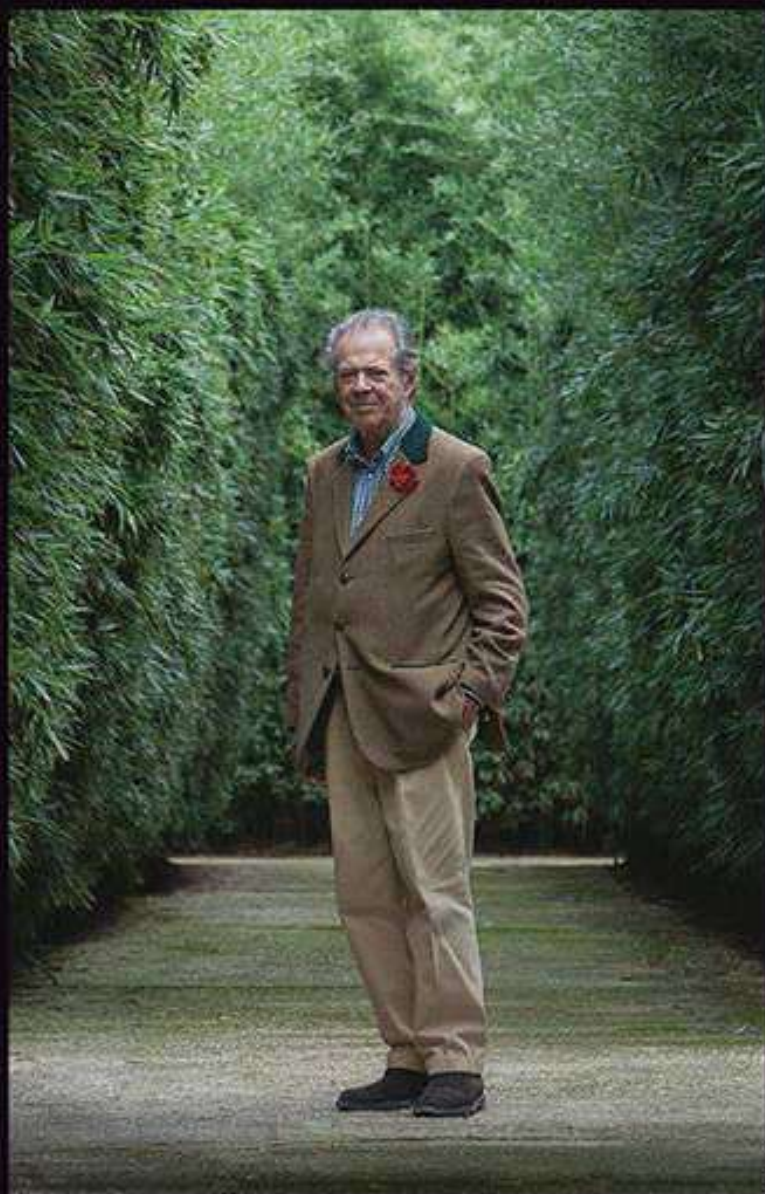


A painting of a pyramid and a brick wall with an arched doorway, under a blue sky with clouds. The pyramid is the central focus, with a small square opening at its base. The brick wall in the foreground has a larger arched doorway. The sky is a deep blue with soft, white and yellowish clouds. The overall style is classical and somewhat surreal.

