Fondazione Cerruti:
Phonograms

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Desired Objects: Desire and Desires in the Cerruti Collection

The very act of collecting implies, first and foremost, a form of desire: the desire to possess a work of art or an object; to assert, refine and define one's taste; to share the objects of one's desire with loved ones or complete strangers; the desire to alter and enrich the environment one inhabits; to compose or complete a coherent ensemble of things; to outdo other collectors; or, more simply, the desire to close a deal.

In 2001, at the opening of the volume *Other Objects of Desire*, the British art historian Michael Camille, a specialist in medieval illuminated manuscripts, observed that collectors are often 'subject to the objects of their desire – tied, bound, one might even say imprisoned' by those objects. Collecting desire, like amorous desire, is in fact in some sense bidirectional: projected by the collector towards the object, it is reflected back and returned to the collector, trapping them in a symmetrical relationship. The case of Francesco Federico Cerruti, who was seemingly driven, according to the bookseller Roberto Cena, by an 'incomparable desire for possession', is no exception. As the philosopher Maurizio Ferraris has written, he too was in some way 'hostage to the Beauty he had created': the objects he had desired and collected throughout his life inevitably conditioned his every choice and decision.

Reflecting on this conception of desire brings to mind a key book circulating in Turin in the early 1970s, one to which Cerruti surely cannot have been indifferent, if only because of the beautiful painting by René Magritte, *The Castle of the Pyrenees*, reproduced on the cover of the first edition: Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, published by Einaudi in 1972. Anastasia, the second of the cities in the series *Cities & Desire*, is caught in a peculiar dimension in which the effects of desire upon the desiring subject are amplified and taken to their extreme consequences:

> The city appears to you as a whole in which no desire is lost and of which you are a part; and because it enjoys everything you do not enjoy, all that remains to you is to inhabit this desire and be content with it. Such is the power, now called malign, now benign, of Anastasia, the deceptive city: if for eight hours a day you work cutting agates, onyx and chrysoprase, your labour, which gives form to desire, takes its own form from desire, and you believe yourself to be enjoying all of Anastasia when in fact you are only its slave.

In the Villa inhabited by the Collection, as in Anastasia, 'no desire is lost': like Cerruti, you can become part of it, at least for the duration of the visit or the listening experience, always aware that, rather than enjoying those desires, you may risk becoming their slave.
Beyond the imprisoning desire for possession, there is another, more general and fundamental dimension of desire that concerns the Villa. As Andreina Cerruti, Federico's sister, recalled, a special 'desire' – that of 'entrusting future generations with the opportunity to discover his collection in all the complexity and aesthetic quality that characterise it' – animated perhaps his most important decision: the creation of the Fondazione Cerruti. Entering the spaces of the house-museum in Rivoli today, preserved and opened to the public by the Foundation, it is impossible not to confront the desire and desires of Francesco Federico Cerruti, both collector and man: those fulfilled, those left unrealised, and above all those never truly expressed. The soul of the collection, those desires are intertwined with a thousand others: those of the artists, the sitters, historical figures, writers and protagonists of the books and works of art that populate the Collection and still animate the Villa today. The Cerruti Collection, then, like Anastasia, can be approached as a fabulous repository of desires: manifest, implicit, secret, sometimes only intuited or freely imagined.

Before entering the rooms of the Collection in search of some of these desires, it may be useful to sketch a brief portrait of the collector and the man. Cerruti was born in Genoa in 1922, but his family soon moved to Turin, where his father founded the Legatoria Industriale Torinese, already entrusted during the Fascist period with binding Italy's telephone directories. In 1940 Cerruti qualified in accountancy: throughout his life he proudly insisted on the title *ragioniere*, accountant. In the mid-1950s, once the wartime crisis had passed, Cerruti travelled to the United States, from where he brought back to Turin a new bookbinding technique. This innovation ensured the LIT considerable prosperity over the following decades – a prosperity fuelled by Italians' telephone calls, and one that allowed Cerruti to fulfil his desires as a collector. The Yellow Pages were launched in 1966 and, in those same years, while binding catalogues and visiting exhibitions in the city, Cerruti began to develop his desire to collect. It was also during this period that he began the project for the villa in Rivoli, built in Provençal style as a retreat for his parents. His father, however, died as early as 1972, leaving free rein to his son's collecting desires. Five years later his mother also died: the house in Rivoli, never really inhabited, thus became the casket for his collection, visited only at weekends and opened to a select circle of friends on two occasions each year: his name day, 18 July, and his birthday, 31 December. Until his death in 2015, Cerruti continued to satisfy that desire for possession and that pursuit of absolute quality that had fuelled his passion for collecting for half a century. Famous among dealers and collectors but unknown to the general public, he was 'sober and austere, intolerant and

hypochondriacal', as he was recently described in a 2026 interview with Annalisa Ferrari Polesello, his long-standing assistant, published in *Il Giornale dell'Arte*, with a 'character that many considered "impossible", sick with perfection'. But what remains, what can remain, of this character and this life, of all these desires, in the collection that still inhabits the Villa in Rivoli today?

Beyond the Villa's veranda, now transformed into the ticket office and bookshop, the first room encountered is the Study. For a man who built his fortune on bookbinding, this is hardly an unexpected choice. Dark walls; a female portrait by the French Impressionist painter Pierre-Auguste Renoir, bought by Cerruti at auction in the summer of 2014, about a year before his death; a six-legged cabinet with ivory inlay from the workshop of the great cabinetmaker Pietro Piffetti; an important eighteenth-century fall-front desk by the Turin furniture-maker Giovanni Galletti; an extraordinary *St Benedict Among the Brambles* by the Piedmontese painter Tanzio da Varallo, active in the early seventeenth century, paired by analogy with *St Jerome in the Wilderness* by the Sienese painter Neroccio di Bartolomeo de' Landi, painted at the end of the fifteenth century.

