



BY MICHAEL DIEMAR

CASA MUSEO

Photography, Furniture & Sculpture

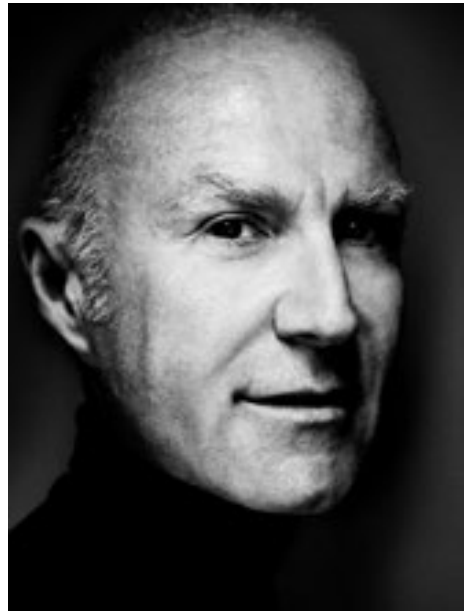
All images Courtesy of Collezione Ettore Molinaro

In March 2025, Italian collector Ettore Molinaro and his wife Rossella Colombari will open the much-anticipated Casa Museo in Milan, a live-in museum, showcasing an impressive collection of photography, furniture and sculpture, for private tours, exhibitions and conferences.

Molinaro is well known in the international photography world as a collector of images of gender fluidity but a visit to his website, collezionemolinaro.com, makes clear that he collects other types of imagery as well. Juxtapositions of two seemingly unrelated images can reveal deeper meanings and so a few years ago, Molinaro launched *Dialogues*, a free newsletter, discussing such meetings. As he explains in the introduction, “The images in the collection date from 1850 to today and come from all over the world. The *Dialogues* retrace the themes most dear to the Collector’s reflection, hence the search for oneself, gender identity, desire, and melancholy. Through these combinations, highlighted by the temporal anachronism and Warburgian montage, the Collector reinterprets the images, bringing to light new meanings.”

On the wall, *L'âme du couteau* by Alain Fleischer, gelatin silver print, France, 1982. Dining table designed by Melchiorre Bega, Italy, circa 1950.

ETTORE MOLINARIO



Credit Giovanni Gastel. © Image Service /Archivio Giovanni Gastel.

He spells collector with capital C, implying an activity that goes way beyond mere acquisition. How are collectors made? How are any of us made? I was intrigued to read edition 35 of *Dialogues*, published in April this year, where Molinaro writes, “It happened exactly fifty years ago, and it is an important anniversary. In April 1974, the exhibition *Transformer: Aspects of Travesty*, curated by Jean-Christophe Ammann, shone at the Kunstmuseum in medieval Lucerne. If there is an event, a vision and a handful of provocative and revolutionary agents who inspired me, here they are, and one of the cornerstones of my collection is precisely the study of the artists who made that exhibition their flagship.”



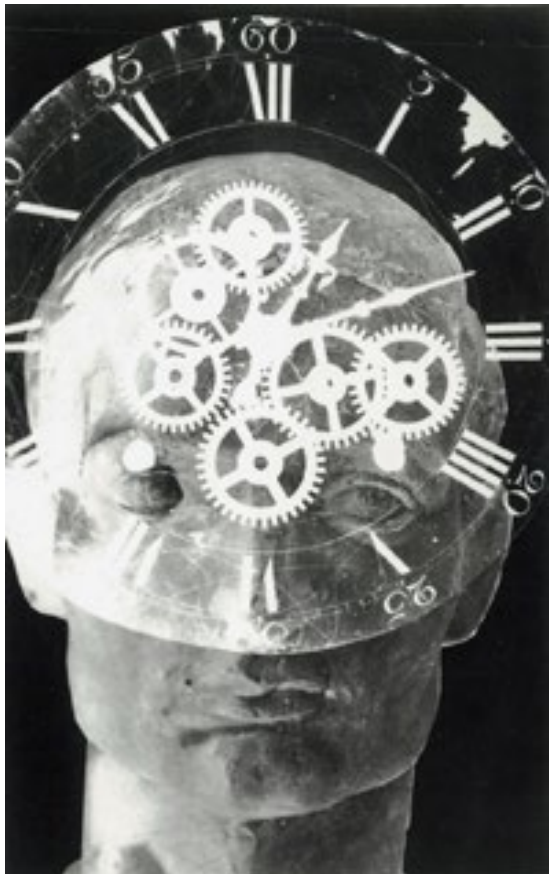
The title of the exhibition referenced Lou Reed's album *Transformer*, released in 1972. Produced by David Bowie and Mick Ronson, it was a far more direct statement on gender fluidity than Bowie's *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and The Spiders from Mars* released the same year, such as the opening lines of *Walk on the Wild Side*, "Holly came from Miami FLA/Hitchhiked her way across the USA/Plucked her eyebrows along the way/Shaved her legs and then he was a she."

