

TWO ART COLLECTORS AND THEIR MARVELOUS COLLECTIONS

■ BY LUCY GORDAN

On this winter in Rome are two exhibitions about collecting art, two art collectors, and their collections. Although of different periods, both have Church connections. For the smaller of the two, *Pope Clement XI: Art Collector and Enlightened Patron of the Arts*, this connection is obvious through its subject, most of its contents, its location, and its intent. For the other, *Voglia d'Italia*, ("Yearning for Italy"), the Church connection is in its locations and parts of its contents.

Pope Clement XI was born **Giovanni Francesco Albani** in Urbino in the Marches on July 23, 1649 to a distinguished family with a home library and art collection. His mother, **Elena Mosca** (1630-98), was a local noble; his father, **Carlo Albani** (1623-84), a patrician of Albanian descent. Their portraits are displayed in the first of the exhibition's four rooms, as are several of the Pope. Sent to Rome to study at the *Collegio Romano* at age 11, he became a very proficient Latinist, gained a doctorate in both canon and civil law, and frequented the academy of **Queen Christina of Sweden**, who greatly admired his intellect.

Thus an erudite lover of culture from an early age, not surprisingly Clement XI as Pope (1700-21) is remembered for his patronage of the arts and science. He was a great benefactor of the Vatican Library, acquiring Christian manuscripts in Syriac from Egypt and other places in the Middle East. And, thanks to his interest in archeology, he's credited with saving many of Rome's antiquities, including the discovery and erection of the Column of Marcus Aurelius. He also authorized excavations of the catacombs, the restoration of the Raphael Rooms, of the Pantheon, and of the Basilica of San Clemente, and the establishment of a painting and sculpting academy in the Campidoglio. In addition, he founded a committee, overseen by his favorite artists Carlo Maratta, a fellow *marchigiano*, and Carlo Fontana — both of whose works are displayed here — to commission statuary of the apostles to complete the decoration of *San Giovanni in Laterano*. In his native Urbino he

restored numerous buildings and founded a public library. On a lighter side, he was key in the decision to allow cats back into Christian homes after they had been seen as overtly pagan symbols!

Clement XI: Collector and Enlightened Art Patron

is appropriately located in rooms of the cloister of the *San Salvatore in Lauro* Church near *Via dei Coronari* (Street of the Rosary-Makers). Within Rome the church, also known as the St. Jesus, is the "national church" of the *marchigiani*, the inhabitants of the Marches region (since the population of each of Italy's regions was counted as a "nation" before Italy's unification in 1870).

One of the exhibition's sponsors, *Pio Sodalizio dei Piceni* (*Pious Sodality of the Picenes*), is also *marchigiano*. Founded in 1633 thanks to the interest of Cardinal **Giambattista Pallotta di Caldarola**, a *marchigiano* living in Rome, this association, still made up of *marchigiani* who live in Rome, was established with the ideal of financially supporting the higher education of intellectually gifted young *marchigiani* from poor families so they could continue their education in Rome. In the case of this free exhibition of some 40 works of art, mostly paintings of religious subjects, primarily collected by Clement XI or previously by his paternal grandfather and father, on until February 25, the association's aim is to raise money for the victims of the Marches' 2016 earthquakes. Sadly, the day I visited, the offering box was empty and no one else was there. This was undoubtedly due, not only to the exhibition's specialized subject, but also to its lack of master-

George Washington Wurts and his wife Henrietta Tower. On right: the *Vittoriano* and *Palazzo Venezia*



Below, a painting of Pope Clement XI from the late 1600s, and the second exhibition room in the cloister of the Roman church *San Salvatore in Lauro*



pieces by world-famous artists and of any explanation of its context or contents.

In contrast, after two years of intense research, *Voglia d'Italia* ("Yearning for Italy") has been meticulously curated with detailed explanations by art-historian Emanuele Pellegrini, professor at the Institute for Advanced Studies in Lucca. One half concerns how foreigners, particularly the English and Americans, collected Italian art in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The other is a display of highlights from the extensive art collection (including many sacred art artifacts: paintings, altarpieces, wooden statues of saints, liturgical instruments, Burne Jones cartoons and more) of American diplomat George Washington Wurts (1843-1928) and his millionaire second wife Henrietta Tower (1856-1933). They were both Philadelphians who lived at length in Rome. Thus *Voglia d'Italia* could count as two separate exhibitions. It is even purposely housed in two different locations: *Palazzo Venezia* and the *Vittoriano*, until March 4.

