that had as yet been accepted, at least not in Milan. It should be said, though, that Milan was the first, perhaps the only, city in Italy consistently and systematically to show American artists. Since

the war Milan has always been interested in U.S. culture. Look at all the American books translated and brought out by Milanese publishing houses”.

Meanwhile Venice and New York had become the two poles of Panza's acquisition circuits. He met Leo Castelli at the 1962 Biennale, applied his mail-order technique after going to see the artists in New York, and wound up with eight Rosenquists, ten Oldenburgs and four Lichtensteins. He regrets having given in to the mockery of his friends which caused him to sell three of his Lichtensteins, and kept him from buying some Warhols.

His visits to New York became annual events after 1960 and ten years later he expanded his territory to include California, conscientiously and assiduously buying his way through the current movements. Thus from '66 to '69 minimalism was his main theme, and starting with some Flavins (if they belong properly in the category) acquired in Milan he went on to works by Morris, Judd and Serra. Reduction of sculptures and objects seemed right to him, but he did not catch up with the idea of applying the principle to painting, and artists he met in New York, like Ryman and Marden, did not come into focus – “I didn't understand them at the time...” – until '70.

Then he made up for the lag in a big way by buying twenty Rymans in Europe and ten more in the U.S.. Lary Bell entered the collection, and, through the mediation of the dealer Sperrone, a number of conceptualists, including Nauman, Kossuth and Wiener. He acquired a disk by Irwin at Kassel, and met Irwin and Wiener at Amsterdam. His interest in West Coast art took him to Los Angeles.

“I saw Irwin in California, bought some of his works and invited him to Varese to do an environment. I visited Turrell at his studio in Santa Monica. It was dusk. He had me sit on the floor, and I watched the sky framed in a window that opened. The vast expanse was held there as it changed color from rose grading to black, and then the stars appeared. He also had a room with little holes in the wall that caught the beams of passing cars and the changing traffic lights. From moment to moment a different pattern was produced. I was enchanted. It was something I recognized that I'd have liked to create – had I thought of it.”

The collection by now had filled his apartment in Milan and the Villa at Biumo. He started to use the villa's noble, vaulted stables to accommodate the large works and environments, among his latest acquisitions.

Two former horse stalls became a mysterious penumbral space focused on two tall slits of light – an environment by Maria Nordman. Another stall, with its 18th-century vault, granite supporting column and flagstone pavement, has a wainscoting of metal panels by Donald Judd. Bruce Nauman's resonating and suffocating parallel walls, a colossal concrete half-egg by Gene Highstein, his penetrating eye level beam, boom or pipe, a luminous disk by Robert Irwin, pavement sculptures by Richard Nonas are among the Italian Stable Pieces. For in the aggregate they add up to a variety of found objects interrelated as much by the character of their owner and the villa as by their own affinities.

Nothing could be more of an environment than the villa itself, spacious, well proportioned and soberly elegant. Entirely free of Rococo coquettishness, it was built in 1751 by the Marquis Menafoglio, finance minister in the Duchy of Milan, then an Austrian protectorate under Maria Theresa. Subsequently it passed to the Litta family and then, in 1931, to the father of the present owners.

In the grand staircase the gray space paintings of the English artist Alan Charlton and the framed memorial phrases of Lawrence Wiener awaken no echoes of tumbrils rolling. They and the various

inventions that occupy the solemn sequences of halls and rooms have been coaxed, unsubversive, into a seemingly natural symbiosis. Everything looks as right as such 18th-century fantasies as the room lined and furnished with porcelain at the palace of Capodimonte. Panza is a master of museography, like the princes of the Enlightenment whose palaces, all over Europe, were perfect little galleries of contemporary art. The palace in this case is also brought into line with the contemporary by being bare of furnishings and having gloss paint on the floors and white walls.

Upstairs a lunette by Turrell at the end of a barrelvaulted hall is opened electronically by the master of the house and collection, who at that moment resembles a businesslike operative in a mad-scientist movie. Another room has been turned into a hypethral hall by the same artist. Neon pieces by Flavin and Nauman in the halls suggest unspecified itineraries and fill perfectly proportioned rooms with late 20th-century ribald self confident American light. Variations on the overwhelming Americana are in a photographic sequence by Dibbetts, canvases by Peter Joseph, an object by Maurizio Mocchetti – a scattering of European works. White figures by George Segal are reminders of the previous chapter in the story of Panza's collection.

Perhaps the most curious of the matings between 18th and 20th century accomplished by Panza is seen in the vast wall drawings in the main hall and diningroom. Conceived by Lewitt, they were meticulously penciled directly on to painted plaster walls by a team of patient Japanese assistants. Large panels of minute grids and hatchings in colored perncil, the decorations are skitteschly perishable and have already been damaged by the damp hands of passing children.

But in another way the entire collections is in motion. Panza has not only made a place for himself in history by identifying himself with its movements (no matter if it's a more or less straight track, a coil, a spur or random lunges), he has plotted them and made up great bundles of evidence to leave to posterity. He is like a free-lance museum director, with possibilities of dynastic succession, as his five children, his eldest son in particular, are interested in the arts and in the destiny of the collection.

Italian museums of modern art have not been known for their big budgets or their breadth of vision, and so far Panza's discussions in Rome, Turin, Prato and Varese have not lead to the consignment of the bulk of the collection. He has offered a loan for Palazzo Reale in Milan and some thirty environments for a neighborhood center at Villa Scheibler, on the outskirts of the city. He proposed that part of the collection go to a Medici Villa near Prato and another part to one of the unused monumental buildings put up in profusion by the Savoys at Turin. "Italy is rich in wonderful monuments standing idle that could become great museums of modern art", Panza says wistfully.

Biumo itself is in doubt, as the municipality of Varese can't make up its mind to except his offer – endorsed by his two sisters and brothers – to donate the one hundred works it now contains if the town will buy the villa. But collecting and living with artists have become his way of life, and he will go on amassing the works of our time even should his vast Wunderkammer of exotica, mainly Made in USA, move into the public domain of Varese. In the meantime five hundred paintings sculptures and environments, submerged in warehouses, are waiting to be distributed.

So carloads from the train he is riding into history are being shunted abroad. Basel's museum of modern art, opening next year, is taking forty-five sculptures and paintings – including some Rymans – on a renewable fifteen-year loan. A loan on the same terms, of works produced since 1965, has been offered to München-Gladbach, for the new wing of the museum. Panza and museum officials are now selecting the pieces. Most ambitious is the program worked out for Düsseldorf. The Rhine-Westphalia regional museum, scheduled to open in 1982, is taking seventy-six works from the '50's to Pop Art, again on loan for fifteen years. The civic museum in the same city is

considering the construction, starting in 1980, of a series of 20m X 10m rooms in which fifteen large sculptures owned by Panza – works by Morris, Judd, Andre and Nauman – would be installed. Stuttgart also has a plan for a new museum, designed by James Sterling, where there will probably be space for one of Panza's substantial loans.

The dematerialization and possible disappearance from the Milan scene of the Panza collection, its reintegration for many years, perhaps permanently, in Switzerland and in the seats of the German industrial power, is less odd as an itinerary for these reveries in the lee of American industry (dreams of steel, ferroconcrete, plastic, tv sets) than Biumo was as their first destination. Odder to American eyes, perhaps, is to see them in the company of African and Pre-Columbian sculpture. Familiar though the juxtaposition has been, since Cubism, we are more used to being the collectors than the collected, at least on such a wholehearted wholesale scale.