Listening to the album again while reading the *Dialogues*, I was struck by the way its lyrics resonated with so many of the images, whether they be contemporary or from the 19th century. Glam Rock had a major impact on Molinario, he tells me.

– Glam Rock was my gateway to discovering transgression in terms of sexual identity. In those years in Italy, there were politics, a lot of politics. I had zero interest in those politics. My militancy was that of Lou Reed, perhaps because in 1972, a song like *Walk on the Wild Side* showed me precisely the direction I had to take to close the narrow, moral and family confines of my past. And then there were those fantastic lines in the song *Vicious* that opens the album, "Vicious/Hey, you hit me with a flower/You do it every hour/Oh, baby, you're so vicious." It's hardly surprising that there are so many flowers in my collection.

Top. Jürgen Klauke. *Umarmung*, C-print, West Germany, 1973.

Left. Gyula Szabó. Untitled, gelatin silver print, Hungary, circa 1960.



The photography world knows you as a collector but what's your professional background?

– I worked in high finance, during what was perhaps its most exciting period, brutality and excess included, namely the decade between the '80s and '90s. I was very lucky because I was living in New York at the time, and I explored every nocturnal nuance of the city. Even after all these years, there are many images in my collection that trigger emotions from that time that I cannot forget. I then left New York and returned to Milan. As times changed, I changed too. I could say that I have matured but not in the sense of having given up certain experiences, on the contrary, I pushed them to an extreme limit of authenticity and concreteness. I also became a marine speleologist, an explorer of caves, to make my research go even deeper. Even today, at the age of 67, when I descend to a depth of almost one hundred meters below the earth's surface, I live at the very limits of my physical and mental balance, and I experience the riskiest and potentially deadliest descent within myself. But in the face of my impulses, being underground and immersed in the darkness of the water, I learned to remain calm and rational and have everything under control. And for me, control is a strong theme. Indeed, I could say that my collection is a way for me to control and dominate my imagination.

You're known as a collector of images of gender fluidity. When did you start collecting these images and what were the first images you acquired?

– My love for photography was born from a dazzling encounter, *Man with Dog* by Joel-Peter Witkin. I saw this extraordinary image in an exhibition curated by Germano Celant at the Castello di Rivoli in 1995. The body of a man and a woman combined, holding a small dog. It had the serenity of a Renaissance painting and it completely seduced me. I bought it instantly. Later on, during a psychoanalysis session, I found myself complaining about the maybe excessive cost of the Witkin print but my analyst, with intuition, told me that the money meant nothing because in buying the print, I had bought

“a piece of myself”. Then came the second insight. I understood that gender identity, that underground and destabilising confrontation between male and female, was my theme. My impulses took shape around it, between dominance and submission, violence and melancholy, love and death. It gave me a firm direction and so I found “my authors”, Claude Cahun, Marcel Duchamp as Rose Sélavy, Pierre Molinier, Nan Goldin, Cindy Sherman, Yasumasa Morimura, David LaChapelle, Lisetta Carmi, Robert Mapplethorpe, Peter Hujar and Jürgen Klauke.



Claude Cahun. *Autoportrait au chat*, gelatin silver print, France, 1927.



Initially, you focused on contemporary works. When did you move towards works from the classic era, including the 19th century?

– For me, it was vital to historically broaden the scope of my research. The start in this sense, thanks to a sensitive gallery owner like James Hyman, was the entry into the collection of one of the two 1930s enlargements of the *Scherzo di Follia*, the portrait of the Countess of Castiglione by Pierre-Louis Pierson. In 1863, she explored her identity and her roles, changing her dress and putting herself on stage. Looking and looking at yourself, as suggested

Pierre Molinier. *Le Chaman*, gelatin silver print, France, 1968.

by the oval that frames the countess' eye, is the key verb of modernity. I felt that André Kertész's *Distortion #34* was also going in the same analytical direction, the body that deforms when mirrored. Looking at yourself is always a painful operation, as suggested by Nino Migliori's *Cancellations*, a work from 1954 that I love very much. And love, even love, can become pain. A weapon and a wound together. When I encountered on my path *L'âme du couteau* by Alain Fleischer, an immense author, I immediately felt a very strong resonance, so much so that I entrusted this image, depicting Danielle Schirman, Alain's magnificent lifelong companion, with "the message" of my collection.