FRANCO MARIA RICCI

THE MAN BEHIND THE COLLECTION

BY GUY ANTONIO FILIPE PIMENTEL



Franco Maria Ricci at his Labirinto della Masone

It was in 2013 that Maria João Seixas, a mutual friend, in her particular manner of hinting ideas in the same fashion as one takes off a glove, handed me, during a dinner party, a beautiful book, along with the suggestion: "Why don't you bring this to your museum?" It was the catalog of the exhibition of Franco Maria Ricci's private art collection which he had curated in 2001 at the Ducal Palace of Colorno: *La collezione d'arte di Franco Maria Ricci, editore e bibliofilo*. This was not the kind of challenge to which I could answer promptly. It was only after, more severely, that I had the chance of browsing the book. Under my eyes paraded an intermittent sequence of beautiful objects (paintings, sculptures, books), many of which any museum would envy. Above all, it was a fascinating mise-en-scène (not only iconological but also graphical) - masterfully set on pictures, many by Massimo Listri - Ricci assembled with both the discipline and seduction that have always distinguished himself and his work. Distinct objects of distinct naves, periods and materials - pieces gathered one by one during a lifetime - which have had integrated Ricci's own inner sanctuary, were now placed in dialogue at the magnificent grounds of the Reggia di Colorno, the previous seat of the sovereign dukes of his native Parma. Although the displayed works were not, in their vast majority, very well-known in the international circuits of the arts (not even the splendid portrait of the Duchess of Aiguillon by Philippe de Champaigne...), their attraction and interest immediately resonated. At this point, it is important to add that, as everyone else, I perceived Ricci solely from his editorial career, popular among those passionate about the arts (particularly art books). Presented to me from that moment was something entirely new, his collection. The seed was planted. Once again propelled by Maria João Seixas and magnanimously hosted by Laura and Franco at their Fontanelato's private edea, I was allowed entrance to the estate, divided between Parma and Milan. While sensing my intentions were being delicately scrutinized, I was met with the utmost generosity as being guided through the bamboo paths of the extraordinary labyrinth Ricci envisioned to magnificently encase the museum that holds his collection. During those days, the Lisbon exhibition was born. For the first time, the collection was set to travel to some place outside of Italy. We knew that, upon their return, the works would no longer be hung up on the previous sites, but would instead be placed in the museum Ricci meticulously projected for them. To me - as for the MNAA, Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga (National Museum of Ancient Art) as a whole - this appeared to be an extremely sensible mission. First of all, the monumental task of choosing, from a collection where each element idiosyncratically occupied its place, the pieces that would integrate the exhibition in a figure that ended surpassing 200 items; the creation of a concept that could easily harmonize with the vicissitudes of the museum and its public while keeping, however, the collector's eye; to put up an art exhibition that, already precious in itself, could as well provide a genuine portrait of the versatile collector whose prestige is so intimately linked to a brilliant career of designer, editor and bibliophile; and last, but not least, in order to not jeopardize the entire project, it was vital to meet its final approval from Ricci. Somehow candidly I was underestimating the rare qualities and panache of the man - that others have described as a renaissance prince transported to our days - I was dealing with. The project was entirely approved and pleased Ricci, I dare to say, as he graciously volunteered to design the exhibition's catalog and illustrations. The doors opened in November 2014 in a one and only choreography that culminated at the museum's library: extraordinarily made available to the public, consecrated as a temple to freedom. Triumph unexpectedly came at a press conference during the opening morning when I came aware of a myriad of journalists, bearing old FMR (the legendary magazine edited by Franco Maria Ricci) issues, that wouldn't miss the opportunity of asking the editor himself to sign them. Not only the MNAA succeeded in bringing to Lisbon, once again, a prime collection - it brought the Franco Maria Ricci Collection. The importance of the deed was evident. Months later, concurring with the conclusion of his prodigious Labirinto della Masone, the collection (in all its width) found a definitive realm. While this moment crowned Ricci's extraordinary adventure, it did not seal it. His career didn't cease and the adventure continues as the publishing house keeps thriving and FMR magazine rekindles.



ANTONIO FILIPE PIMENTEL Let me start with this question: How does a man deal with his own myth?

FRANCO MARIA RICCI Math and dreams are fun to flirt and carry on the creative process and the search for beauty.

Your art editor facet is well known, the prestigious seal inherent to Franco Maria Ricci and the FMR magazine is an internationally recognized water mark. On the other hand, less disclosed is your bibliophile side and your passion for Bodoni. When did your Bodonian passion emerge, to the point of compelling you to dive in the adventure of editing the *Manuale Tipografico*?

It all began in the 1960s when the Biblioteca Palatina in Parma was sorting out material to be stored in the museum dedicated to Giambattista Bodoni, which opened in 1963. Although I had graduated in printing, my interests in art and graphic design were well known in the city, and so I became involved in the undertaking.

I spent countless hours in the silent rooms of the Palazzo della Pilotta, where the Biblioteca Palatina housed the Bodonian bequest. I would delicately touch the dies and center puncher, or leaf through the printed works, mesmerized by the rigor and outstanding elegance with which the markings—whose lines could either be thick or slender—had been impressed on the wonderful sheets of Blipped paper by hand. That aesthetic experience encouraged me to become a publisher. I made my debut in 1964 with a reprint of the *Manuale tipografico* by Bodoni

and from that year on, I started to collect also all the books printed by Bodoni. The whole collection I own today counts about 1200 volumes.

