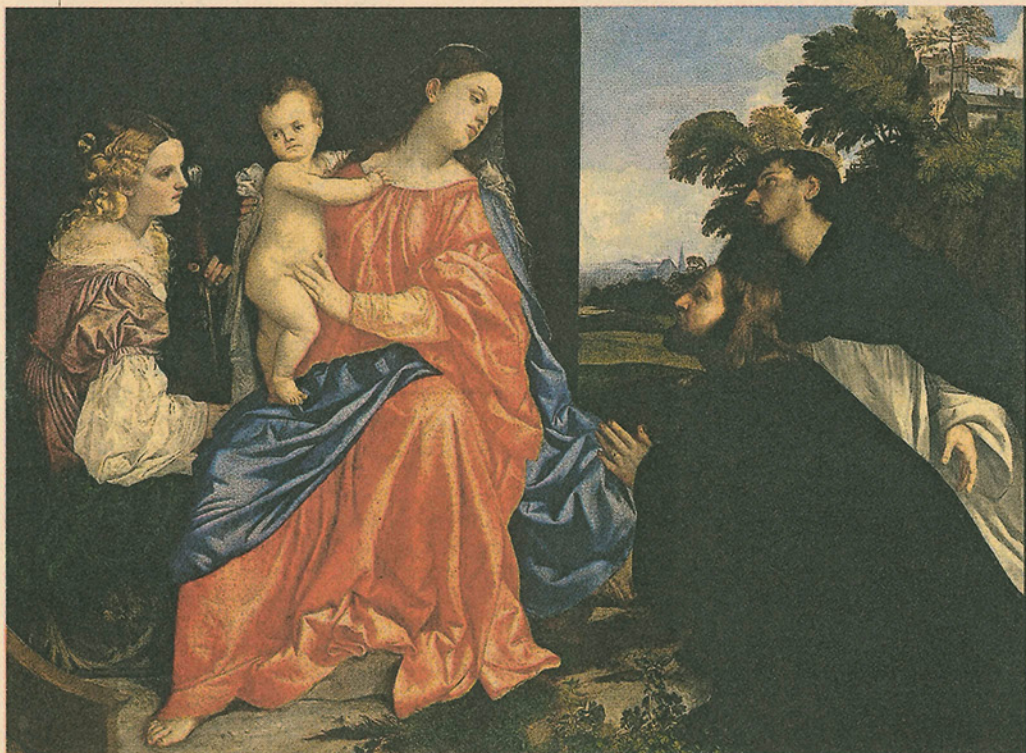


Hidden gems in a Parma villa

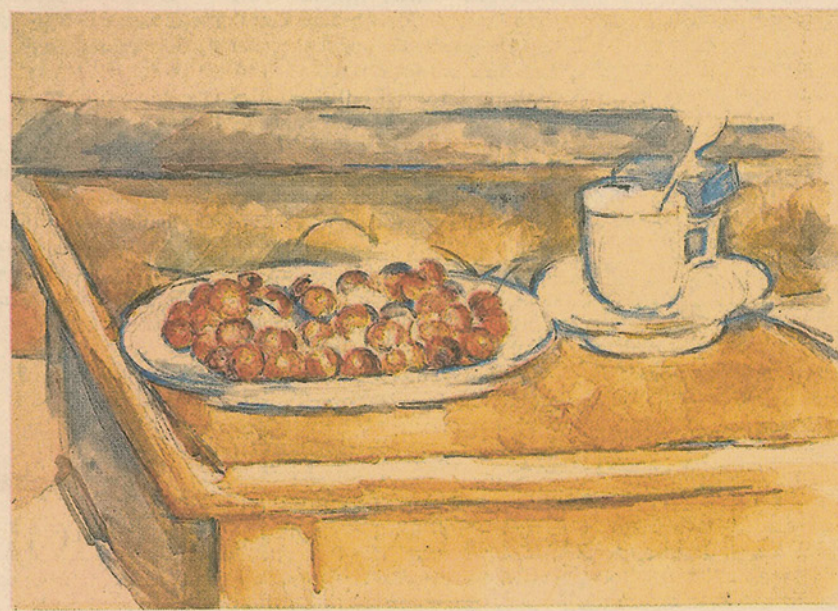
Luigi Magnani | The eclectic collector filled his country house with five centuries of masterpieces. *Jackie Wullschläger* checks out the show and region's cultural reopening