What possibilities did 19th-century photography present to you?

– At a certain point I understood that through the theme of gender identity, I could explore the entire history of photography. A wonderful vertigo. It is no coincidence that the image that opens the collection, the oldest, is a Daguerreotype from around 1845, that portrays the mysterious Louise, perhaps

one of the first female cross-dressers to pose in front of the lens. I can never thank Daniella Dangoor, dealer and friend, enough for offering me this treasure. And I also owe Daniella my gratitude for the encounter with the beauty of ancient Japanese photography. Owning a portrait like the *Samurai in Armour* by Shin'ichi Suzuki, or *Oiran* by Tamamura Kōzaburō, allowed me to better understand, for example, Nobuyoshi Araki and Daido Moriyama. But nineteenth-century photography also gave me other food for thought. First of all, I was impressed by the strength of these images, so fragile and yet so resistant in the face of the violence of time. The images of the 1990s had conquered me with their gigantism but with patience, a skill almost unknown

to me, I learnt to appreciate the small size of the 19th century images. Every day, 19th-century photography gives me lessons in intimacy, discretion and tenacity.

You have worked for a number of years with an independent photography curator, Laura Leonelli. When did you start working together?

– I started working together with Laura Leonelli five years ago and from our first meetings, I felt that her independent and somewhat eccentric gaze complemented mine. Together we transformed a

Pierre-Louis Pierson. *Scherzo di Follia (The Countess of Castiglione)*, circa 1863, France. Gelatin silver print, enlargement printed circa 1930 by Braun & Cie.

André Kertész. *Distortion #34*, gelatin silver print, France, 1933.





primary drive, my attraction to cross-dressing, into a “reasoned drive”, which for me is synonymous with collecting. Above all, Laura invited me to also consider the images of lesser-known or anonymous authors, first of all, Monsieur X, to give depth to some of the collection’s strong themes and reconstruct the horizon on which some of my favourite masters were formed, such as Erwin Blumenfeld and Helmut Newton. In the beginning, I experienced this proposal as a provocation, a financial man like myself, to welcome images worth a few euros. But then I discovered that it was only my gaze, my sensitivity that gave value to these images. This too was a rebellion, and this rebellion against the classic rules of the photographic market thrilled me.

Top. Living room. On the walls; photographs by Paolo Gioli, Urs Lüti, Joel-Peter Witkin, Bettina Rheims, Bill Brandt, Herb Ritts, Henry Callahan and others. White armchair with Ottoman model P110-Canada, designed by Osvaldo Borsani, Italy 1969.

Red chairs designed by Carlo Scarpa, Italy, circa 1950. Dining table designed by Gio Ponti, USA, circa 1950. Ceiling lamp designed by Luigi Caccia Dominioni, Italy 1967. Prestige Club, Fiji Islands, circa 1820.

Anonymous. Louise (Female Cross Dresser), Daguerreotype, England, 1845.



How do you work together?

– We have a lot of discussions, and we are joined in our meetings by Martina Conti, the precious conservator of the collection, and Jelena Mirković, our assistant. The goal is to identify the “backbones”, that is, the themes that run through the entire collection and to contribute to making the discussion of “my identity” broader, stronger, and more personal. For example, there’s the theme of aggression, and so we included images of weapons and warriors, from the Samurai to the inflorescence of the atomic bomb, from Zorro’s whip among pink carnations to Alain Fleischer’s knife-wielding woman. There’s also the theme of colonial photography, with Christopher Columbus’ armour, an emblem of Western curiosity and voracity. And then there’s the theme of instinct, of animality, exemplified by

Left. Ettore Molinaro studio. Portrait of Patti Smith by Robert Mapplethorpe, USA, 1986. Desk and chair by Josef Hoffmann, Austria, circa 1900. Mirror designed by Carlo Bugatti, Italy, circa 1900.

Right. First floor, armchair designed by Ettore Zaccari, Italy, circa 1910. On the shelf, Untitled (Rose) by Edward Steichen, gelatin silver print, USA, circa 1920. *Marchesa Casati* by Baron Adolf De Meyer, gelatin silver print Paris, 1912.

a nude by Gaudenzio Marconi, with a wolf’s head printed on the fabric of the drapery. Another theme is the hand and the glove, with images of gloves of lace, satin, and leather, which brings me back to the pleasures of fetishism.

The *Dialogues* is your way of communicating with the world at large. What gave you the idea?