The true protagonists of the room, however, are the books: arranged on the wall shelves, displayed on the desk at the centre of the room, enclosed in the glass case of Galletti's writing desk. Cerruti's book collection is simply extraordinary: it contains masterpieces and absolute rarities from the history of publishing, often presented in refined bindings by celebrated binders. More interesting than the individual books, however, are the empty spaces between the shelves, partly filled by decorative dummy books produced by Cerruti's own LIT. Those empty spaces are what allow the bibliophile's desire to breathe: there is no need to relinquish any part of the collection; one need only remove the dummy books, and space – physical, but ultimately mental – for new conquests, for newly desired books, is assured. A potential filling-up, this artificial space of desire – combined, perhaps, with that air of ostentatious modesty which allowed a man who resolutely introduced himself as an accountant to place rows of dummy books, emblems of aspirational kitsch furnishing, alongside absolute bibliographical rarities.

Let us return, though, to Tanzio da Varallo's painting: St Benedict is shown in the foreground, blond and haloed, wearing only a loincloth, thrown among thick brambles in a wild woodland landscape. The episode depicted, certainly familiar to the Catholic Cerruti, is particularly significant. The young Umbrian monk, who had withdrawn to a cave on Mount Taleo, on the border between Lazio and Abruzzo, had been visited by the devil, who tried to tempt him with images of a woman. To escape desire, Benedict stripped and threw himself naked into a thicket of brambles and nettles, so that the wounds of the flesh might heal those of the soul – an episode recounted by the Doctor of the Church Gregory the Great in his *Dialogues*. Already in the Villa's first room, then, two paintings are set

against one another and somehow connected: on one side a female portrait, Renoir's; on the other the image of a saint who wounded himself precisely to escape the desire provoked by similar images. Thus, in the Study, the room devoted to intellectual retreat, an ideal tension is immediately created, unlikely by chance: an implicit opposition that confirms the power and symbolic value of images and of the desire they inspire.

To escape the play of glances between Renoir's *Young Girl* and Tanzio's young saint, one must proceed towards the strange corridor overlooking the staircase to the first floor. It is a surprisingly cramped space, smothered by heavy Rococo-style wall decoration commissioned by the accountant between the 1980s and 1990s, on the advice of the Turin antiques dealer Pietro Accorsi, to replace the original rustic Provençal style – a yellowish ground with white panels framed by botanical motifs. The shift from the studio is striking: from a convincing reception room to a narrow little space of dated taste. What redeems it, and distinguishes it from the corridors of a faded hotel, is the dazzling fan of twentieth-century masterpieces punctuating the ascent of the stairs. Paul Klee, Joan Miró, Felice Casorati, Francis Bacon, but above all a 1918 portrait by Amedeo Modigliani: *Young Woman in a Yellow Dress (Renée Modot)*, wife of the actor and silent-film star Gaston Modot, who appeared in Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí's Surrealist film *L'Âge d'or*. The painting astonishes precisely because of the context in which it is displayed: a deliberate lowering of register dictated by the space available, which confines a recognised masterpiece to a small wall at the end of the staircase, hung above the grille of a radiator. The mind inevitably turns to posters for Modigliani exhibitions encountered in similar settings, in hotel corridors or dreary waiting rooms: here, however, one is confronted by the original, present in all its pictorial immediacy. For someone with Cerruti's financial means, altering the spaces of the Villa, buying a larger building, in short conceiving an exhibition environment truly commensurate with the quality and importance of the Collection, would hardly have been a problem: that Modigliani at the end of the stairs must, somehow, be the sign of a profound desire to protect and preserve that original spatial arrangement, a desire whose deepest roots may be impossible to reach. As the architects responsible for adapting the building, Armando Baietto of Baietto Battiato Bianco and Giusi Rivoira, have observed, 'Cerruti takes the place of the architect, imagining for himself the interiors of a bourgeois house with a sequence of traditional rooms'. More explicitly, the art critic Giuseppe Frangi described as 'disorienting the disproportion between the very high quality of the paintings and the bourgeois domestic microcosm'. This very disproportion is perhaps the clearest expression of a precise desire for self-representation, analogous and parallel to Cerruti's insistence on his status as an accountant.

At the top of the Staircase, still enclosed by floral details, another portrait catches the eye. It is a male figure in elegant dress, seated and isolated against a dark green ground: painted between 1956 and 1957 by the English painter Francis Bacon, it is entitled *Study for Portrait IX*. The sitter is Peter Lacy, the protagonist of a troubled love affair with the painter throughout the 1950s, marked by repeated and painful physical and psychological violence. Long presented and believed to have been a former Royal Air Force fighter pilot who had also taken part in the Battle of Britain, Lacy was in fact simply a mechanic and occasional pilot. Like Bacon, Lacy came from a prosperous Midlands family with Irish connections and had an aggressive father who did not accept his homosexuality. Having moved to Tangier in the mid-1950s, Lacy was often visited there by Bacon, in a Morocco that offered a haven of homosexual freedom compared with Britain at the time. On those occasions, as earlier in England, Bacon portrayed him, immortalising him in many paintings from those years: unequivocally, images of desire. An alcoholic, Lacy died in 1962 at the age of just forty-six: he remained the great love of Bacon's life, as Annalyn Swan has recently reconstructed in the biography *Francis Bacon: Revelations*. Several passages in the book recount moments from those years and the context in which portraits such as the one Cerruti acquired at Sotheby's in 1989 took shape – that same year, with a 1973 triptych also sold at Sotheby's, Bacon became the most expensive living artist in the world: the proverbial timing of Cerruti's desires.

