

Art Talk Magazine

Where Art Lives and Breathes

Ettore Molinaro & Rossella Colombari
Casa Museo – Milano

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Rossella Colombari & Ettore Molinario

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Art Talk Magazine: Dear Ettore and Rossella. We wanted to thank you for opening your Casa Museo (Museum Home) in Milan to us. It is truly an oasis in the center of the city, and we were taken aback by how the sounds of the city rushed in when we left the courtyard; we hadn't realized until then just how "protected" we were from the city! Rossella, you own what is the most prestigious design gallery in Italy and beyond; Ettore you are a financier; theoretically it means one of you is creative, the other cartesian. How has that translated into your collecting?

Rossella Colombari: I used to be a collector – in fact, I auctioned off my collection in 2004. That chapter is behind me. Today, I no longer think in terms of collecting, what excites me is the recreation of space: curating dialogues between objects, allowing masterpieces to confront, challenge, and illuminate one another. It's not about accumulation, but about creating energy and new perspectives. My guiding principles are to innovate, to change, to break away. I'm not interested in repetition or in following trends.

Ettore Molinario: Admittedly, on paper we come from different worlds: Rossella from the creativity of design, I from the rationality of finance. But the way I collect is anything but cold. It's a gesture of inquiry—analytical, yes, but also deeply instinctive. I'm also an experienced cave diver, and collecting for me is much like that descent into darkness and silence. I dive inward, into my own depths, and with light—whether it's the beam of a torch in a cave or the light of photography, which is literally the writing of light—I try to reveal something I didn't yet know about myself. There is a Cartesian side, yes, to my approach: order, rhythm, structure. But what drives the choices is an impulse. The works that enter the collection either mirror me, or challenge me: it's a creative act, it's mimetic. I collect through identification. Sometimes I find myself in an image. Other times, I lose myself there, and that's where it becomes truly meaningful to me.

ATM: Ettore, you started collecting at a young age, and over time you have discovered that beyond the aesthetics of the photographs you acquire, they are also a catharsis, a reflection of your inner being taking the fundamentals of

collecting – the connection to the collection – to a different level. Is collecting a need or a passion? How does it affect your life?

Ettore Molinario: I started collecting 35 years ago. At first, it was a deeply instinctive, almost impulsive act—I would see an image and feel the urge to possess it, as if that act could help me grasp something still hidden about myself. Over time, that impulse became more structured and analytical. Collecting turned into a way of understanding myself, of exploring my inner world through images. In this sense, it became a form of self-representation—a visual autobiography. Now, with the Casa Museo, that process has reached its most complete and radical form. The house itself is an extension of me—of my eye, my history, my contradictions. Through the Casa Museo, I now find myself at the center of the contemporary photography "vortex". And that brings a certain responsibility: to grow the collection, to valorise it, to share it and make it visible internationally. And, why not, to influence the very rules of collecting. I'm interested in opening new paths, especially for younger generations, for those who will collect not just to possess, but to understand something about themselves. So yes, I would say my approach is totalizing. I don't collect to decorate a wall. I collect to never stop exploring.

ATM: Rossella, you were born into one of the most important Italian families in art and antiquities, as such we can only assume that your career was a natural path? Your impeccable taste in furniture and design can be seen, and felt, throughout your Casa Museo. In what way(s) are your choices in dialogue with the photography within the space? How do you and Ettore select both the art on the wall, and the objects that surround them?

Rossella Colombari: I approach photography as both an architectural and chromatic element. It's never just an image to hang – it's a structure, a presence that shapes the space around it. For me, the focus lies in reinterpreting Ettore's photographs architecturally, and in curating the installation through a careful balance of colours. In the Casa Museo, every element – whether it's a piece of furniture or a photograph – is in dialogue. It's not about matching, but about creating

tension and harmony, about finding a rhythm between form, material, and colour. The process is intuitive, but also deeply intentional.

ATM: Rossella and Ettore: The entire Casa Museo is an artistic endeavor in itself. You made the acquisition of an old silver factory, and then trusted the design to a "maritime" architect resulting in a feeling that the Casa Museo is like being in a yacht. Tell us about the process of re-designing the house. As a follow up, more intriguingly you have taken the concept of open space to a higher level by adding windows and glass doors where there would normally be walls. We are left with a feeling that nothing is hidden, everything is on view. Surprisingly not a feeling of a lack of privacy, but rather (perhaps based on the nature of the photography), that the Casa Museo is a playground for voyeurism and exhibitionism; did you have a different vision when you designed the house?