On the same line of thought, what set in motion your decision of re-editing (alongside personal remarks) the *Encyclopédie* of Diderot & d'Alembert and all the others that followed?

The decision of re-editing the *Encyclopédie* comes from my passion for the Enlightenment. Also, what fascinated me the most in the *Encyclopédie*, were the plates. They were a celebration of human wisdom and talent, they represented all the artisan's skills: the attention for details, the maniacal precision and so on... I believe in these values too, I would say that whether my taste is neo-classical, my mind is deeply linked to Enlightenment.

With its compromise between the exagerrated images and graphic rigor but also with the editorial nature that always manages to unveil hidden beauty, FMR is an absolutely unique magazine. Inherent to its own editorial character, there is also a clear and rigid coherence between the first and last number. May it not be, perhaps, too rigid for such a long course project?

I think FMR, thanks to some recurring elements, was able to establish a long-lasting style. Along with the Bodoni typface, the color black was one of the elements that characterized most of my publishing activity. In order to authenticate and make evident the works I was reproducing, I chose

to use the color black, the color of elegance and luxury. If it is true that such a way of printing art has become widespread, for example in countless exhibition catalogues, I would like to believe that it is to a certain extent—rather, to a great extent—thanks to me. Also, the rigidity was completely absent in the choice of the themes. The only rule was to avoid narcissistic selection (of the 152 issues I edited, it is impossible to find a single photograph of a living person: a world record at a time when periodicals are based mainly on the repetition of well-known celebrity faces).

What about KOS? Does it derive directly from FMR?

The principles that ruled FMR were the same ones for KOS. In particular, while FMR showed unknown masterpieces or even very well known works of art with an original point of view, KOS tried to do the same but with themes regarding science, medicine, nature. I like to think to KOS and FMR as two sides of the same, humanistic culture. In history there had been many times close links between art and science, for example Ulisse Aldrovandini, who was a naturalist and a botanist, made several books with beautiful illustration regarding nature, animals or anatomy, and was the creator of one of the first Natural History Museums, in Bologna. Another wonderful iconography linked to science is the one I recently published in Portugal with the collection of the Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga.





Home of Evandro Maria Kiehl
Fontainhas, Porto



Bust of Cardinal Paluzzo Paluzzi degli Albertoni (Alberici) (details)
Lorenzo Marini, c. 1745

“ [...] my objects and artworks reflect my taste, my personality, my soul

Another side to you is that of a graphic designer, the one responsible for some of the most beautiful and well-adapted logos ever created. This question may sound absurd but may the graphic nature of the ether collections, such as the Library of Babele, more heterodox than FMR or the grand books of art, have constituted an escape for that side of yours?

I don't think so, because for a long time I kept on designing logos (from time to time I still do), and as you say the graphic designer is just a side of my job, but I think it is well integrated with the other ones and doesn't need no escape. In fact, it is useful, as a publisher, to know also how the graphic design works.

May the compulsion of gathering originals from Bodoni (of which you have a remarkable estate) and your generalized bibliophilia be considered a natural consequence of your drive as a graphic designer combined with that of a collector?

As I said before, it all began with Bodoni: he truly inspired and in some ways even shaped my personality as a publisher and graphic designer.

When did it become clear and obvious that you were amassing a notorious art collection, as consistent as your Bodonian compilation, as opposed to the mere ownership of objects of artistic value accumulated over a lifetime?

I think it was just from the start. What makes a difference between an art collector and

the mere ownership is whether there is a particular purpose in buying artworks, a particular taste leading the purchases or not. All of my objects and artworks reflect my taste, my personality, my soul.

I know you dream of acquiring a Parmigianino. Could one consider your collection to be prevalently parmigianini? In Parma, for you, more of an ethos than a topoi?

My collection features an European taste, even if there are many paintings by artists who revolved around Parma, its countryside and its nearby cities. It is true that I don't own a Parmigianino (even if recently I have bought a wonderful portrait that had been attributed to his entourage), but the room painted by him, near my house and my library, in the Castle of Fontanelle, is considered his masterpiece!