Let us continue up the Staircase. We will pretend not to see Casorati's large tempera *Morning*, and also ignore the Fernand Léger composition hanging opposite the Bacon. Before entering the antechamber, a small room crammed with paintings, however, it is impossible not to admire, on the landing, Scipione's *Reawakening of the Blonde Siren*. Scipione was the pseudonym of the painter Gino Bonichi, born in Macerata in 1904 and dead of tuberculosis in 1933, before he had even turned thirty. The painting dates from 1929 and, as its title suggests, depicts the first moments of a siren's day. With long blond hair, bare breasts and a conspicuous fish tail, the creature lies on a leopard skin combing her hair. Around her neck is a gold necklace, and a large pink feather is tucked into her hair. Beside her are a fish, figs and a cucumber, explicit symbols of desire. An 'orgiastic and refined work', as the historian Giuseppe Marchiori described it at the end of the 1930s, perhaps inspired by a dream recounted to Scipione by the painter Antonietta Raphaël, the *Siren* was often presented as one of the rare examples of genuine Italian Surrealism. This was of course due first of all to its fantastic subject, but the disturbing, murky erotic atmosphere pervading the painting also contributed to that characterisation. This became one of the privileged ways of reading Surrealism in twentieth-century Italy, and it is worth keeping in mind in order to understand other choices made by Cerruti as a collector. Not by chance, the work had long belonged to the collection of Luigi Carluccio, organiser in Turin of the epoch-making exhibition *The Disquieting Muses*, a major public success which,

between 1967 and 1968, definitively legitimised Surrealism in Italy too, softening the movement's political character in favour of a more accommodating reading within the broader, less ideologically marked category of fantastic art – Carluccio, like Cerruti, was deeply Catholic.

Still on the landing, remaining in the atmosphere of Italian dreams and Surrealism, hangs one of the four paintings in the collection by Alberto Savinio, Giorgio de Chirico's brother. Born in Athens in 1891 and active and best known as a writer and musician, Savinio came to painting in the crucial Paris of the 1920s. This first painting is entitled *Here Is My Dream* and was painted in 1928, a year before Scipione's siren. It shows a female nude with her face enclosed in a cage, surrounded by three strange anthropomorphic figures, a kind of metallic mannequin, in a surreal rocky setting. In the next room, another small painting by Savinio, one of his earliest, hangs high near the ceiling covered in patterned paper: entitled *The Sleep of the Hermaphrodite*, it introduces another of his favourite themes, gender ambiguity, particularly in relation to the classical tradition. Savinio, moreover, in his *New Encyclopedia*, offered a definition of love that sits well with the theme of collecting desire:

> Another cause that prevents love from being realised – that is, desire reaching its outcome in the amorous sense – is that, the moment we take possession of the beloved thing, love for the beloved loses its transitive character, becomes confused with self-love and is absorbed by it.

and a little further on:

> Desire is the limitless, the infinite. Love is death. (A new meaning to be given to the pair love–death.) And now I ought to move on to speak of desire, that is, of what love in fact is. But here experience truly fails me, or rather is beginning to fail me. Desires hold us fast to life, as moorings hold a ship fast in harbour. But little by little desires die, the moorings break without our noticing, and tomorrow our ship will set sail, calm and free of desires. Will the 'great hypothesis' then come true?

Desire as that which keeps us alive, death as the definitive absence of desire: a valuable proposition. Before moving towards the sleeping quarters, a possible Savinian 'realm of dreams', it is worth entering the Dining Room. The walls are entirely covered with mirrors and boiserie, perhaps from the family flat in Via Cialdini in Turin, where Cerruti had lived with his mother Ines until her death in 1977. The room is devoted entirely to Giorgio de Chirico, Savinio's brother, as noted above, born in Volos, Greece, in 1888, trained between Florence, Munich and Paris, and sent as a volunteer with Savinio to Ferrara during the First World War, where he devised Metaphysical painting, one of the

most important European artistic movements of the twentieth century, with a lasting impact on international Surrealism. De Chirico is the most extensively represented artist in the collection and the only one to have a room devoted to him: this dining room, in which Cerruti arranged, directly on the mirrors and, in two cases, in curious tortoiseshell frames, a highly select group of eight paintings chosen from the ten he owned. A scene from *Hebdomeros*, de Chirico's world-novel published in 1918, comes to mind: the moment when its protagonist, Hebdomeros himself, enters the Bachelor's palace: 'A sensual cowardice, a violent desire for peace and bourgeois respectability overtook everyone, and then slowly, without jostling, they poured into the robust banality of those drawing rooms whose mirrors, framed in Baroque stucco, were covered with violet veils so that the flies would not soil them.'

'A violent desire for peace and bourgeois respectability…' Let us set that aside, recalling the choices made for the Villa's interiors discussed earlier, and return to the paintings. First, three Ferrarese still lifes from the war years: one from 1916, one from 1917 and one from 1918. All three have remarkable collecting histories: the first passed from the Paris dealer Paul Guillaume to Albert C. Barnes, the legendary Philadelphia collector; the second from Guillaume to Roland Penrose and then to William Copley, the painter who, more than any other in the 1960s and 1970s, reactivated the Surrealist legacy, particularly in relation to desire; the third from the Lombard painter Mario Broglio to the New York gallerist Julien Levy. The three still lifes are populated by mysterious objects: easels, biscuits, pinwheels, sticks, geometric solids, even pictures… To understand the evocative value of these objects, including in relation to the problem of desire, a passage from *The History of Surrealist Painting*, written in the 1950s by the French painter and poet Marcel Jean, is useful:

> The Surrealists, and de Chirico among the first, rediscovered the object, a new object containing a powerful subjective component in the form of desire […] Surrealist objects, as complex objects, can embody an archetype. For the most part they are mysterious, unstable, dynamic, contradictory, but they can sometimes become archetypal portraits; and it is precisely those that attain completeness and balance that become convincing 'collective portraits', that is, images in which anyone might recognise their own desire.