– The *Dialogues* are inspired by my experience as a marine speleologist and my collection is nothing more than an underground network of caves and tunnels, like the ones I explore every year in my dives in Yucatan. In the depths of the collection, the images travel along secret paths. They attract each other and they “choose” each other. There is a certain risk in these contaminations, but above all, there is the desire to experience the collection as a world of deep relationships. At first sight, they might seem irrational but they have a very precise logic. No image enters the collection by chance, and no image enters it in order to “make” a dialogue with another. The dialogue between Joel-Peter Witkin and Paul Coze, for example, was born this way. I was returning from Japan and that calligraphy of hair in a river of ink suddenly became a way to tell the fluid identity of Witkin and myself. It was as if the braid adorning the head of *Man with Dog* had dissolved



and with it every bond of gender. Another example is the dialogue between Paolo Gioli's *Vulva* and an aerial photograph from the First World War, that painful opening in the earth, where hundreds of thousands of men died, was metaphorically the female sex. Orgasm, as Georges Bataille teaches, is always a small death.

Do you have plans to publish the *Dialogues* in book form?

– I think about it from time to time, and then I tell myself that the light form of sending them out is the one I prefer. Books can give the impression that the mission is accomplished, that it's over. Instead, I want to continue the *Dialogues* for a long time.

In addition to photographs, you also collect sculpture, Khmer, Gandhara and early Medieval Indian. Do you regard them as linked to the photography collection?

– Yes, indeed. I started collecting Khmer, Gandhara and early Medieval Indian sculpture as a three-dimensional completion to the fetishism of photography. To give you some background, I was born in Rome, in the baroque and Catholic Rome of Bernini and Borromini, among saints, tears, blood, twisting bodies and dizzying ascents to heaven. The choice of the most ascetic sculpture in the world, Khmer, Gandhara and early Medieval Indian, austere, androgynous in virile bodies, and at the same time extremely delicate, was yet another rebellion in my personal history. To be honest, it is also proof of my contradictions. Many of my sculptures are Bodhisattvas. One of the phrases from the Abhiniskramana Sutra that I reflect upon most is this: "Only the madman is blinded by the external appearance of beauty. Where is the beauty when the decorations are removed, the jewels removed, the dress lies on the floor, and flowers and garlands turn white and die? The wise man looks at the illusory charm of these vanities as dreams, mirages, fantasies." Here, collecting, accumulating, investing, remaining close to the beauty of these works, loving them, touching them and at the same time reflecting on their impermanence, is a significant spiritual exercise.

There are also works from Oceania in your collection.

– They are an invitation to travel, to the life I would have wanted to live if I had been born two and a half centuries ago. James Cook was one of my heroes as a boy. When on "my path", I came across a magnificent 18th century Akatara, almost two and a half meters tall, from the Central Cook Islands, I understood that we were meant for each other. It also attracted me that there were two eyes engraved at the attachment of the "blade". And that look of aggression and conquest, which also has the shape of the symbol of infinity, anticipates the look of photography. Beauty and terror together.



Top. **Zorro**. Untitled, C-print, France, 1968

Bottom. **Monsieur X**. Untitled, gelatin silver print, France, circa 1930.



Left. **Joel-Peter Witkin**. *Man with dog*, Gelatin silver print, USA, 1990.

Right. **Paul Coze**. *Étude de chevelure*, gelatin silver print, France, circa 1950.



Left. **Paolo Gioli**. *Vulva*, gelatin silver print, Italy, 2004.

Right. **S. LT. Ioanid**. WWI trench, aerial photograph, Romania, 1917.





Let's move on to Casa Museo. It's a live-in museum, combining photography, sculpture and masterpieces of furniture. What gave you the idea?

– Casa Museo was born from the need to live together with the images I collect. For me, collecting photography means creating the ideal space in which to discover myself and explore the most secret chambers of my personality. My dream was this, a house museum that would make it possible to “inhabit” every part of me, even the most extreme, in a very natural way. And from this perspective, the images have become my “sentinels”, who protect me, guide me, and comfort me. Collecting also means never being alone. My wife, Rossella Colombari, is one of the most authoritative art gallery owners of Italian design who rediscovered and relaunched Carlo Mollino's design work. We started imagining this house thirty years ago when we met. Even then, the idea was a Casa Museo, a theatre house to accommodate the passions of both of us.

Dining room. On the wall: Yasumasa Morimura, *Self-portrait (actress) after Vivien Leigh 2*, Ilfochrome print, Japan, 1996. In the back, Eikoh Hosoe, *Untitled*, gelatin silver print, Japan, 1969. Dining table designed by Melchiorre Bega, ca 1950, Italy, red chairs designed by Carlo Scarpa, ca 1950, Italy.