Palazzo Venezia was built in 1455 for the Venetian cardinal Pietro Barbo, later Pope Paul II. It was at times a papal residence, at others the Venetian embassy, before passing into Austrian hands in 1797. Since 1916 it has belonged to the Italian state. During the Fascist era, Mussolini used it as his headquarters, haranguing the crowds in the Piazza below from its balcony. At Henrietta's death in 1933, five years after George's, she left the Wurts-Tower art collection, that George had begun in 1876 and which they had expanded together to approximately 4,000 artifacts, to Italy, with the proviso that it remain in a museum. Sadly, for some unknown reason, however, its destination *Palazzo Venezia* has long been Rome's most underrated museum in spite of its first-rate collection of Renaissance art. The Wurts collection includes books, ceramics, musical instruments, lace, silver, clocks, textiles, tapestries, 19th-century Russian hats, stuffed foxes and bears, 80 wooden religious statues from Germany, numerous European paintings, and artifacts from China and Japan with dates from ancient Rome to the 20th century. Until *Voglia d'Italia*, it had remained in the storerooms of *Palazzo Venezia*.

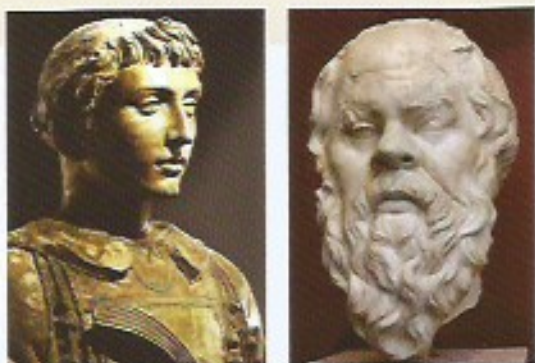
Besides art, the Wurts couple also bought the Villa Sciarra in 1902 on the top of the Janiculum Hill, today a public park, not as their residence but as a location to show off their art collection and host con-

certs and parties. At George's death, Henrietta donated Villa Sciarra to the City of Rome.

The Wurts' half of *Voglia d'Italia* is divided into seven sections: "From Philadelphia to Rome" sets the scene for a diplomat's life of parties, receptions, and balls in the 19th century; "An American in Russia: The Roads of Diplomacy" for Wurts, after serving in Turin, Florence, and Rome for nearly 20 years, by this time a widower (his first wife, fellow-Philadelphian Emma Hyde, died in 1880), was assigned to St. Petersburg from 1882 to 1892, when he was transferred back to Italy. In Russia he collected hats, *balalaikas*, icons, porcelain dinnerware, and small bronze and porcelain sculptures.

He married Henrietta in Philadelphia in 1898 and moved back to Rome for good in 1902. Hence "Thursday at Villa Sciarra: Conversation and Music" with its musical instruments, tableware and silver, which is followed by "The Rhine in Rome" with its wooden religious statues, a 15th-century tapestry of Christ and the Virgin (a wall panel proclaims it the most significant in an Italian museum) from the Middle Rhine Region, and ivory and silver beer mugs, for the Wurts, of German origin, were Germanophiles. The fifth section is "An American Collection: Artifacts That Belonged to Robert Jenkins Nevin (1839-1906)." A fellow art collector, Nevin had been the founder and the pastor of the American Protestant church on Via Nazionale, "St. Paul's Within the Walls," which is decorated with mosaics by Burne Jones. Wurts bought their full-size preparatory drawings at an auction at the antiquarian San Giorgi in 1907. However, the most striking works here are the very fragile *papier maché* angels made in Florence between 1423-64; there are only a few such examples still surviving. In Section 6, "Made in China and Japan," are Oriental, but mostly Japanese, artifacts: screens, porcelain, and magnificent silks that George bought during a visit to Japan while stationed in Russia and then again on his around-the-world honeymoon with Henrietta, as well as in Rome and Paris, for at that time Oriental art was the latest rage in the Western world. On display in Section 7, "The Last Wunderkammer," are photographs of the Wurts apartment in the *Palazzo Antici Mattei* in Rome's ghetto bursting with its hodgepodge of artifacts.