Alongside the three *Still Lifes*, in which each of us can practise 'recognising our own desire', *Metaphysical Muses* also belongs to the Ferrara period, the most important in de Chirico's career and the most coveted by collectors. Another medium-small painting, it depicts the heads of two mannequins and was formerly known as *Castor and Pollux*. At its first exhibition the painting was in

fact shown alongside perhaps de Chirico's most famous work, *The Disquieting Muses*, dedicated to the sister-muses Melpomene and Thalia: by analogy and contrast, it was identified as an image of the two Dioscuri. Male counterparts to the Disquieting Muses, the *Castor and Pollux* of the Cerruti Collection, once their fraternal identity is established, might serve as an indirect portrait of de Chirico and his brother Savinio. The two brothers were, in fact, often compared to the Dioscuri, the two sons of Zeus who excelled in horsemanship and boxing, patrons of the arts and protectors of sailors, and closely linked to astronomical – or sidereal – questions, to the same stars to which, as we shall see, the word desire refers. Above all, *Castor and Pollux* had been Argonauts: together they took part in the journey to Colchis in search of the Golden Fleece. In 1917, a year before de Chirico painted *Metaphysical Muses* – or rather *Castor and Pollux* – Savinio, already aware of this identification, wrote *The Departure of the Argonaut*, an account of his journey to the front from Ferrara, 'city of geometric lust', to Thessaloniki, published in instalments and later collected in the volume *Hermaphrodito* (1918). Republished in 1974 in the experimental Einaudi Letteratura series, the book enjoyed renewed popularity, culminating in 1986 in a luxurious folio edition of its first English translation, illustrated with major lithographic interventions by the Neapolitan painter Francesco Clemente, a leading figure of the Transavanguardia. The volume, in that first English translation, *The Departure of the Argonaut*, Petersburg Press, New York–London, 1986, was acquired by Cerruti in the early 2000s and remains part of his collection. The accountant certainly cannot have been unaware of this strange interweaving of real and fictional identities between Savinio, de Chirico and the two mythological figures, amply documented by works in his collection. In *The Departure of the Argonaut*, Savinio immediately sets out the conflict between two of his desires, one towards stasis and the other towards travel and adventure: opposing desires that in some way seem also to have conditioned Cerruti's choices:

> By nature I incline towards sedentary positions (not sedentary occupations). On the racetrack of my character, two opposing desires circle one another: one, of the spirit, spurs me to action and movement, while the other, of the body, concerns itself with calm and tranquillity. I know, however, the beneficial use of moving house, of changes of climate and environment, of overturning habits and periodically killing off the daily humdrum that inevitably leads to the progressive arteriosclerosis of the mind; nor am I unaware of the masterly education obtained by great men through journeys of every kind.

At the end of the story, in the *Epilogue*, now arrived in Thessaloniki, far from the dreamed-of home, the sirens – not unlike, one imagines, Scipione's siren presiding over the Villa staircase – wonder

about the fate of the writer, Argonaut and Dioscuro: ‘I should like to return… And how insistently the song of the surviving sirens annoys my ears: the Argonaut goes away tra-la-la tra-la-la / the Argonaut goes away / who knows if he will ever return?… Yes, to return: but only for myself and for my heart… What, after all, does it matter to others if the Argonaut never returns?…’

A possible answer to the Sirens’ question, and to Savinio’s own troubled one, comes from another painting by de Chirico – the other Dioscuro, the brother who did not set sail – also in the Cerruti Collection: *The Farewell of the Departing Argonauts*, also known as *The Departure of the Argonauts*, painted in 1920, three years after Savinio’s story first appeared. The work is one of de Chirico’s most celebrated paintings, a kind of emblem of the new classically inflected return-to-order phase that followed his decision to sever ties with Parisian circles and settle in Italy. The painting condenses references to Renaissance art and architecture: in a sunlit square dominated by a monumental building adorned with two sculptures, two naked men hold a length of cloth and a flag. Beside them an old philosopher lies on the ground, leaning against a block of marble bearing the old-fashioned signature ‘G. de Chirico Pinxit’, or ‘Giorgio de Chirico [painted it]’. Behind him stands a female figure wrapped in classical dress; in the distance, a thin strip of sea and a ship that has just unfurled its sails. The story of the two brothers, travelling Dioscuri, also evoked by another Savinio painting in the collection – *End of a Voyage* of 1929, with its dream vessel stranded among mysterious coloured solids – condenses at once a desire for adventure and a desire for self-representation, a desire to situate oneself and a desire to remain nomadic. The presence of these various works, including the volume illustrated by Clemente, within the Cerruti Collection cannot be accidental: it tells us something about a wish to reunite the two Dioscuri and, at the same time, to reflect on the meaning of travel – Cerruti’s fortune, after all, had depended in large part on a voyage by ship to the United States, a new post-war Colchis, in search of new bookbinding techniques: his own personal Golden Fleece.

Before leaving the Dining Room, a kind of astonishing Metaphysical hall of mirrors inhabited by other de Chirico masterpieces such as the 1919 *Self-Portrait with a Shadow* – whose prominently placed book served as an indirect editorial and entrepreneurial self-portrait of Cerruti himself – before leaving the room, I was saying, we can register another unrealised desire by looking into the small adjoining Kitchen. Perfectly furnished in Provençal style and well equipped, with tiles and an extensive collection of crockery and copper pots, it was in fact never connected to the gas supply and therefore never used. Here, on the right-hand wall, in 2025 the artist Gala Porras-Kim had Felice Carena’s large painting of mussels, a shell and watermelon – whole and sliced – installed. A marine still life from the collection of Margherita Sarfatti, promoter of the Novecento art movement and

famous lover of Benito Mussolini, who described it in these terms: ‘great watermelons of fresh green and splendid scarlet, ringing out like a cry of summer joy against the turquoise line of the sea’. A desire for summer.