Akatara, power insignia in the shape of a spear. Central Cook Islands, Atiu, Aitutaki, Mitiaro, Mauke 18th century.

When did you start turning the dream into reality?

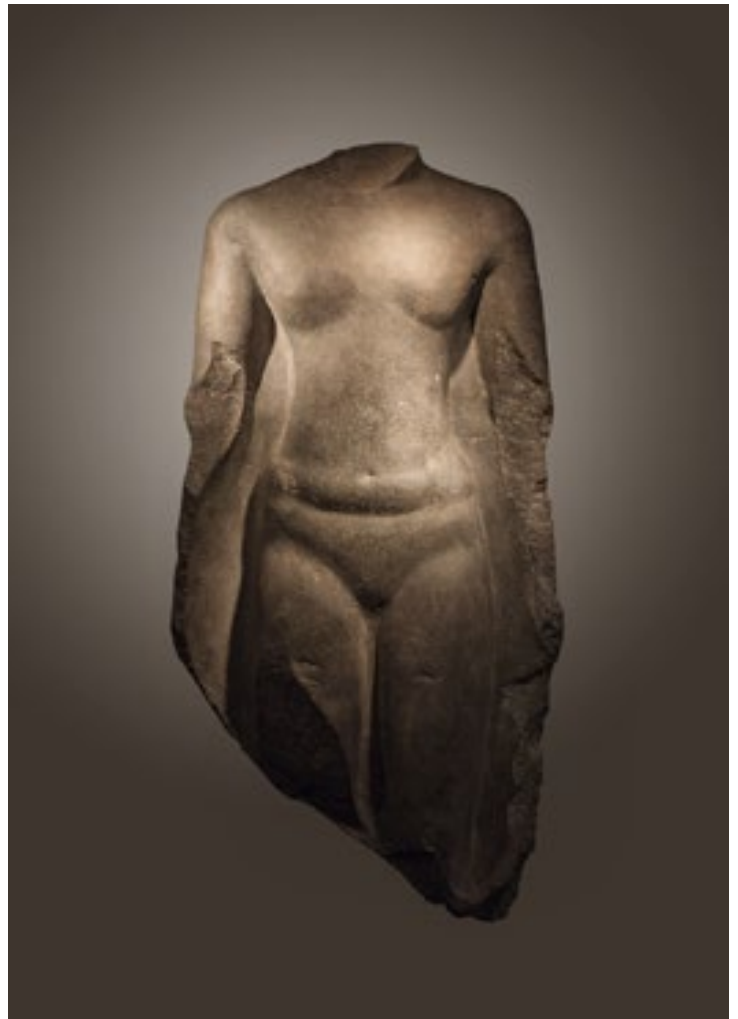
– Five years ago, the wish came true when I purchased an early 20th-century silversmith factory in the Isola district of Milan. Today, Isola, which means the island, is one of the most vital epicentres of the city. I entrusted the project to architects Claudio Lazzarini, Carl Pickering and Marco Lavit. Together with them, the idea of a large circular, dynamic, open and very bright environment was born. In the scenography of the double-height building, every space, convivial and private, is also an exhibition space. Approximately 1000 square metres are devoted to the photography collection. Of the approximately 800 images that make up the collection, I have displayed around 200. I change them in rotation so that I can also enjoy the latest arrivals. The design collection, mainly Italian, was created thanks to my collaboration with Rossella. The furniture pieces bear the signature of, among others, Carlo Scarpa, Gio Ponti, Ignazio Gardella, Osvaldo Borsani, and Luigi Caccia Dominioni. Each of these masters speaks of research, beauty, and modernity, and I believe that their talent still represents one of the highest Italian contributions to 20th-century culture.

How will the photographs, sculpture and furniture work together?

– Each presence participates in the deep sentimental dialogue that unites my life and that of my wife. And as in the best style of my collection, it is a clash, a meeting between two different, complementary, very strong personalities. A war, a peace, every day.

When do you plan to open to the public?

– Casa Museo will be open for private visits which can be booked on the soon-to-be-launched website. We will have the official inauguration in March 2025 and from then on, we will be happy to organise conferences, book presentations and exhibitions. And it will be wonderful to start collaborating and host masterpieces from other private collections. Meanwhile, my collection is online, collezionemolinario.com



Top. Bust of Bodhisattva, Gandhara, 2nd -3rd century.

Bottom. Torso of Buddha, Dvaravati, 7th century, Cambodia or Thailand.