

The Mecene: Max Mara's Maramotti Family Shares Ardor for Art

BY PIA CAPELLI | MARCH 25, 2016

The Maramotti family, owner of the Italian luxury fashion house Max Mara, has always been passionate about art, and about nurturing that passion in others. Achille Maramotti, who founded the company in 1951, was not only an astute business man, foreseeing the benefit of creating a brand that was not linked in the customers' eyes to a single designer or personality, but he was also an avid art collector.

He started collecting Italian abstract expressionists in his 20s and expanded his interest over the years, collecting works by artists as varied as Giorgio de Chirico, Anselm Kiefer, and Julian Schnabel, displaying some of these works in the corridors and public spaces of his headquarters for all to enjoy.

Today, the Collection Maramotti includes more than a thousand artworks dating from 1945 through the 2000s, and since the company's former manufacturing plant was converted into an exhibition space by British architect Andrew Hapgood in 2007, the collection has been permanently exhibited there, welcoming 10,000 visitors every year.

"Art is in the company's DNA," says Giorgio Guidotti, head of communications for Max Mara worldwide, noting that in the 1970s company employees were encouraged to visit museums and shows during working hours, and also pointing out some institutions such as the Whitney Museum have had a longstanding relationship with the family. "Achille Maramotti used to trust immensely the choices of Whitney's chief curator Donna di Salvo. He felt a connection with a museum that was born as a private collection," Guidotti recalls.

Last year Max Mara funded the Whitney Art Party, thrown to celebrate the opening of the new Whitney Museum in New York's Meatpacking District. In honor of the same occasion, the house also collaborated with the architectural firm responsible for the building, Renzo Piano Building Workshop, on the Whitney handbag — proceeds from the sales of the bags benefit the Renzo Piano Foundation.

So committed is the family to ensuring the art legacy of its founder that it created a trust to avoid the dismembering of the collection in the future. "The starting point of Maramotti's approach was to keep the family's collection and the fashion brand separated," explains Collezione Maramotti's director Marina Dacci. "Max Mara gives us the building and funds our cultural services, guided visits and books, so the visit can be entirely free for the public and we do not have to depend on public funding," she explains, but the company does not interfere with the museum's artistic choices. "We meet them informally twice a year to discuss the artistic program, but we have total freedom," she explains.

Describing the visitor experience, Dacci notes "[they] enter a place that is alive with memories: not a mausoleum, not a white cube." Within the museum's 100,000-square-foot space is ample storage, offices, library, archives, and the restoration lab. Collezione Maramotti tends to look after artworks without moving them, "so they don't get stressed," and the artworks only occasionally leave their Italian home, such as for important international events like the Burri exhibition at the Guggenheim New York, to which Maramotti contributed with two loans: a "Nero con punti rossi" from 1956 and a very rare "Ferro" from 1958, when Burri was just at the beginning of his work with iron.

Among the highlights of the collection there are paintings by Francis Bacon ("Man eating the leg of a chicken", 1952), works from the 1960s by Cy Twombly, Henry Moore, Michelangelo Pistoletto, Jean-Michel Basquiat's "Alchemy for waxmen" (1982), a Sigmar Polke from the same year ("The Instructor"), seminal pieces by Italian artists like Piero Manzoni, Pino Pascali, Mario Merz, Lucio Fontana, and by international painters like Gerhard Richter and Christopher Wool.

The Collezione's mission goes beyond conserving and presenting art to the public, at home and abroad, to actively supporting those who create new work, especially women. The museum commissions three or four projects a year from not-yet-established artists, giving them total freedom with regard to timing, medium, dimensions, and quantity, and also acquires the final work. Recipients of commissions have included Evgeny Antufiev, Chantal Joffe, Mark Manders, Margherita Manzelli, Beatrice Pediconi, Jules de Balincourt, and Kaarina Kaikkonen. And while Manzelli, for example, produced just two pieces for her commission, Antufiev installed more than 80 in five rooms.

Another international initiative is the biennial Max Mara Art Prize for Women (MMAP), now in its sixth edition, which is run in partnership with the Whitechapel Gallery in London. The recipient is offered a residency in Italy to create a work that will be shown at Whitechapel and acquired by the Collezione.

"Thanks to gallery director Iwona Blazwick's commitment" says Dacci, "Whitechapel was already a breeding ground for experimentation in arts and well integrated within a system of international galleries and museums. We were interested in creating a long-residency program that did not exist in Italy at the time. We don't give money but opportunities, services, and time for thought."

The first five Max Mara prize winners were Margaret Salmon, Hannah Rickards, Andrea Büttner, Laure Prouvost, and Corin Sworn. They were joined this year by Emma Hart who proposes to explore the power of the family as expressed in the symbols, possessions, and objects pertaining to unique Italian traditions. Hart will spend two months in Milan at Via Farini, researching the Milan Systems Approach — a systemic and constructivist method of family therapy — as well as the pioneering work of Italian psychiatrist Mara Selvini Palazzoli. In a second phase of the residency, Hart will spend three weeks in Todi, Umbria where she will deepen her knowledge of Italian conceptual artist Alighiero Boetti at the late artist's studio, now managed by his son Matteo Boetti. Hart will also have the opportunity to connect with a number of cultural institutions in the region, in particular the Fondazione Burri which holds a number of works by painter and sculptor Alberto Burri. The residency will end in Faenza, Ravenna, Emilia-Romagna where Hart will spend three months studying and experimenting with the production of ceramics at Museo Carlo Zauli.

Teenagers are also among the recipients of the Maramotti family's support through an initiative with the Atelier dell'Errore (Atelier of Mistake), a mental health artistic project connected to Reggio Emilia's and Bergamo's children neuropsychiatry wards. Currently, the hospitals have art labs for the young patients but Italian artist Luca Santiago Mora, who works with them, wanted to extend the project so they could continue even after they turned eighteen and had to leave the hospital, so he asked for a space. "We happily gave it: now we are used to having Atelier dell'Errore BIG, for kids over 18 or dismissed from the hospitals, on the third floor of the building every Wednesday," Dacci says.

Both the family and the fashion house support the initiative: during last year's Art Week in Milan, Max Mara and the Collezione mounted an exhibition of 40 giant drawings created in the Atelier dell'Errore. It not only spread awareness about mental disease in children, but also made headlines for the quality and intensity of the work. In October 2016, the drawings will once again be shown, this time at London's Fabrizio Moretti's gallery (Moretti Fine Art) in New Bond Street to coincide with Frieze Week.