Back we go, through the Dining Room once more, back into the antechamber and finally into the first bedroom. Conceived for the mother, it contains, predictably, another impressive concentration of masterpieces. Above the bed, first of all, is a *Virgin and Child* by the Milanese Leonardesque painter Marco d’Oggiono, acquired in 2006, almost thirty years after the mother’s death. Immediately beside it is a dense sequence of works by the historical avant-gardes, with paintings by Yves Tanguy, Marc Chagall, Giacomo Balla, Alberto Savinio, Enrico Prampolini and Gino Severini. High above the door hangs Magritte’s *The Duo*, one of the very rare works by the artist from the 1920s in Italy; like Scipione’s *Siren*, it too had belonged to Luigi Carluccio. Interested in the gap between word and image, between naming a thing and depicting it, Magritte, in a series of paintings devoted to the use of words – the most famous of all being the image of a pipe that is not a pipe – challenged conventional relationships between names and things at the end of the 1920s, anticipating research and debates that would become especially influential from the late 1960s onwards. *The Duo* in the Cerruti Collection also belongs to this group of works: two mysterious blue things – a biomorphic form, perhaps a mirror, and the structure of a piece of furniture – stand out against an anonymous brown background. The shape on the left bears, in a schoolroom cursive hand like that of a sign, the word *fusil*, ‘gun’, clearly at odds with the object. The mystery remains suspended, the association is broken and nothing attempts to replace it. A few years later, in 1936, among various other paintings devoted to the use of words, Magritte painted *Hidden Labour*. The work, perhaps inspired by the sets Pablo Picasso designed for the ballet *Mercure*, in which instead of depicting stars the artist repeatedly wrote the word ‘star’, represents a starry sky. Looking carefully at the stars, one notices that some of them are arranged to form the word ‘DÉSIR’, desire. Beyond the significance desire had acquired for Surrealism, the work seemed to refer directly to the very origin of the word desire, a curious etymology worth invoking. In truth, there are few certainties about it. One is that its origin runs parallel to and intertwines with that of another verb, to consider. Both somehow concern the stars, from -sidus, or more generally targets, things at which one aims, and perhaps therefore astrological observations: in the case of consider, careful observation; in the case of desire, the abandonment of observation for lack of signs, hence a turning away from the stars, or perhaps a wish to reach what one observes. According to the Treccani encyclopaedia, the word desire derives ‘from the Latin de-, and sidus, “star”, literally “to cease contemplating the stars for augural purposes”, in the sense of drawing omens from them and hence longing – it alludes more to the distance between the subject

and the object of desire, and to the movement of the soul that binds them, than to the nature of the object itself'. It is only a suggestion, but one that can help us enter into resonance with Cerruti's collecting desire.

Let us return to the Antechamber, skirt the column of three female portraits by Magritte, Balla and Campigli, and not enter the other bedroom. Just a glance at two portraits on paper by Pablo Picasso from the 1940s: *Head of a Woman* of 1942, a portrait of his beloved Surrealist photographer Dora Maar made under the German occupation, and above all the large sheet *The Faun Woman*, painted on the Côte d'Azur on 31 August 1946, just after the war. The work belongs to a series of sheets Picasso devoted to the theme of the faun, recognisable by its horns and hairy chest. Onto this virile, mythological image Picasso superimposes a female profile, perhaps that of his new lover Françoise Gilot. *The Faun Woman* thus takes on an unprecedented hermaphroditic ambiguity, not without erotic connotations. In Picasso's work, as in classical mythology, the faun – assimilated to the Greek satyrs and the god Pan – was often associated with an animalistic sexual instinct, an expression of his semi-zoological nature: a creature ruled by desire. Not by chance, the third Picasso work in the Cerruti Collection, displayed in the basement near Lucio Fontana's large *Spatial Concept*, is a 1936 sugar-lift aquatint from the *Vollard Suite*, the celebrated portfolio of one hundred prints commissioned by the legendary art dealer Ambroise Vollard: *Faun Unveiling a Woman*, inspired by Rembrandt's engraving *Jupiter and Antiope*. The print depicts a naked satyr, identifiable by his horns, tail and hairy chest, the artist's alter ego, lifting the veils that cover a sleeping female figure, also nude, probably a reference to the artist's lover at the time, Marie-Thérèse Walter. Set in an intimate interior, the scene belongs to the highest tradition of Western figuration; the light entering through the window on the left, moreover, makes it iconographically akin to numerous representations of the Annunciation. Within a few years, the two figures in the scene would overlap and identify with one another, mysteriously united in *The Faun Woman* in the antechamber, where we began.

It is now worth moving towards the Villa's most important reception room, through the corridor opening in front of what had been conceived as the house's main entrance. Here too we return to faux-eighteenth-century boiserie, animated by a curious mirrored niche. It gives the impression of a bar corner, but in place of bottles of vermouth we find two Spanish wooden saints and a canvas by the Genoese painter Valerio Castello, *Moses Striking Water from the Rock*. What is most surprising in the room, however, are two Florentine sculptures: a fourteenth-century wooden *Virgin and Child* and a terracotta *Penitent Magdalene* modelled by Benedetto da Maiano at the end of the fifteenth century. Or rather: what is most surprising are the pedestals on which the two sculptures stand. In the

case of the Virgin, a cube covered in red velveteen; in that of the Magdalene, a cube painted with an unconvincing marble effect. Combined with the parquet, the stone profiles in the floor and the faux-eighteenth-century boiserie on the walls, the two cubes create a striking visual and material clash: what desire might have lain behind such a choice? In the Rectangular Room, an entirely similar velvet cube supports instead a sixteenth-century wooden female saint from the Netherlands. Dominating the room, however, is the large *Weary Limbs*, painted in 1907 by Giuseppe Pellizza da Volpedo and devoted to a family of migrant workers portrayed on the banks of the Curone stream in the province of Alessandria.

