

An interview with the collector Volker W. Feierabend, who discovered his passion for Italian art of the 20th and 21st centuries rather by chance. He has since become one of its greatest patrons. Questioned about art as an investment and about the concept of patronage, the passionate collector freely admits to following his intuition rather than current trends.

BY ANGELICA CICOGNA MOZZONI
AND ALESSANDRO RIZZI

Volker W. Feierabend became involved with Italy in 1959, working on behalf of a prominent Berlin establishment. "When the Berlin Wall went up in 1961 I decided to move to Frankfurt, where I got into business for myself and as a result worked in cooperation with a group of Italian companies," Feierabend explains. During the 1970s he got married and it was then that he started to collect art. His home gradually filled with antique furniture and paintings dating from the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries. Eventually, however, he decided to sell everything, and to focus instead on collecting work produced by living artists. He set his sights on Italian art – a fascinating terrain, and one still largely unheeded by the big international collectors at that time. Feierabend sold all of the non-Italian works in his collection, and thus started his adventure as a collector.

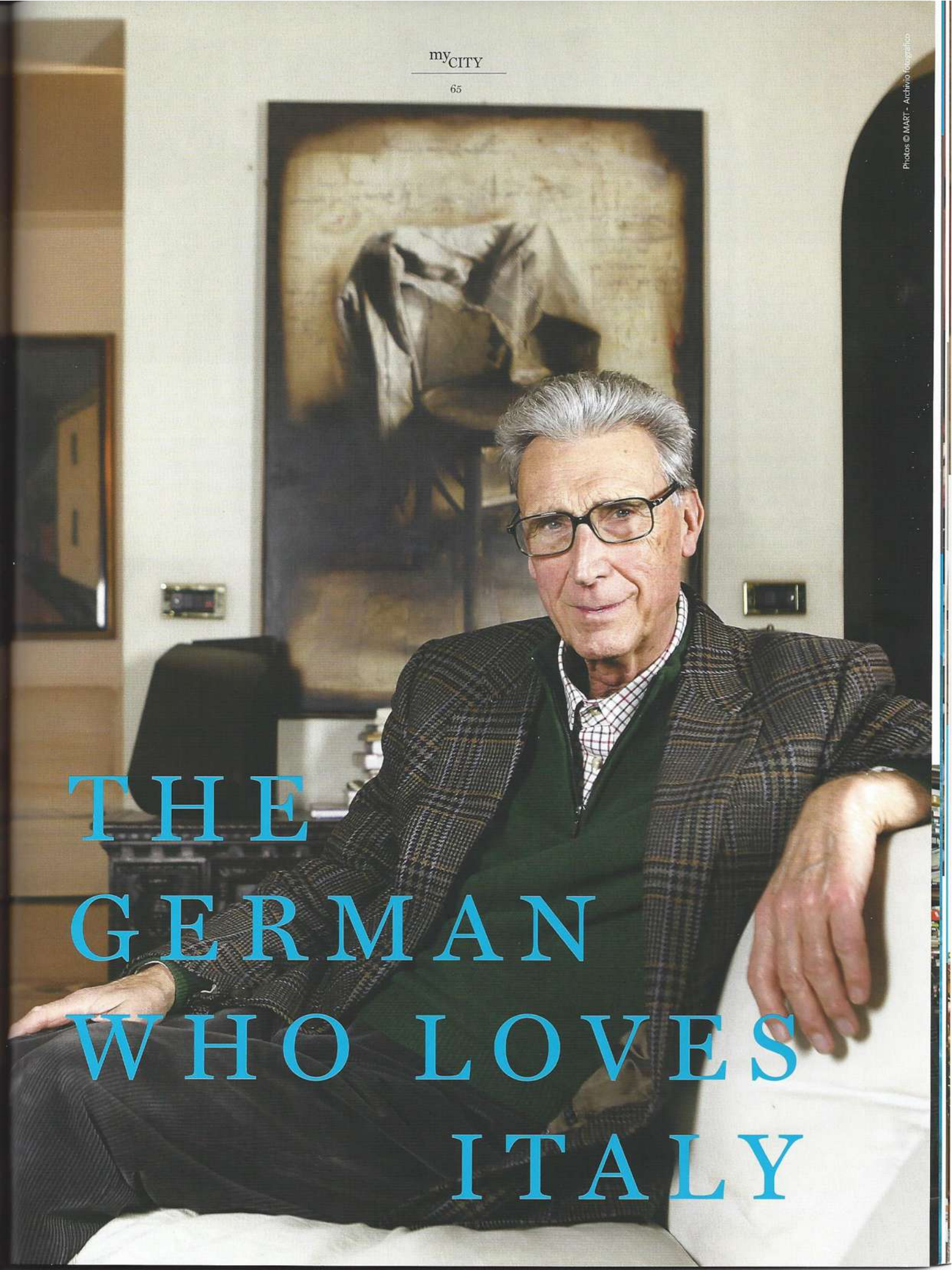
The original core of his collection includes Italian figurative painting from the early 20th century. "I would call it a selection, rather than a collection,"