I feel a strong bond with Parma, and with my 135-year-old house that I inherited by my family. As time passed that initial idea was for the most part transformed. By now, I have come to think of my enterprise above all as a legacy—as a way of going back to the Po Valley.

One distinctive trademark of your art collection - that the Exhibition of Lisbon could not neglect - is your evident delight for sculpture, particularly busts, be it marble or terracotta, of which you own a noticeable collection defined by quality and quantity and pontified by works of Bernini, Bartolucci, Thorvaldsen, etc. From where emerges this addiction?

I am not interested in art as a simple description of a fact, as a sort of historical document. I need to see the intervention of the artist, his interpretation of reality. I am very fascinated by busts because if you look at them, they look back at you, they can "speak", they are closer to reality than anything else but at the same time they are timeless.

Another particularity of your collection, specially regarding sculpture, is your clear penchant for Neoclassicism. Is it, in view of the prestige of the duchy during Bodoni's time, on more aristocratic parmigianini traits? Or is it a sort of particular seduction for the capture of time - the immortalization of perfection that sculpture is capable of doing due to its mimetic representation of reality?

FMR's a matter of taste. I am deeply Neoclassicist because Neoclassicism permits to look at Classicism from a different point of view. This way Bodoni can be rediscovered and be compared to Pop Art, new buildings, such as the one I designed along with the architect Pier Carlo Fontana for my gallery, can be inspired by projects from 18th century architects (Lodovico, Boullée, Antoine, Lequeur). Neoclassicism is the testimony that Maier's sentence, tradition is the leading of the flame, not the annihilation of ashes, is true.

Being so distant, in their morbidity, from the before mentioned Neoclassical ideal, I do not resist to inquire about the presence of Francesco Orsi's extraordinary wax

“[...] everytime I’ve felt my life had become too reasonable, I beseeched folly to interceded for me

Busts of Vittorio Amedeo III di Savoia and Maria Antonia Fernanda di Borbone...

These have been, some years ago, a wonderful discovery. I bought them from an art dealer but they were previously in the collection of Gianni Agnelli. The author has never been really studied but he was very expert in using different materials: wax, terracotta, papier-mâché. Apparently, he had a great success when he exposed at the Salon de Cize, some wax sculptures representing famous paintings, such as The Death of Marat by David. His works may seem different from the other busts but they look as impressive and “alive” as the others.

From a different point of view and in face to a collection where the art of the portrait assumes such a strong precedence, the presence of an impressive set of Vasistas (including one from Ligorio) seems to mirror that fallacious notion of eternal beauty being encapsulated by time. Or is it not the case?

In my opinion the Vasistas are a reminder of the fact that nothing lasts forever, everything is ephemeral. But there is something eternal, as the Vasistas from Belloni explains: “under the stuff it’s written «frequently the wax taken for dead / and she laughs / just as those bones with soul, nerves, muscles and / flesh can be revived, so also can painting always / without wishing to offend the many undertakers. / Amen, as a celebration of the eternity of art»”.

The interest you have in Ligabue - of whom you own three remarkable paintings and whose recognition is so linked to the book you have dedicated to him -, how did it surface? Why was it your decision to concentrate him the first monographic exhibition presented at the newly opened labyrinth?

The french word folie means folly, but it is also the name given in architecture to these buildings that, between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the aristocrats and rich bourgeoisie built in their parks and gardens to host concerts, dance parties and other forms of entertainment. These follies were related to its belonging to their extravagance, and also because they involved great expenses, often leading to their owners’ ruin.

Some might be tempted to call my Labyrinth the folie vive. I wouldn’t mind it if they did, actually. Folly is a powerful goddess: every time I have felt my life had become too reasonable and that I had become rather bored I beseeched her to intercede for me. It was Folly that redeemed the poor and wretched lives of Antonio Ligabue and Felice Casati, the protagonists of the first temporary exhibition.

The idea, suggested to me by Vittorio Sgarbi and Augusto Righetti (to have the opening of my labyrinthine Felice coincide with an exhibition dedicated to both painters was immediately to my liking, also because it offered the idea of continuity. Half a century ago, in the days when I published Ligabue, my publishing activity was just about to get off the ground. Today, along with my (illab-

oration, I am experiencing an undertaking that is profoundly different but also similar in some respects.