From this room one enters the Circular Room, with yet another sculpture on a faux-marble cube and, above all, the two large *Allegories*, masterpieces by the Luccan Neoclassical painter Pompeo Batoni: one devoted to *Painting, Sculpture and Architecture*, the other to *Apollo, Music and Geometry*. They came from the collection of the celebrated Turin banker, antiques dealer and psychic Gustavo Adolfo Rol, famous from the 1950s onwards for his alleged paranormal gifts. An anecdote handed down by the art critic Marco Vallora concerning these two large paintings allows us to glimpse, between the lines, something of the collecting desire that animated Cerruti:

> When an emissary from the Getty Museum arrived to buy his precious *pair* of mythological works by Batoni with a Disney-sized cheque, he replied, without arrogance but categorically: 'All right, but once I no longer have the Batonis, what am I supposed to do with the money?' He did not collect for profit or exchange: he put all his proceeds into artworks.

The profound bond with 'the Batonis', still in their eighteenth-century frames, is also demonstrated by another detail: in 1990 Cerruti commissioned the English painter Barrington Barley, a celebrated copyist, to make two exact, full-scale copies of the paintings so that they could replace the originals when these were lent to exhibitions. The commission of the two copies, like his refusal to sell, tells us something about Cerruti's desire always to have those images with him: a 'hole' of that size and importance in the Villa's perfect system would have been unacceptable – the collector's desire was also a desire for proximity, presence, nearness and completeness.

Behind the wall on which the two Batonis – and, at certain moments, their copies – hang, runs the staircase leading to perhaps the most mysterious room in the entire Villa: Cerruti's own bedroom at the top of the tower. Like the kitchen, this room has retained its original Provençal style: terracotta-coloured floor, walls clad in dark wooden strips, rustic exposed beams. The accountant's bed – single

and monastic – is set into an alcove lined with green fabric. All the walls are covered with religious gold-ground paintings, now sealed inside estranging Plexiglas cases that heighten the room's sense of enclosure and immutable stasis. As the curator Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev has suggested, in that isolated room, almost fairy-tale in its location, Cerruti may have wished to 'spend the final moments of his earthly life'. A kind of mausoleum, it would have been furnished with everything needed for the passage into the afterlife, like certain tombs of ancient civilisations: after all, it is the 'highest room in the Villa, the closest to the sky', the space of the stars. Collecting desire, together with the desire to arrange and organise the Collection and the Villa, would here acquire an additional value and meaning: it would no longer be only a question of the image one wishes to give of oneself while alive, or to leave behind after death, but of the space and meanings by which one wishes to be surrounded at the moment of departure. The art historian Pietro Rigolo has also insisted on this possible meaning of the room, supported by the fact that 'the tower room was probably never used as a bedroom; a circumstance that all the more invites a symbolic reading of the space'. Having emphasised the particularly intense presence of iconographies linked to death and rebirth, Rigolo noted an interesting analogy:

> The insistent repetition of these images inevitably prompts reflections connected with birth and death, and in particular with the bed and the bedroom as places traditionally assigned to these passages. Following the easy association of the bed with the coffin and the bedroom with the burial chamber, this room seems to become a threshold between two worlds, evoking suggestions – once again Turin-based – suspended between Egyptian archaeology and its transfiguration in the spaces of Casa Mollino.

Among the works chosen for the room, and which might therefore have witnessed the final moments of Cerruti's life, are a wooden *Virgin* by the Master of Saint Catherine Gualino; a fourteenth-century *Crucifixion* by Marco di Paolo Veneziano; a portable triptych with another *Crucifixion* by the Sienese Paolo di Giovanni Fei; and a gruesome predella fragment painted by Giovanni da Modena around the middle of the fifteenth century, showing the *Beheading of St John the Baptist*. On the opposite wall, facing the bed, is Bergognone's *St Sebastian*, which, together with the *St Roch* hanging beside it, comes from the Polyptych of the Certosa di Pavia. Between them, replacing the *Virgin* formerly part of the Polyptych and now at the National Gallery in London, is another *Virgin* by Bergognone, intended for private devotion: the expression of a surprising desire for recomposition, for para-philological reconstruction.

Looking at the beautiful *St Sebastian* once again brings Savinio's *New Encyclopedia* to mind. At one point the writer recalls a Roman friend, Vittorio F.B., who 'kept on the bedside table next to his bed a small painting representing *St Sebastian* suitably bristling with arrows and bleeding, and one day, showing me some large cardboard folders lined up neatly on a shelf in his bookcase, told me that in those folders he kept a very rich iconography of *St Sebastian*, intending one day to write a monograph devoted to the saint. Do you understand? Vittorio F.B., being an invert but not a painter, had to content himself with St Sebastians painted by others' – but take note, '*St Sebastian* is not only the saint of inverts but, because of the profound similarities between sexual inversion and aestheticism, also of aesthetes. See *St Sebastian* commissioned by Ida Rubinstein from Gabriele D'Annunzio' – the reference is to the 1910 theatrical work *Le Martyre de Saint Sébastien*, with music by Claude Debussy. The Bergognone panels entered the Cerruti Collection in 1983. Six years earlier, in the summer of 1977, the British director Derek Jarman's *Sebastiane* had also been released in Italian cinemas, perhaps the highest twentieth-century outcome, at least, of the desirous projection onto the story of the Christian martyr. The 'saint of aesthetes', captured at the moment of martyrdom and thus, in effect, of passage from life to death, is the most natural guardian of this 'burial chamber' – remember, once again, Savinio's idea of death as the definitive liberation from desires?

