



Edmondo di Robilant

Robilant + Voena are agents and dealers in fine art.

Edmondo, why did you come to live in London in the early seventies and then never go back to Italy to work?

The choice was never really mine. My parents didn't give me the option, but decided that I should be educated outside of Italy for two reasons that, looking back, seem quite specific. Firstly, my siblings displayed a poor result in their academic achievements via the Italian educational system; I was the third child and clearly a new trajectory was necessary. Secondly, we lived in Milan and the socio-political atmosphere of the time pretty much required for whoever could afford it to remove their children to healthier climates.

And in England you found your vocation in the art world?

I suppose I eventually did, via a series of mischosen paths.

Why did you specialise in Old Masters?

I assume it was due to family historic interest in art of that period. My father and I would often go to see exhibitions together, and in those days, the 1970s, modern and contemporary art was certainly not the first port of call. It would have been far easier then to see exhibitions of Old Masters and 19th Century artists than ones of modern and contemporary artists.

Is London the centre of the Old Masters' market?

I think London probably took over from Paris in conjunction, possibly later on, with New York. So London has had a pre-eminence since the 1920s.

Are there some very important private collections in the UK?

Some of the greatest collectors were based in England with fortunes amassed from the Industrial Revolution to the Second World War, and this must have had a huge influence on the repositioning of the market to London.

Nowadays Old Masters are less fashionable. Why is that?

I think all schools dip in and out of fashion over the decades and centuries for all sorts of reasons. Partly from the wish to collect in different areas than one's ancestors did. In this particular instant we have seen a marked change of attitude towards most of the 17th and 18th Century Old Masters in favour of modern and contemporary art. There are however some exceptions – for instance gold-grounds are more popular now than they have been in the last twenty years. However, Baroque and Rococo paintings have seen disfavour with younger collectors.



R+V Milano-Genova exhibition, June 2013, a masterpiece by Grechetto, Circe.

Why?

One obvious reason springs to mind. Baroque paintings were meant for princely and ecclesiastic palaces, and do not really fit into the sort of houses that we live in today. In this case we have a primary issue of size.

But what about the very large contemporary artists' works?

For Old Master works, size is not the only issue. You must also consider the historical, mythological, political and psychological context before you can understand the meaning of such works. With contemporary works you will find that most collectors are no longer persuaded by their enjoyment per se, but more as a means of stationing wealth. They will happily store 90% of their collection, and maybe have a small number of works on a rota system in their homes. The very wealthy might eventually create a space uniquely dedicated to their collection outside their own homes, thus increasing their social visibility; which presumably was their ultimate goal.

And with the Old Masters' collectors?

This has not been the case, since such works are much rarer and more difficult to collect in quantity at a high level of quality.



Edmondo with his partner Marco Voena in the gallery.

This is why you and your partner decided to be involved in modern art as well?

We could see that it was important not to overlook that part of the business as well, and had to find a niche that we thought pertinent and that we felt comfortable dealing in. We were lucky that we chose an area that has become very sought after in this last six or seven years, post-war and Italian art, and especially conceptual art – spatialism. Artists like Fontana and Manzoni were already famous, and other artists were virtually unknown outside of Italy, such as Castellani, Bonalumi and Scheggi.



The R +V gallery, Paolo Scheggi exhibition, October 2014.

And in the Old Masters' world, where do you concentrate?

We continue in what we know best, and specifically 15th to 18th Century works by Italian masters. 18th Century Vedutisti, Neo-classical and Romantic French and Italian painters, with the occasional English 18th and 19th Century painting as well.

What are your future intentions for progress?

We have recently opened a new gallery in St. Moritz, where we intend to have a show on the concept of female beauty throughout the ages. We are also trying to put together a retrospective exhibition of "Mimmo" Rotella later on in 2015.



R+V WHITE show, 2012, an Achrome by Piero Manzoni alongside a Roman marble Vestal, II century AD.

How do you find your paintings?

There are only three ways of finding paintings. In private collections, through mediators sometimes, sometimes via other dealers and obviously at auction as well.

Who are your clients?

There are no specific types, we have mostly Europeans and North Americans, but increasingly Middle Eastern clients as well. What is interesting is the expansion of the client base in geopolitical terms since we were only dealing in Old Masters. Nevertheless we have a niche of very supportive collectors mostly in Italy.

And is London today, after 35 years, still the place where you think you should be?

That is the sixty four thousand dollar question.

London

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Robilant + Voena