The well known personal relationship you had with Jorge Luis Borges, which started through literature and culminated in a truly unique friendship, led you to create for him the very famous library of Babel collection (the labyrinth itself being an explicit Borges reference). In which moment have you realized you had to edit your very own labyrinth?

The way was fortuitous and unpredictable, originated from encounters, experiences, emotions, thoughts that, at some point, fused together into one project.

Before the meeting with Borges I didn’t paid too much attention on labyrinths, but looking back at my past experiences I can say that I came across them many times, in the first place, when I was a child, I remember being very fascinated by a maze made of wires installed by some games in Parma. From time to time they used to come there to bring consoles.

I was also enchanted by subterranean labyrinths and caves. I graduated in geology and during my studies I explored many of them, including the ones in Lanzuse, Ruffigno, Combario.

The fact that at a certain point, much later, these laborious paths re-emerged as if from a sort of oblivion and began to attract my attention was first because of my readings, and then because of my meeting and befriending Jorge Luis Borges.

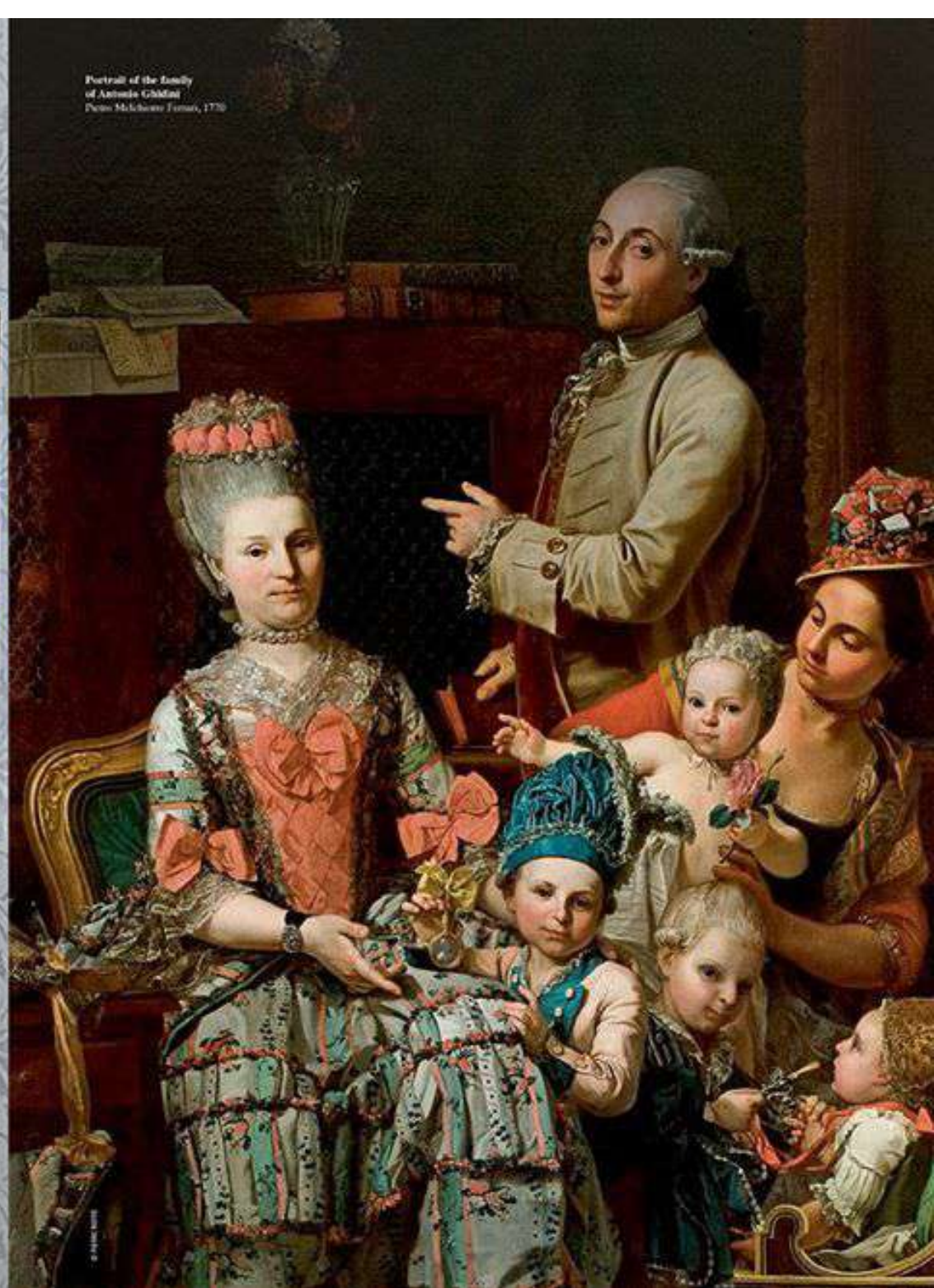


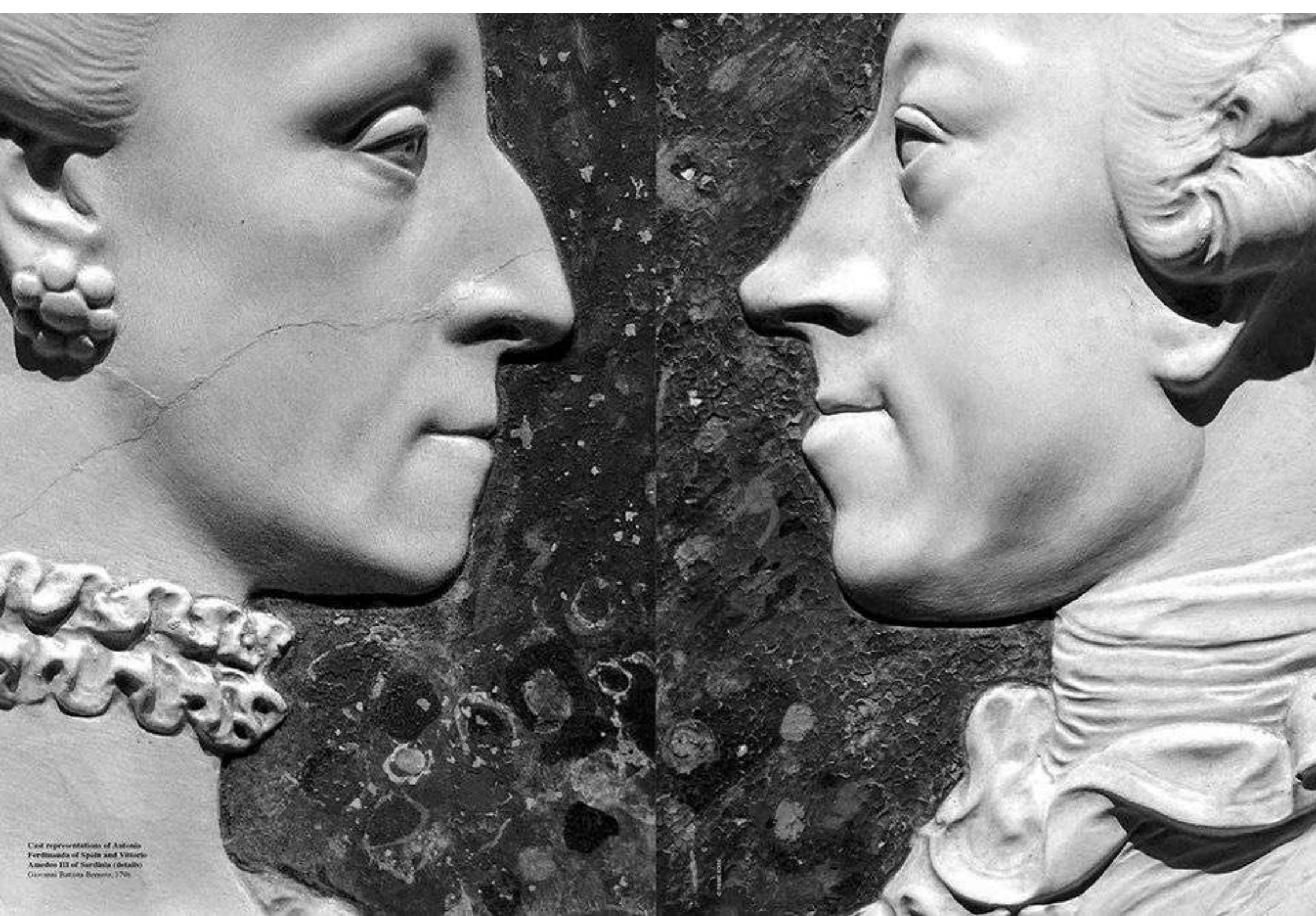
Portrait of Marie Madeleine Coignere,
by Jean de Aguilan 1642-1643
Drapé et accessoires, c.1640