The other half of *Voglia d'Italia* is housed in the *Vittoriano*, nicknamed by tourists "The Wedding Cake" or "Typewriter." We



Left, Donatello's bust of St. Lawrence. Right, a marble portrait head of Socrates, discovered during the excavations for the Vittoriano, which once belonged to Wurts. Below, Dossena's wonderful Annunciation



The Wurts collection includes books, ceramics, musical instruments, lace, silver, clocks, textiles, tapestries...



decided to host the more general part of the exhibition here," **Edith Gabrielli**, in charge of all museums in Latium, told me, "because it was being built while the Wurts lived in Rome, from 1885-1925, and was the gift the Italians gave to themselves to celebrate the Unification of Italy and to honor their first king, **Vittore Emanuele II**. You could say it was the first artifact 'Made in Italy.' Section One, *Excavations for a New Monument*, covers the building's construction and the many ancient artifacts uncovered during its builders' excavations of the Capitoline Hill to make space for the *Vittoriano*'s foundations; some of these were bought by Wurts or foreign museums."

"At the turn of the 20th century," the opening wall panel of Section 2, *Sales and Protection*, tells us, "there was a considerable increase in the sale of art objects, as may be seen from the publication of countless auction catalogues on display. Often, entire collections were put on the market." After several unsuccessful attempts, finally in 1902 Italy passed its first protection law. "In 1907 the first *Soprintendenza* for the protection of historical and artistic heritage was established." This started a debate between protectionists who wanted to stop art from leaving Italy, art dealers who saw these laws as an infringement of free enterprise, and artists who made fakes to satisfy the growing art market, especially in the United States and England.

Although Wurts was also a mediator for the Metropolitan Museum, as Section 3, *The Art of Giving*, illustrates, he was not the only collector to donate his collection to Italy. Others with Wurts' polymath taste were **Loeser**, **Horne**, **Stibbert**, **Perkins**, and **Whitaker**.

A fascinating Section 4, *Exchanges and Exports*, points out: "Trade in art did not just involve sales. There were other ways of transferring ownership, particularly exchange. In fact, dealers frequently offered works of art to the State in return for a permit to export others, or in exchange for a reduction in sales tax. This led to fierce controversies because sometimes the exported item was considered more important than the one remaining in Italy."

Elia Volpi (1858-1938), the famous Florentine antiquarian and donor of art to Italy, was the first to organize these highly successful "exchanges." Numerous artifacts were then auctioned in New York and bought by **J.P. Morgan**, **Isabella Gardiner**, and **Henry Clay Frick**. "A look at sales prices," Pellegrini told me, "can come as a bit of a shock. Objects that today would be considered for everyday use like these andirons from Tuscany, in



Nicola D'Asnaghi's double portrait of Frederick and Irene Perkins. *Voglia D'Italia's* logo. Below, Giuseppe De Nittis' *The Japanese Screen*



is also on display.

On display in Section 6: *Made in Italy: A Question of Style*, are works by contemporary artisans of the late 19th century in imitation of Renaissance style. They are original works, not exact copies or forgeries. For examples, the bridal chest painted with possible scenes of the Crusades from the Stibbert Museum in Florence and the Wurts' tulip-shaped chalices made in Murano. Also on display here are two artifacts: a glazed terracotta bust of the Renaissance condottiere "Gattamelata" as a young man, and a glazed polychrome tile of the Madonna and Child, which for the first time bears the words "Made in Italy." Only much later did this become a guarantee of quality.



Oil paintings by Eduardo Gioja (1862-1937) of scenes of the friezes in the *Vittoriano*

Instead, Section 7: *Trading in Falsehood*, examines cases, not a matter of style, but of deliberate forgeries, contemporary work passed off as original antiques. At the turn of the 20th century these works often hoodwinked connoisseurs and museums alike. One example here is **Alceo Dossena's** (1878-1937), then Italy's most brilliant forger (in fact, such a good forger that his works are collectors' items), *Annunciation* from Pittsburgh, which was sold to **Henry Frick** as an allegedly original sculpture by **Simone Martini** (1284-1344).

Section 8: *1911, Dizzying Frieze*, brings us back full swing. Although the *Vittoriano* was not completed, 1911 was the year it was inaugurated. Section 1 concerned the excavation of this unique monument; on display in Section 8 are the preparation drawings and casts for its "classical" friezes. ○