says Feierabend, who still today insists on only buying what he likes, for the sheer pleasure of it. "In the mid-1980s the price of 20th-century art shot up, meaning that it was simply no longer possible to acquire works from the period," he explains. "However, a collector can't just give up, and so I decided to sell a 20th-century masterpiece. I used the profit from that piece to set up a new collection of post-1945 artworks: I purchased Italian works from the 1950s and 1960s, which were still relatively cheap at the time."

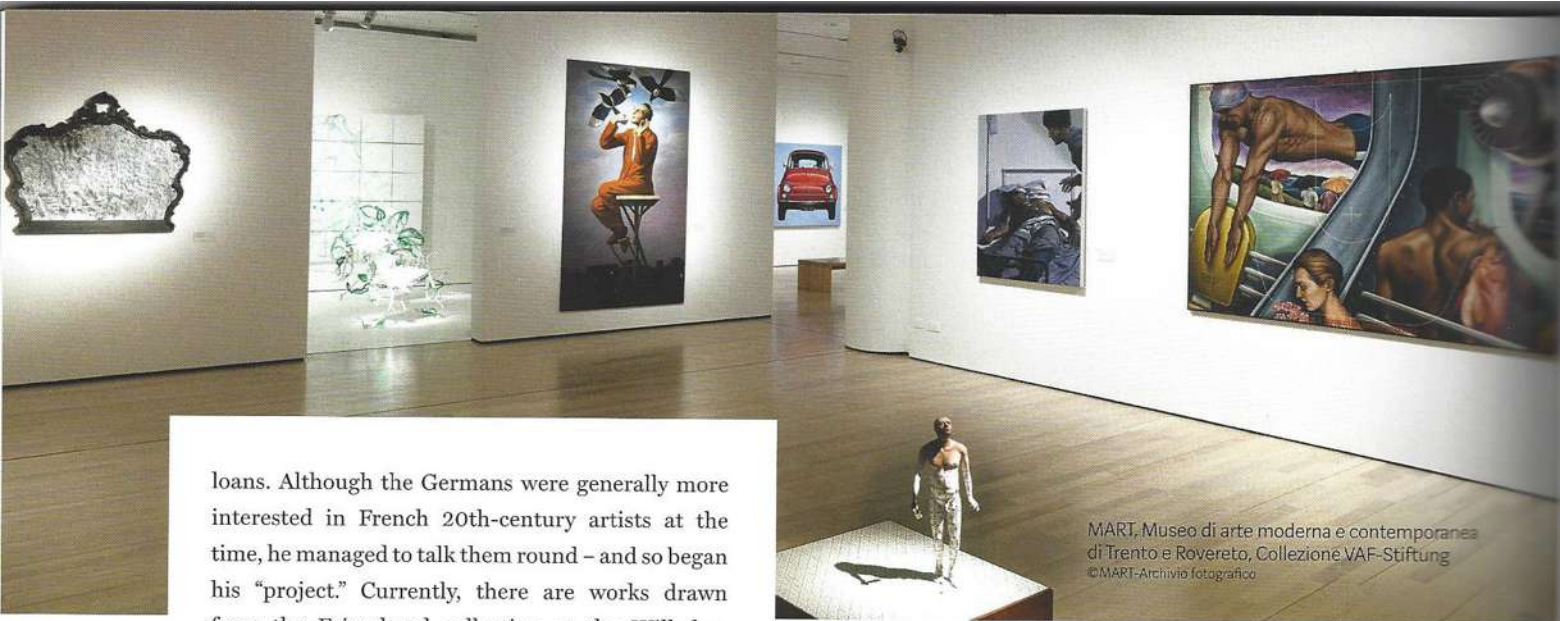
He adds: "Luckily, I have always managed to buy the right artists at the right time." His collection expanded as he secured works by Bonalumi, Dadamaino and Gruppo T Cinetica, directly from the artists.

However, as he explains, "A collector has to start reconsidering when there is no room left on their walls." He too was faced with this problem, and the solution he found was to contact German museums to offer them his Italian artworks as permanent





THE
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loans. Although the Germans were generally more interested in French 20th-century artists at the time, he managed to talk them round – and so began his “project.” Currently, there are works drawn from the Feierabend collection at the Wilhelm-Hack-Museum in Ludwigshafen, the Sprengel Museum in Hanover, the Kunsthalle Mannheim, the Lehmbruck Museum in Duisburg and the Skulpturenmuseum Glaskasten Marl. “The museums requested works by Italian artists that they did not already own.” So Volker Feierabend went looking for them on the art market, in galleries, and also privately and from the artists themselves. “I bought works in order to leave them to the museums as a permanent loan according to the usual system.” He continues: “In Germany, a private person does not pay net wealth tax if they lend an artwork to a museum; and the museum takes care of everything – from any necessary restoration through to insurance. It’s still the case today.”

