

A Storied Collection of Ancient Sculpture Will Finally See the Light

The Torlonia family assembled one of the world's most important private collections of statuary. It will go on display in Rome in March, a prelude to a grand tour.

By **Elisabetta Povoledo**

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ROME — Several of this city's finest museums bear the names of the aristocratic families who once built majestic palazzi and stuffed them full of priceless art: the Borghese, the Barberini, the Doria Pamphilj, and more still.

But one of the world's most precious private collections — that of the Torlonia family — has remained out of bounds, unseen by the public and known to most scholars only through its catalog, published in the late 19th century. It includes scores of busts and a veritable who's who of classical mythology, dating from the fifth century B.C. to the fourth century A.D. Eventually the collection would swell to 620 statues depicting Greek and Roman gods, goddesses and mythical heroes, as well as portraits of Roman emperors. The catalog's author, Pietro Ercole Visconti, described the sculptures as “an immense treasure of erudition and art, amassed in silence over the course of many, many years.”

Inaccessibility fueled its mystique, and the Torlonia Collection became the stuff of legend.

After decades of negotiations and false starts, the public will be able to decide whether reality lives up to the myth when 96 statues go on display at the Palazzo Caffarelli, part of the Capitoline Museums here, in March. The exhibition, “The Torlonia Marbles. Collecting Masterpieces,” will be open for a nine-month stint, a prelude to a grand tour.

On a warm October morning, a small group of visitors, including reporters for The New York Times, had a preview of the collection in the ground-floor former granary on Via della Lungara where the Torlonia Collection was installed around 1875.

Sculptures lined the walls and peppered the floors of several brightly lit rooms that for the past three years have served as a restoration laboratory.

At a news conference after the viewing, Italy's culture minister, Dario Franceschini, told reporters that he still felt a little giddy.

“You come out feeling stunned by so much beauty, such stupefying quality,” he said.

The art historian Salvatore Settis, the co-curator of the exhibition with Carlo Gasparri, and a former director of the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles, played the consul Cicero on the tour for Mr. Franceschini, Mayor Virginia Raggi, sundry culture ministry authorities and their respective retinues.

Passing through a leafy courtyard in a beehive of residential rentals owned by Torlonia family companies, Mr. Settis took a sharp right through a nondescript door and into an Aladdin's Cave of classical art.

He paused before a relief of a ship tied to a mooring block in a harbor, found at the site of the artificial ancient Roman harbor of Portus. “It's only been studied from photographs, no one has ever seen it,” Mr. Settis told the minister.

Many pieces of the collection were well known without having been viewed, he told reporters.

“When I first entered the warehouse, I recognized dozens of pieces that I'd read about but had never seen,” he said.

Students of classical art would have probably recognized the so-called Hestia Giustiniani, or a bust that has been identified as portraying Euthydemus of Bactria. The collection also includes a restoration by the Baroque-era sculptor Gian Lorenzo Bernini of a Greek statue depicting a resting goat. It was as though Bernini was “competing with antiquity,” Mr. Settis said of the sculptor’s integration of the work. The curator said that he thought other works in the collection would gain fame once they were known, including the bust of a third century A.D. matron, her hand wrapped in a fine veil.

In the case of the port scene, the restoration brought to light some of the traces of color that originally adorned the surface. Brightly painted sculptures were common in antiquity, but the color rarely survived the passage of time and the tastes of later collectors, who liked their marble sparkling white.

Restoration of the sculptures — some Greek originals, others Roman copies of Greek statues as well as Roman originals — began three years ago.

“The works were not in critical condition, but they were very dirty,” mostly layers of dust that had settled over the years, Mr. Settis explained. The restoration, which was commissioned by the Torlonia family and sponsored by the Bulgari jewelry company, was carried out under the watchful eye of culture ministry experts to “return them to the splendor of antiquity,” the curator said.

In a video on the website of the Torlonia Foundation, the chief restorer, Anna Maria Carruba, frees a statue from a papier-mâché shell imbued with a solvent, and then gently cleans the surface with soft sponges and a toothbrush.

“This has been the most wonderful restoration commission of my life,” she told Ms. Raggi, the mayor, explaining how her team had documented each individual intervention on the statues over the centuries. Ms. Carruba has been working for a decade on the Torlonia Collection.

Different eras used different materials to restore and integrate classical works, and these often left visible traces, she explained. “We’ll do the same, only our materials are more suitable,” she said.

The collection was formed in the 19th century when the Torlonia began acquiring antiquities as befitting Rome’s noble families.

The first lot acquired by the family, at public auction, belonged to the 18th-century restorer and sculptor Bartolomeo Cavaceppi, and included ancient statues and sarcophagi, along with terra cotta vases and bronzes that ended up decorating some of the Torlonia family villas. In 1825, the Torlonias acquired 270 works amassed by the 17th-century nobleman and art collector Vincenzo Giustiniani, an admirer of Caravaggio. At the same time, the collection swelled with works found during excavations on Torlonia properties around Rome. In 1866, the family bought the Villa Albani with its collection. It can be visited by appointment.

In 1875, Prince Alessandro Torlonia decided to found a museum on the Via della Lungara. The collection was open only to small groups of visitors, while scholars had sporadic access. In more recent decades, negotiations between the family and the Italian culture authorities to find a suitable showcase for the works never panned out.

In 2014, a descendant, Prince Alessandro Torlonia, created a foundation to promote the collection. Two years later, he and Mr. Franceschini signed an accord to exhibit part of it. The prince died in 2017, but the foundation carried on his wishes.

As the Torlonia sculptures are a “collection of collections,” Mr. Settis explained, the exhibit in the Palazzo Caffarelli will showcase both the collection and the collecting practices of the Roman nobility from the 15th century on.

Under the terms of the accord the 96 statues on show in Rome will travel to museums around the world, though they have not been chosen yet.

The restoration laboratory, which includes a makeshift photo studio, takes up just a portion of the many rooms where the collection is stored. In the dark, sculptures wait for their turn to be scrubbed.

To this viewer, the most striking were the dozens of busts: expressive and moving portraits of long dead Romans, famous and not.

“Is there another Augustus?” asked Jean-Christophe Babin, chief executive of Bulgari, referring to the first Roman emperor.

Mr. Settis said the Torlonia had collected some 180 busts, making it one of the biggest collections of Roman portraiture in the world. Some are of “great quality,” he said.

Italian officials are now seeking a site where the collection can be permanently displayed, so that the Torlonia, like other noble families, will have a museum of their own.

“This is a story with a happy ending,” Mr. Settis said.