Portrait of the Family
of Antonio Ghislanzoni
Pietro Melchiorre Ferrari, 1770





Clay representations of Antonio Ferrisanda of Spain and Vittorio Amedeo III of Sardinia (details)
Giovanni Battista Bionico, 1796



"The Mocking of Christ" (detail)
Valentin de Boulogne, after 1620

"[...] I would've liked to build a labyrinth, the largest in the world

Why have you envisaged a labyrinth at green bamboos, locking in its heart an utopian construction (Boullée and Ledoux coming to mind) inside of which, in turn, are assembled the works of art you have collected? It is not frequent to find constructions enclosed inside of labyrinths as they usually stand for their self ideographic statement. Is this green labyrinth only a metaphor or does it serve as protection?

To tell the truth it is the opposite of a protection. I wanted my collection to be visited by everyone, but in Italy (I'm not sure if it's the same in Portugal) many great collections have been opened to the public but nobody goes to visit them! The labyrinth is a lucky stratagem, to attract people to culture, giving them a place where they can also relax, meditate and feel the little shivers of looking themselves.

One who today looks at the *Labyrinth of the Masons* (and especially those who were privileged enough to watch it being built) is overwhelmed with its boldness and entrepreneurship. These recall two dimensions of Franco Maria Ricci that are intrinsic to his personality: the union between science and humanism. Do you accept the verdict that you are a Renaissance man?

I may say that the boldness takes origin from the Neoclassical period: the architect Pier Carlo Borromini and I were inspired by the great architects who lived during the French Revolution: Boullée, Ledoux, Séguier, but also the Italian architect Antonio, who presented Napoleon with a visionary

project for the Foss Bonaparte in Milan. Undoubtedly due to the circumstances, none of these men have left us with great buildings; however, drawings and projects, dictated by a love of geometry, Egypt, the Greek and Roman world, and a visionary talent, nurtured by the Utopias of the age in which they lived, remind us that neoclassicism was not the classical, but, rather, fertile ground for the modern. But I must admit that the architect himself compared our relationship to the one between a Renaissance prince and an architect working at his court.

Back to Borges: how did your fascination about this brilliant author, who, already blind, ran the National Library of Buenos Aires appeared? Thinking of Borges is like thinking about a character from a novel who lived himself a labyrinth of which, however, he had Ariadne's thread?

Borges was my guest on several occasions in Milan and in Fontanelle. The paths, the hesitant steps of this blind man drew in spaces that were easy and familiar to me reminded me of the uncertainties of those who move amidst forks in the road and enigmas. While walking through the field where my Labyrinth now stands, I asked him to direct a fiction series for my publishing house: small volumes that collected the best writings of his favorite authors. This was born to *Biblioteca di Babele*. I also told him that, sooner or later, I would have liked to build a labyrinth, adding, with

a touch of arrogance, that it would be the largest in the world.

It was one of those things you say without really thinking. It had no proof of not being gone, nothing to lose and nothing to gain. At the time it did not correspond to any specific project of mine.

Borges objected by saying that the largest labyrinth in the world already existed. It was the desert. One thing seemed certain to me at the time: I was never going to be able to build one of those endless or almost endless labyrinths that Borges had described in some of his stories in *Ficciones* or in *The Aleph*. What I was missing to be able to build was what Borges was fond of calling the considerable resources Omnipotence offers.

There was once a mundane and cosmopolitan Franco Maria Ricci, spending time between driving sports cars and mixing with the greats of this world, and there is this other Franco Maria Ricci, nowadays, focused on his *Labyrinth of the Masons* and, if I may say, becoming progressively an absentee. What changed?

Time passes for everyone, and today I feel happy because finally my dream of building a place that reflects myself, my activity during my entire life, my taste, came true. The Labyrinth still needs attention and care, and I am always making new projects, together with my wife, Luisa Casali, "The Lady of the Labyrinth" and my old and new co-workers, coordinated by Edoardo Papiola. ■