From the room and the loftiest desires, from this almost sidereal space, it is now worth descending the tower staircase towards the lowest: the Villa's large basement. The room symmetrical with the bedroom, the one that in effect supports the whole tower, also preserved in its original rustic style, is used as a wine cellar: it houses Cerruti's important collection of wine, despite his well-known abstinence – unexpressed desires reserved for convivial occasions. As Vallora recalled, it was a 'collection of rarities, reserved for friends. Always exceedingly refined and generous'. Among the bottles is an unexpected collection of dogs and other animals, more or less kitsch, all in ceramic. These are not the Villa's only canine statues: Cerruti had in fact devoted part of the garden to a cemetery for his dogs, commemorated by rocks serving as gravestones: Prinz Rufus, Denny, Dusky, Dumpy, Prinz, Toy… At the centre stands Puny the Champion, the only one portrayed in a life-size bronze statue. The work was made around 1970 by Virgilio Audagna, a sculptor born in 1903 and active since the 1920s, with significant funerary and ecclesiastical commissions – the bronze *Don Quixote* installed in another corner of the garden is also his. Cerruti's purchase of Audagna's bronzes, the work of an artist completely out of step by the 1970s, then in his seventies and indifferent to the new developments of post-war sculpture, once again tells us something about Cerruti's desires. More significant than the artist, however, is the subject of the small shrine devoted to Puny the Champion. In 1968, shortly before the schnauzer was cast in bronze, Gillo Dorfles had devoted some space to

canine funerary monuments in his very successful book *Kitsch: An Anthology of Bad Taste*. In particular, he focused on representations of Marquise and Tony, the two dogs of the Russian princess Vera Nikolaevna Lobanov Rostovsky, buried at the *Cimetière-des-Chiens* in Asnières-sur-Seine just outside Paris, according to legend with jewels around their necks and portraits with wide-open eyes in a disturbing funerary monument that Dorfles had taken care to reproduce in the book. With rather too much venom, at the end of his volume Dorfles reflected on the value of kitsch for certain collectors. The description, it will be clear, does not entirely fit Cerruti, normally immune to lapses into kitsch; at the same time, however, it can offer some productive clues regarding the relationship, already invoked several times, between collecting and desire:

> Collectors and users project their inner world outwards […] Along with bad films, illustrated magazines and so on, *Kitsch* objects give them a prompt for projecting the poverty of their inner world outwards […] Unable as they are to become conscious of their relations with the world in which they live, and thus to develop their own individuality, incapable of understanding the language and logic of forms, such individuals readily opt for the false splendour of vulgarity because it recalls something that lies in the darkness of their desires.

Kitsch interlude over, it is worth exploring the rest of the Basement. It is a peculiar environment, perhaps the only one in the Villa in which the museum function seems to take precedence over traces of the building's initial domestic function. Beyond the wine cellar, into which one can only peer, the neutral floors and the arrangement of works in coherent groups in the other rooms, faithful to the installation documented in photographs from the 1990s and 2000s, make it harder to intuit the collector's desires and personality. Masterpieces are not lacking here either: it would be impossible to list them all. What is especially surprising are certain attempts to update the collection, pushing its chronological limit forwards: works by Giulio Paolini, Nicola De Maria, Enzo Cucchi and Gino De Dominicis, all artists at least a decade younger than Cerruti, are gathered in various rooms on this level. The real surprise of the basement, alongside Mimmo Rotella's very late *Marilyn on the Beach*, torn in 2004, and Lucio Fontana's *Spatial Concept, Waiting* – four slashes on a red ground enclosed in an improbable gilt frame – is the large portrait of *Hélène Rochas* painted by Andy Warhol in 1974 and acquired by Cerruti in 2007. The profile of the French socialite and businesswoman, chief executive of the fashion house founded by her husband Marcel Rochas, seems enormously remote from Cerruti's own circles and interests. Other additions to the collection in the 2000s confirm that the collector would have been able to buy any painting from the 1970s or 1980s by the American artist, from whom he had already acquired, in 2005, the 1982 canvas *The Poet and His Muse*, directly

derived from a 1959 work by Giorgio de Chirico, *The Poet and the Muse*, and therefore perfectly integrated into the collection. As the art historian Fabio Belloni has reconstructed, the Rochas portrait, belonging to the so-called "vanity portraits", was produced in several versions: 'the first for the sitter, usually sold for 25,000 dollars, the others for the market at 5,000. In this case, against the four works requested by the sitter, the artist produced a total of twelve'. Portraits of this kind, removed from the sitter's direct possession, become the object of a peculiar collecting desire: why wish to possess the image of a person who was, moreover, still alive at the time, and distant from one's own interests and professional sphere? The intrinsic qualities of the painting can only go so far: formally, despite the quality of the screen-printing process and the handsome green Warhol chose for the background, the Rochas portrait tells us little, especially to someone who owned portraits by Pontormo or Barocci. Here too, Cerruti's collecting desire is probably destined to remain inaccessible. Before leaving the basement, guiltily ignoring the room devoted to the nineteenth century, the furniture and the atlases, we should at least note the sheet painted by Kandinsky in November 1918, Cerruti's first acquisition in 1970, when he was already forty-eight, the act that inaugurated his late-blooming collecting desire. The small ink-and-watercolour composition on paper was made by the Russian painter at the age of fifty-two, already fully immersed in his abstract phase and newly married to his second wife, Nina Andreevskaya. The watercolour is dedicated to Ludwig Bähr, a curious German military-diplomatic figure sent to Russia to forge links with the local intelligentsia after taking part in the 1918 Brest-Litovsk conference – in the months that followed, he would help pave the way for Kandinsky's move towards the Bauhaus. Just a year after acquiring the watercolour from a gallery in Geneva, Cerruti lent it to the major exhibition at Turin's Galleria Civica d'Arte Moderna devoted to *The Blue Rider*, the group led by Kandinsky in Munich between 1911 and 1914. From the very first acquisition, then, Cerruti's desire to share, and implicitly, beneath the surface, to be recognised as a collector, was immediate.