Rossella Colombari: No, in this kind of process, Ettore and I were completely aligned. One geometric shape narrates all of it: the circle. It gives rhythm to the spaces of our house and two open circumferences with translated centers structure the space in an enveloping gesture. Alongside the circle, the idea of theatre runs throughout the Casa Museo. The space is conceived as a play of curtains and portals that frame different moments of private life, almost like a film sequence. It's a fluid space, simultaneously domestic and performative, where life and art blend naturally. The transparency was not about voyeurism per se, but about embracing a way of living that doesn't hide. We wanted to challenge the usual boundaries between inside and outside, public and private. Following Carlo Molino's lesson, it's a space where oriental minimalism and Italian baroque coexist, creating a house that is both a stage and a home.

Ettore Molinario: The maritime background of our architects, Rome-based firm Lazzarini & Pickering, had a profound influence on the design of the Casa Museo: just like on a yacht, every space has been optimized, especially the private rooms. Everything was designed to give a sense of efficiency without sacrificing intimacy, as we wanted a space where movement could flow naturally. So, I agree when you describe a cer-



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ain “voyeuristic” quality to the architecture, though it always maintains a delicate balance with privacy.

That nautical spirit also extended to the materials: refined elements like lacquered mahogany, traditionally used in classic boats, which Rossella selected with great precision to warm what was once an industrial shell. She chose them not just for their beauty, but to introduce a tactile richness.

And then there’s another essential element brought in by the architects: everything is airy, light, almost floating. Like the walkway that cuts across the space or the central staircase. There was a very intentional effort to lift, to lighten, to allow space to breathe. Nothing is heavy and this adds to the feeling that the house is not just a home, but also a dreamscape, a vision, a stage. I fully agree with Rossella: the Casa Museo is the synthesis of both our visions. We wanted it to become a living theatre. A place where art and life not only coexist, but constantly feed into each other, like we do with each other in life. Where space isn’t just lived: it’s performed, inhabited.

ATM: Rossella and Ettore: The collection is rooted in what is typically referred to in conservative societies as taboos, fetishes, and “contentious” themes. From sexual ambiguity and diversity, to socio-political controversy such as nazism, the artworks (and their arrangement) however does not leave visitors “agitated” but rather open to dialogue, maybe curious rather than judgmental. Is this a purposeful curation, a way for visitors to respectfully connect with you and Ettore in a mature dialogue about what is also part of being human? A mirror one can stand in front of to “see” inside of themselves in ways they normally couldn’t?

Ettore Molinaro: This collection has always been, first and foremost, a form of personal and psychoanalytic investigation. It speaks of me: of my contradictions, my obsessions, my fears, my desires. Many of the works may appear controversial at first glance, but they are not there to provoke for the sake of provocation. They are there to reveal something, to open a space for collective reflection.

What interests me is not the scandal, but the abyss. The part of ourselves we often keep hidden, even from our own eyes. The collection is, in this sense, an invitation: to look inside, not outside. Photography, as we’ve said before, is writing with light, and light can illuminate the places we’re most afraid to look.

In this sense, collecting has become, for me, a way to search for an inner democracy: a space where the many parts of the self, even the most contradictory, can coexist and be heard. It’s not about resolving tension, but allowing it to speak. Accepting our very human complexity. And that’s the invitation the collection extends to others: to step into the mirror, and to begin a dialogue not just with the work, but with themselves. If the Casa Museo helps someone venture

into their own abyss, even just for the time of the visit, a moment, then it’s fulfilled its most human purpose.

ATM: Rossella, as we mentioned earlier you are a foremost expert in design and furniture. We found out recently, from your sister Paola, that design and furniture elements are not allowed in a booth at Art Basel for example. Do you feel that “fine arts” (paintings, drawings, sculptures, etc...) do not have a place next to design and furniture? Do they not complement each other and allow for a “3D” dialogue that goes deeper? Can one live without the other?

Rossella Colombari: Prestigious fairs like Art Basel are highly specialized, and it is quite normal for them to separate different disciplines – such as fine arts and design – in order to maintain clarity and curatorial focus. However, this separation in a fair setting does not imply that there is no dialogue or complementarity between the disciplines themselves. On the contrary, fine arts and design – just like sculpture and photography, or painting and architecture – often engage in a rich and meaningful exchange. So, while they may be presented separately in certain contexts, in life and in creative practice they are deeply interconnected and certainly not mutually exclusive.

ATM: Ettore, we know that you are a financier, and we also know that being surprised about your collection would be both diminutive and offensive. Nevertheless finance still has a reputation for traditionalism and for a certain rigidity. As such, were you ever “judged” by your peers for the subject of your collection? Two or three decades ago it must have even taken what can only be referred to as courage. How do you hope visitors to the collection will react? Is there an element of provocation?

Ettore Molinaro: Finance has been a very big part of my life, having worked in the industry for thirty years, and what you say is true: finance still carries a reputation for traditionalism. I’m sure that, over the years, my collection may have raised a few eyebrows, but to be honest, no one ever told me so directly, as that’s how judgment often works.