Parma, the Italian city that is refined, precious, slightly off the radar though home to a High Renaissance school of delicate elegance – Parmigianino of the long-necked Madonnas, Correggio's illusionistic domed ceilings – was set to take the limelight this year as Italy's Capital of Culture. Instead, its main square fell as eerily empty as a de Chirico piazza, the popular annual Verdi Festival was cancelled and, after Lombardy, the Emilia-Romagna region became the country's second worst hit for Covid-19 deaths.

Signalling resurgence is a highlight from the programme, the exhibition *The Last Romantic* at Fondazione Magnani Rocca's "Villa dei Capolavori". This "villa of masterpieces" is set in 12 acres of gorgeous parkland – cedar trees, lakes, grottos, meandering peacocks – in Mamiano di Traversetolo to the south of the city. Scheduled to launch days after Italy went into lockdown, the show finally threw open its doors last weekend, a joyful herald for Parma's now extended role as Capital of Culture 2021.

It tells the story of how collector Luigi Magnani brought five centuries of world-class paintings to his intimate country villa, beginning with Gentile da Fabriano's tempera and gold leaf drama of revelation "St Francis Receiving the Stigmata" (1415) and ending with



Alberto Burri's roughly stitched sackcloth "Sacca" (1954), metaphor for postwar wounds and healing.

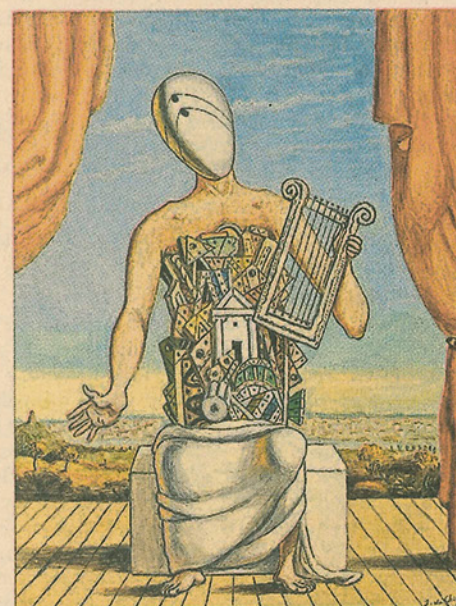
In Titian's "Sacred Conversation" a flow of gazes – maternal Madonna, adoring St Catherine, devoted donor – unites luminous saints in lilac and crimson with psychologically realistic, smaller figures in black: their everyday lives made transcendent. In Cézanne's pellucid watercolour "Still Life with Cherries", a bowl of fruit invites a musing on light, geometry, form. Together, such works build a rivetingly personal vision of art, themed around harmony, meditative energy, and unfolded in "The Last Romantic" as one man's restless spiritual quest.

Magnani saw his favourite paintings as belonging to his "imaginary museum": some "by a twist of fate, became real around me", others "live in my mind as in my home". Several loved but never acquired pieces have been borrowed for the show, notably Giovanni Moroni's splendid "Gentleman in Pink", gracefully contemplating the broken classical artefacts surrounding him – the typical Renaissance northern Italian aesthete, whose unapologetic modern embodiment was Magnani.

It began with an encounter during the second world war. In October 1940, under Correggio's crescent moon-studded, sky-imitating dome at Parma's St Paul monastery, Magnani, musicologist and professor, met a visitor from Bologna: the artist Giorgio Morandi. The spark between these two reserved, polite men with metaphysical casts of mind, inclined to seclusion, was instant.

Clockwise from main: Giorgio Morandi's "Self-portrait" (1925); Cézanne's "Still Life with Cherries" (1890); Giorgio de Chirico's "Solitary Orpheus" (1973); Titian's "Sacred Conversation" (c1513); Luigi Magnani shows Princess Margaret his Filippo Lippi work, "Madonna and Child", in 1984

Fondazione Magnani-Rocca



When, months later, Magnani's father bought the Traversetolo villa, it quickly began to fill with paintings.