In 2000 he founded the VAF Foundation based in Frankfurt, to which he donated his collection of 1,500 works. The initials “VAF” are a combination of his own name and that of his wife, Aurora. The foundation’s aim is to collect Italian art from the 20th and 21st centuries, to make it more accessible to the public and, above all, to raise awareness of it, to boost its importance.

In 2000 he also met Gabriella Belli of MART (Museo di arte moderna e contemporanea di Trento e Rovereto) and offered to lend some artworks to the museum, which at the time was still under construction. Feierabend was fascinated by a visit to the new museum planned by architect Mario Botta. More than anything he was impressed by how the museum had been designed: it was built around the works that it was to hold, and not the other way round.

The collector put together an initial selection of 100 artworks that he claimed back from various

German museums (to their dismay, not surprisingly) in order to loan them to MART. Over the course of time he lent MART about 1,000 artworks in total. The foundation’s works on show there include masterpieces of the early 20th century as well as the avant-garde of the post-war period through to works by less well-known contemporary artists.

MART, Museo di arte moderna e contemporanea di Trento e Rovereto, Collezione VAF-Stiftung
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A work by the first winner of the biennial art prize awarded by the VAW Foundation in support of young talents. Chiara Dynys, Near and far, 2003

Does patronage still exist? “Since 2003, the VAF Foundation has awarded its biennial art prize to young Italian artists under the age of 40 in Germany, Austria and Italy. They are not chosen for being currently in fashion, but rather purely on talent. Often the foundation supports these artists by purchasing materials and other things they might need for producing their artworks.” The stunning work of the first prize-winner, Chiara Dynys, has since become renowned throughout the art world; her works have been on display in numerous solo and group exhibitions, at major museums and in public and private cultural institutions.

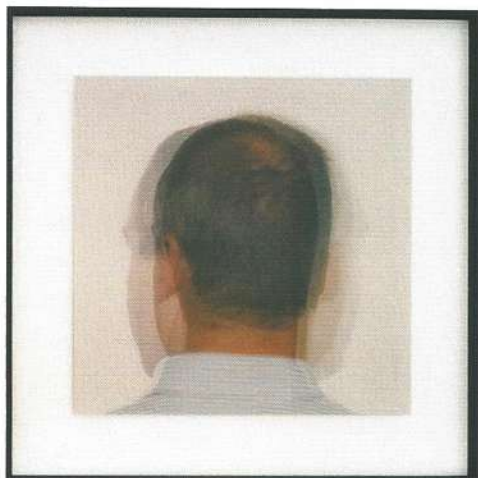
Questioned on the subject of art as an investment, Volker Feierabend explains: "In Germany in the 1970s, it was the museums who showed the critics which direction art should take. The critics then wrote in the newspapers about the artists and their work in the museums, but remained completely neutral. Museums worked with galleries in order to discover new artists, and museum directors often spoke in galleries about the artists staging the exhibition. Today museums are following a general trend and focusing entirely on raising visitor numbers, while the market operates under the influence of large, internationally active galleries and major collectors – it is they who launch artists' reputations, and these artists are then suddenly able to command six-figure sums out of nowhere." He continues: "There is too much money in the world and there are about 100 artists who are

it had been put at 5,000 to 6,500 suros. "It was a real bargain, and this is not the first time it has happened to me," he says with obvious satisfaction. "The work will be on show at MART as part of their next exhibition, 'Grande Guerra 1914–2014,' about the World Wars."

Volker Feierabend finishes our conversation with the following words: "During the last 20 years I have bought work by young artists who I considered talented. Over the course of time, let's say in 30 or 40 years, we will find out whether I was in fact right to follow my intuition."

Angelica Cicogna Mozzoni is Director of the Milan Dorotheum.

Alessandro Rizzi is an expert in Modern and contemporary art at Dorotheum.



Chiara Dynys, Near and far, 2003
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trendy at the moment and favoured by the relevant buyers. These think they are doing good business or adding another major name to their collection, but frequently they buy without passion or conviction. Names that reach multi-million-dollar sums dominate at auction while work by other artists sells below its true value. In my opinion, there are opportunities here for real collectors to acquire works cheaply and to expand their collections."

Volker Feierabend goes on to describe how he recently managed to buy a 20th-century artist's work at an auction for the lower estimated value –

"Buying with
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conviction"