I remember when I bought what I consider today the seminal piece of the collection: Man With Dog by Joel-Peter Witkin. It’s an image that doesn’t leave you indifferent. When we had guests, Rossella instinctively suggested we cover it with a curtain: “it’s too strong, maybe too much.” But I didn’t want to. I never have. Because I believe there’s no shame in truth and no need to hide when we’re trying to bring more of ourselves into the light. Of course, showing oneself with honesty takes courage, but this collection isn’t about conforming, and it’s not about shocking either. It’s about inviting people to look into the abyss. Their own, not mine.

There is something uncanny in the collection, yes, even unsettling. And I hope visitors feel

something, whatever that may be: attraction, discomfort, curiosity. But I would never try to guide their impression. Everyone reacts differently when standing in front of their shadow: that’s the point.

And I am fully coherent with my collection. There’s nothing to hide, not even in the images that might make some people turn away. Especially in those. Because that’s where the tension lives, and sometimes, where the truth begins.

ATM: Rossella, your design and furniture style is eclectic, and spans decades if not centuries. What is it that attracts you to an object or a piece of furniture? Is there one that you dream of owning?

Rossella Colombari: I’m drawn to pieces that I wish I had created myself. When I choose an object or a piece of furniture, it’s because it speaks to my own sensibility – something I recognize as aligned with my vision, even if made by someone else. I then reinterpret it within a new space I’ve designed, giving it a new life and context. As for what I dream of owning – perhaps it’s really what I still hope to invent. The most exciting piece is always the one I haven’t imagined yet.

ATM: Ettore, what is it like to live in a home that is also quite literally a museum? Everything inside the space is arranged perfectly, every artwork, every piece of furniture in its place. Does living in such a space make it difficult, if not impossible to be “messy”?

Ettore Molinaro: Being messy? For me, that’s simply not an option, it would go against my nature entirely! The truth is, everything in the Casa Museo follows a harmony that deeply feels ours: the way the artworks are displayed, the arrangement of the furniture, the architecture. It’s never about rigidity, but about precision and balance, it reflects a shared desire for aesthetics, for a visual and emotional rhythm that makes us feel at home.

Whenever we move a photograph or shift an element, it’s never casual, it’s a considered process, something we discuss and decide together. And even if we start from different points of view, we always end up aligned. That aesthetic balance usually begins with Rossella, she has an extraordinary instinct for composition. I follow her lead gladly, because her vision is always coherent. That said, messiness is probably where our natures diverge. I’m meticulous, almost obsessive: order gives me clarity. Rossella, on the other hand, doesn’t need perfection to feel at ease. She’s able to live with imperfection, with what’s unresolved. And I think that’s part of her creative genius. She finds meaning in the irregular. And yes, I’ll admit it, that’s something I admire... and envy even.

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ATM: Rossella and Ettore: some of your photographs have great stories, such as that of the taxi driver who took the photographer to his home after the photographer asked him if he knew any interesting people in the city. Punch-line the taxi driver's wife is transgender. Do all the artworks you collect have a "story"? None certainly could be accused of being just decorative!

Rossella Colombari: Many of the pieces we own come with stories – some poignant, others quite amusing. One of my favorites is about a Joseph Hoffmann writing desk with its armchair. It once belonged to a dentist who, in the midst of a bitter divorce, was forced to sell the pieces he loved most – his wife had taken all of his dental prosthetics! Another example is the “Grappolo” chandelier by Luigi Caccia Dominioni. I actually convinced Ettore to buy it even before we had conceived the idea of the Casa Museo. Its dangling chains resonate beautifully with the fetish-

ist element of the photography collection. So yes, behind almost every work, there's a layer of meaning or a curious anecdote.

ATM: Rossella and Ettore: You were recently the protagonists in a movie that was shot in your Casa Museo. The theme of the movie was very much aligned with the collection, and we can't wait to see it! Can you tell us about the movie?

Rossella Colombari: Yes, the film was a truly unique experience for us. It's actually the first time that two collectors – a husband and wife – have become the main performers in a movie. And what better stage than our Casa Museo? As I've mentioned before, the house itself is conceived almost like a theatre, a space of daily performance where art and life are constantly intertwined. So, creating an actual movie inside it felt like a natural extension of that vision.

Ettore Molinaro: Absolutely. For me, it was a way of staging the collection, not just as a back-

drop, but as an active presence, almost a character in itself. And yes, it was important to play that part, to lend a voice and a body to the spirit of the Casa Museo. But what I truly loved about the experience was the shift in roles. It felt completely natural to step “to the other side”, to be interpreted, and at the same time, to interpret parts of myself.

In a way, it was about stripping things back, exposing something more vulnerable. Not acting in the conventional sense, but revealing. And doing that within the very space that contains so much of who we are, made the entire process deeply intimate.

We are eager to see the movie too and, as soon as it comes out, we will wait for you in the Casa Museo for a very special private viewing! Thank you so much for having us, it is truly a pleasure to share our passion and our lives.



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