The 50 works in the Morandi room here create a theatre of variation, echoes, rearrangements, played across a lifetime. There are classic "Still Life" line-ups of solemn vessels in restrained hues, bathed in light or shrouded in darkness; early experiments – a 1918 composition with pipe and sculpted head (a milliner's prop); later watercolours where objects appear like dissolving zones of colour and shapes, then reveal themselves as a vase, a pot.

"Self-portrait" (1925), one of the artist's scant ventures in this genre, is as psychologically neutral yet insistent as the vessels, and shadowed by a large, pale silhouette.

Magnani the music scholar, drawn to the rhythm-yet-silence between Morandi's objects, immediately commissioned a picture of musical instruments. Morandi fretted that he had none; Magnani set off for Venice, returning with a Renaissance lute, two Indian flutes and other curiosities. Morandi eyed them miserably, then ignored them and produced the stunning elongated, gold-brown "Still Life with Musical Instruments" (1941): a mandolin, guitar and trumpet laid on top of each other, like a chant of curves and straight lines, a conversation in the street.

Magnani went on to gather a wonderful group of Italian avant-garde music pictures whose cadences seem to answer each other: Renato Guttuso's starkly expressive "Still Life with Piano", a tremulous orchestration of sheet music titled "Mozart" with ink bottle and plant pot painted in wartime by nervy lyricist Filippo de Pisis; Gino Severini's enigmatic, enticing Pierrot and Harlequin jamming beneath ruined columns "The Music Lesson". Visiting Severini's family, Magnani fell in love with and managed to prize also a key work from the artist's Paris years, the bright orange-pink "Articulated Dancer" (1915) depicting his daughter's toy puppet, cardboard shapes moved by a string, deconstructed as dazzling futurist planes of movement.

"I love that relationship with art-

'A painting full of contents, even beautiful tales, doesn't interest me. What matters to me is the formal aspect'

works which pertains exclusively to the form," Magnani said. "A painting full of contents, even of beautiful tales, doesn't interest me in the least. What matters to me is the formal aspect, else I remain indifferent." Magnani sought, says curator Stefano Roffi, "figurative artworks which... opened out onto... relationships with music, poetry and... came to offer a coherent vision".

His last purchases – he died in 1984 – especially show his longing for serenity: Canova's idealised life-size "Terpsichore" celebrating the muse of dance, and "Cliffs at Pourville, Sunrise", a vaporous pale pink light, hardly real, enveloping rocks and sea that Monet painted in 1897 to recall his "impressions and sensations" at this coast decades earlier.

Magnani's emphasis on interiority, memory, what Roffi calls his saturnine nature, the non-passive melancholy of the solitary intellectual, who eschewed the rhetoric "art for everybody... in an aura of high civilization, of elected spirituality" permeates the Villa of Masterpieces, but there is also a vein of sociability, shared erudition, albeit elitist.

A photograph records the balding, reticent Magnani showing Princess Margaret, lively in polka dots, his Filippo Lippi "Madonna and Child", with its ornamental trompe l'oeil marble effects. Princesses, painters, poets were Magnani's small court, secluded from Italy's mid-20th-century political turbulence – an atmosphere surely resonant with the collection's single greatest work, Goya's "The Family of the Infante Don Luis".

Like Magnani, Don Luis, brother of Spain's Charles III, embraced a cultured internal exile: he lived with his morganatic wife, beautiful María Theresa of Vallabriga, a hundred miles from Madrid, with a retinue of artists and musicians, including composer Luigi Boccherini.

Goya's portrait of this group, also featuring himself depicting them with a flamboyant gesture, centres on Maria Theresa, magnificent in informal peignoir with her hair down, starring in this tableau as she was not allowed to star at court, and her secretary Francisco del Campo, in white headband, who fixes the viewer with a wide knowing grin. It is a complicit, non-royal, private painting about friendship, art, the comforts of solitude – Luis plays solitaire – within a close-knit circle, the figures brilliantly spotlighted and enclosed by the sweep of a curtain, shutting out the world and its shadows.

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