One last room remains: the ground-floor Music Room, compressed within the vertical sequence of the tower's round rooms between the basement wine cellar, the Batoni room on the first floor and the bedroom on the top floor. Here Cerruti installed a piano, a collection of small twentieth-century sculptures and a highly select group of paintings: Dosso Dossi's *St Jerome in a Landscape* – patron saint of bibliophiles and an ideal closing of the circle begun with Tanzio da Varallo's *St Benedict Among the Brambles* – a *Portrait of a Lady Holding a Book* by the Venetian painter Paris Bordon, Antonio Joli's *View of the Campo Vaccino in Rome*, *Two Young Brothers Embracing* painted at the end of the eighteenth century by Gaetano Gandolfi and, above all, Pontormo's *Portrait of a Gentleman with Book and Gloves*, as well as the only photographic work in the collection: a portrait,

probably, of the British lawyer Harry Melvill, taken in 1925 by the American Surrealist photographer Man Ray. Let us begin with this photograph. Close to Oscar Wilde and Jean Cocteau and a prominent figure in London society, Melvill was openly homosexual and had been very close to the actor Cosmo Gordon-Lennox. Melvill – assuming it is indeed him, since it has recently been suggested that the sitter may instead be the American painter Russell Hubbert Greeley – is portrayed holding a mysterious rectangular object wrapped in a sheet of dark paper that partly covers his face. In front of the object, perhaps a book, are two elegant, tapering hands, slender wrists enclosed in perfectly starched cuffs. As Rigolo has reconstructed – defining the Music Room as 'the room that more than any other speaks both of Cerruti's collecting choices and of his personality' – the reason for this mysterious acquisition is soon explained: Cerruti owned the copy of the first edition of Marcel Proust's *Swann's Way*, the first volume of *In Search of Lost Time*, that had belonged to Melvill himself, bearing an autograph dedication by the author worth reproducing here in translation:

> May 1916. To Harry Melvill / Monsieur, at the time when Jacques Blanche was painting your portrait and mine [Proust is referring here to the celebrated French portraitist, for whom Melvill had sat in 1904], I wished to know you, and when going to our painter I often thought that, as I was leaving, I might have the pleasure of meeting you in his studio. But all that has become what a line of verse (by Rossetti, I believe) calls 'what might have been, and was not'. Day after day, the years have placed between our lives, following their divergent wakes, the expanse of those waters that cannot be crossed again. It is therefore with a very melancholy pleasure that I send you, Monsieur, knowing what will not be 'regained', *In Search of Lost Time*. / Marcel Proust.

The Cerruti Collection thus becomes the device through which, a century later, a missed encounter and an unexpressed desire can ideally be recomposed, making possible once again, through book and photograph, a contact between the two men, however indirect. It is no coincidence that Turin itself, during the 1970s, had become the capital of a homosexual rediscovery of Man Ray's work: through both the gallerist Luciano Anselmino, who ran the Il Fauno gallery and had transformed his home into 'a temple to Man Ray', and the editorial group of Fuori!, the magazine of the Fronte Unitario Omosessuale Rivoluzionario Italiano, which often illustrated its articles with works by the artist, including several masks formerly in the collection of Corrado Levi.

It is precisely Levi – architect, artist and major Turin collector – who allows us to close this triangle by also bringing in Pontormo's portrait, rediscovered by Roberto Longhi in 1952 and acquired by Cerruti from the dealer Carlo Orsi in 2010. It was an important acquisition, in which Cerruti's

unbridled collecting desire enabled him to prevail over major international museums, the Uffizi foremost among them: 'I keep the photograph of that masterpiece on my desk, the memory of a defeat that still burns, but we could not afford it and he, gallantly, lent it to us', recalled Antonio Natali, then director of the Galleries. In 1977, when Cerruti was at the beginning of his collecting activity and was not yet pursuing Renaissance masterpieces, Levi included in an issue of his underground magazine *From the Queer Cellars* (*Dalle cantine frocie*) an insert devoted precisely to *Madame Pontormo*. Drawing on the painter's diaries, rich in ambiguous passages, and comparing his drawings, often devoted to surprising compositions of virile male nudes, with the far more explicit homoerotic cartoons of the Finnish artist Tom of Finland, Levi issued a playful call to arms, entirely in small capitals, to claim the supposed homosexual desire concealed among the works of the Mannerist painter: 'Pontormo, we will avenge you: all the queens out stealing nail polish, lipstick, eye shadow, kohl, and off to the churches and museums to put make-up on all the male figures'. This was followed by a 'first contribution towards a history of art from the homosexual repressed' and the text 'misadventures of straight critics who have salami skin only over their eyes'. As Levi wrote, 'cunning, this homosexual desire of ours/yours: follow the tricks it used in Pontormo in order to express itself through internal and external censorship (not even all that strong, but how come no one noticed it before…)'. The portrait in the Cerruti Collection is far removed from the tormented desires of Pontormo's late drawings; nevertheless, the gaze of the unknown male sitter retains a desirous tension that is hard to ignore. The nervous hands, entirely analogous to those of Melvill desired by Proust and photographed by Man Ray, reinforce the impression; the half-closed book held in the left hand finally seals the triangle, binding the painting indissolubly to Cerruti's personality and entrepreneurial history.

Before leaving the Villa, Calvino's *Invisible Cities* is useful once again: 'Cities' – though let us try replacing them with 'collections' – 'like dreams, are made of desires and fears, even if the thread of their discourse is secret, their rules absurd, their perspectives deceptive, and every thing conceals another.'