

HOMES, ARTWORKS, PERSONALITIES NOTES FOR A BIOGRAPHY OF LUISA SPAGNOLI

Ludovico Pratesi

“There were only a handful of collectors in Rome in the 1960s: Solari, Luisa Spagnoli, Franchetti, Campilli and Anfuso.” In a 1970 article by Sandro Viola¹ about contemporary art collectors, the Umbria-born Luisa Spagnoli, granddaughter of the founder of the fashion house of the same name, was mentioned as of one five collectors active in the Italian capital during the *Dolce Vita* era. Blonde, passionate about art, a visionary and habitué of the avant-garde art galleries of the day – from the Tartaruga to the Obelisco and the Attico – Spagnoli was a friend of Giorgio Franchetti’s and shared his ideas about art. She had already made her name as a brilliant hostess of artistic gatherings in her home. The daughter of Mario Spagnoli, Luisa was born in Perugia in 1929 and came to Rome in the 1950s. She first lived in Via Tortolini before moving to Via dei Tre Orologi in the chic Parioli quarter. Her close friend Giosetta Fioroni recalls, “Even then, you could meet loads of people at her house, artists and painters above all. No one was left out; she welcomed one and all with that impulsiveness and generosity that distinguished her.”²

“Her apartment was very large, and the furniture was built into the walls, which were upholstered with grey fabric,” recalls an eye-witness to that era, the American model Joan Whelan, wife of the photographer Johnny Moncada, who had been hired to photograph the outfits from the Luisa Spagnoli fashion collections against backdrops inspired by contemporary art and drawn on large sheets of paper by two artists in Spagnoli’s circle, Gaston Novelli and Achille Perilli.

This artistic collaboration lasted nine years, from 1956 to 1965, a period that we might well imagine coincided with the start of Luisa’s art collection, with Franchetti himself quite possibly her adviser. As time went on, her love of art became more and more pronounced – Luisa was also a writer³ for prestigious publications such as *L’Espresso* and *Il Mondo*⁴ – until it came to dominate her new residence, an airy apartment in Via Po that was photographed by Elisabetta Catalano in the spring of 1972. The occasion was a lunch in the honour of Andy Warhol, who had been invited to Rome by Graziella Lonardi to present his film *Women in Revolt*.⁵

The photo spread by Catalano, which has never been published, shows a number of works from Spagnoli’s collection very clearly, starting with *Nude Woman on the Bed* (1967) by Michelangelo Pistoletto, which would appear in Alberto Boatto’s *Dentro/fuori lo specchio*, the first monograph devoted to the artist.⁶ The various sitting rooms in the apartment featured sculptures

by Mario Ceroli, several *Campbell’s Soups* by Warhol, a large painting by Cy Twombly, several sculptures by Pino Pascali, a screen by Fabio Mauri, a painting by Valerio Adami, and a portrait by Giosetta Fioroni.

“It was a very large collection,” Giosetta Fioroni recalls, “of works by mostly Italian artists, whose works Luisa acquired, and many drawings as well. I remember seeing important works by Giulio Paolini, Jannis Kounellis, Franco Angeli and Tano Festa.”⁷ Another gem was George Segal’s *Girl on a Swing*, which Luisa lent to the major exhibition *Contemporanea* held in the Villa Borghese parking facility on 30 November 1973. The show was curated by Achille Bonito Oliva, a close friend of Spagnoli’s, who was a frequent guest at her social gatherings, like many of the capital’s cultural elite. Journalists such as Eugenio Scalfari, Alberto Ronchey and Furio Colombo, writers like Goffredo Parise, Alberto Moravia, Alberto Arbasino and Nanni Balestrini, and filmmakers of the ilk of Luchino Visconti, Michelangelo Antonioni and Pier Paolo Pasolini flocked to Luisa’s lunches and cocktails on any number of occasions, from the inauguration of an exhibition to a book presentation.

“Luisa would train her lively curiosity on each of her guests, whose personal affairs all fed into her own unique wisdom, which was actually solitary and, above all, mysterious,” Fabio Mauri has observed.⁸

Luisa’s *salotti* welcomed especially foreign intellectuals passing through Rome, such as the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan. “I met him in front of one of my paintings, while Pasolini had appeared with an interpreter to start up a conversation,” recalls Gianfranco Baruchello. “Lacan asked him if he spoke French, and he said he didn’t, at which point Lacan turned on his heels and walked away.”⁹ And this is only one of the anecdotes about the goings-on at Spagnoli’s gatherings, which exerted a strong pull over anyone involved in cultural activities in Rome in the 1970s, a city through which a steady stream of artworks passed. After Via Po, Luisa moved to her father Mario’s apartment in Via Monterone 2, where she lived until her tragic, premature death at the age of 48, on 3 September 1977, in an accident in the woods in the Val Gardena, where she was staying at the Fishburg castle owned by Giorgio Franchetti.¹⁰

“Injured in the fall and lost, frightened and thirsty: she who was so warm, reassuring, and tender” Alberto Arbasino remarked.¹¹ To live alongside art, Luisa Spagnoli pioneered a very unusual collecting style, passionate and generous, that it would be well to remember today, tomorrow and forever.

¹ S. Viola, *Quando si guadagna il mille per cento*, in *La Stampa*, 13 June 1970, p. 3.

² From a conversation between Giosetta Fioroni and Ludovico Pratesi, Rome, 4 February 2014.

³ Cf. L. Spagnoli, *Lunga vita di Giorgio De Chirico*, Longanesi, Milan 1971.

⁴ Cf. G. Fioroni and E. Siciliano (ed.) *Luisa Spagnoli scritti e testimonianze*, Studio Tipografico, Rome 1979. The book features articles printed in *Il Verri* in 1964, *Il Mondo* from 1972 to 1975, and *L’Espresso* between 1966 and 1970.

⁵ L. Spagnoli, *Warhol nudo-pop*, in *Il Mondo*, 19 May 1972, reprinted in Fioroni, Siciliano, *Luisa Spagnoli scritti e testimonianze* cit., pp. 50–57.

⁶ A. Boatto, *Dentro/fuori lo specchio*, Fantini, Rome 1970.

⁷ From a conversation between Giosetta Fioroni and Ludovico Pratesi, Rome, 4 February 2014.

⁸ F. Mauri, *Dediche a Luisa*, in Fioroni, Siciliano, *Luisa Spagnoli scritti e testimonianze* cit., p. 264.

⁹ From a conversation between Gianfranco Baruchello and Ludovico Pratesi, Rome, March 2014.

¹⁰ P. Pagliaro, *La scomparsa di Luisa Spagnoli*, in *La Repubblica*, 6 September 1977, p. 5.

¹¹ A. Arbasino, *Per Luisa*, in Fioroni, Siciliano, *Luisa Spagnoli scritti e testimonianze* cit., p. 247.