

THE PANZA COLLECTION STORY

“The Panza Collection is entirely a couple’s affair. When my wife Giovanna and I discover works by a new artist, I look at her and she looks at me. I can see in her eyes if she wants to buy or not. So even between my wife and me, ‘looking’ is an issue.”

Giuseppe Panza, 2009¹

Giuseppe Panza di Biumo, along with his wife Giovanna, is recognized as one of the world’s foremost collectors of contemporary art. The collection, originally composed of around 2,500 works of art, is mainly representative of the most significant developments in American art from post-World War II to the 21st century. Along with a need to fulfill spiritual and inner quests, both intuition and reflection have inspired the collectors’ choice that would demonstrate, retrospectively, their far-sightedness. By devoting themselves to an in-depth focus on emerging artists and specific creative periods, the Panzas contributed to acknowledging the new art forms among both the general public and the art market.

The Beginnings of the Collection: On the Road to America

The collection ideally began in 1954 when Giuseppe, at the age of thirty years, traveled to South America and the United States, from New York to Los Angeles, where he discovered the continents’ captivating vitality of economy and culture.

Upon his return to Milan, he felt the need to take part in the international cultural *milieu*. In 1955, shortly after his marriage with Giovanna Magnifico, Giuseppe purchased his first work of art by Italian abstract painter Atanasio Soldati. Thereafter, he gathered a group of paintings by Gino Meloni, as well as works by European and American artists such as Camille Bryen, Emilio Vedova, Philip Guston and Richard Diebenkorn.

In 1957, prompted by the art critic and friend Pierre Restany, the couple discovered in Paris the Art Informel of Antoni Tàpies. As Giuseppe wrote, the combination of «formal, compositional sobriety and dramatic temperament» was a real revelation. The acquisition of *Grey-Brown Composition* (1957) from the Stadler gallery thus marked a new course for the collection.

That same year, Giuseppe acknowledged the radicalism of the New York School by acquiring Franz Kline’s works in which he ideally saw a visual dialogue with the city of New York. After having learned about Kline’s oeuvre from Achille Perilli’s article *Segni e immagini di Franz Kline* published in the Italian magazine «Civiltà delle macchine», he purchased his first Klines through photographs from New York Sidney Janis’ gallery.

At the same time, he found Jean Fautrier’s *Otages* to be as socially committed as Tàpies’ work, and from 1958 onwards he pursued his paintings of the 1940s. Between 1960 and 1961, the purchase of seven canvases by Mark Rothko, whom he visited in New York, marked the decisive transition from the collecting of Art Informel to Abstract Expressionism.

“I consider painting as a way to visually express the essence of man, neither a pleasure, nor an amusement, nor a divertimento. To choose a painting means to identify in it something of myself. I only purchase art when I find such an involvement.”

Giuseppe Panza, 1957²

Resonance of the Object: New Dada and Pop Art

“... What is popular transcends the myth.”

Giuseppe Panza, 2006³

The first part of the collection, comprising works from 1943 to 1969, is completed with masterpieces of New Dada and Pop Art. In 1958, while sojourning in Milan, composer John Cage informed Giuseppe about Robert Rauschenberg's work. The collector would acquire eleven *combine paintings*, emblematic of his profound interest in the poetics of the object and metaphysical component of everyday life. Leo Castelli, who had opened his first gallery in New York in 1957, was instrumental to the transition from Abstract Expressionism to Pop Art; he became close friends with the Panzas and their collaboration lasted for several decades.

By acquiring a copious group of works by Claes Oldenburg, of whom they purchased pieces of *The Store* from the groundbreaking Richard Bellamy's Green Gallery, James Rosenquist, Roy Lichtenstein and George Segal, the Panzas contributed to the international rise of Pop Art, celebrated by the XXXII Venice Biennial.

Fascinated by non-Western cultures, from the beginning of the 1960s Giuseppe began gathering traditional African and pre-Columbian art. At that time, he began experimenting with the display of art by presenting the dialogue between non-Western and contemporary art that still distinguishes the exhibition spaces of the 18th-century Villa Panza in Biumo (Varese).

“The distinction that we Westerners make between aesthetics and meaning is arbitrary. In fact this separation does not exist; real art is always a tool for communicating with the unknown that is within and around us.”

Giuseppe Panza, 2006⁴

From Minimalism to Conceptual Art

The evolution and developments of Minimalism in the context of American neo-avant-garde were celebrated by the 1966 exhibition, *Primary Structures*, held at the Jewish Museum in New York. That year, Robert Morris' geometric structures and Dan Flavin's fluorescent lights entered the Panza Collection.

“Minimalism is, for me, the revelation of the reality behind appearances.”

Giuseppe Panza, 2009⁵

Between 1967 and 1973, the collection documented the richness of theoretic and artistic praxis of Minimalist and Anti-form tendencies: from Donald Judd's *Specific objects* to Carl Andre's structures, from Richard Serra's processual and sculptural oeuvre to the works of Richard Nonas (from 1975) and Jene Highstein.

From 1969, Minimalist paintings as well as American and British abstract-reductionist art were added to the collection: Robert Ryman, of whom the Panzas purchased numerous works in his series of paintings, Brice Marden, Robert Mangold, Alan Charlton, Bob Law and Peter Joseph. The collection thus became a milestone in the international art scene.

During his 1968 sojourn in New York, Giuseppe viewed the works of the young Conceptual artists. He also began extensively collecting Bruce Nauman's body of work on the perceptual and physical experience of space, and assembled some 40 pieces including his environmental projects.

"Conceptual art... for the first time, philosophy and thought have been made visible through art."
Giuseppe Panza, 2006⁶

From 1969 to 1974, the collection expanded to the main developments of Conceptual Art through diagrams, texts, linguistic propositions and photography by such artists as Lawrence Weiner, Joseph Kosuth, Douglas Huebler, Sol LeWitt, Robert Barry, Hamish Fulton, Jan Dibbets, and Ian Wilson, to name but a few. Along with collectors Dorothy and Herbert Vogel (with whom Giuseppe exchanged his thoughts on art during his New York sojourns), Martin and Mia Visser and others, the Panzas formed a core collection that became an exhaustive documentation of the field.

"We live in a virtual world, a world of ideas. But this is the only way we have of possessing things, or at least many of them. If knowledge is virtual, reality is not virtual, and it acts in a determining manner on us, an inseparable mixture of body and soul."
Giuseppe Panza, 2006⁷

Light and Perception

Since 1958 the collectors had moved part of the collection from their Milanese apartment to Villa Panza. From the late-1960s to early-1970s, the Rustici wing was transformed into exhibition spaces following an important restoration. The interiors are organized according to a series of environmental spaces, and Dan Flavin, Daniel Buren and Sol LeWitt came to Biumo to create new interventions.

"The experience of art is not restricted to the vision of an object or a group of objects, but is an experience of life in a place in which one exists removed from the everyday, in which the highest aspirations are sought in order to render them real; art may have this power when it is truly art."
Giuseppe Panza, 2001⁸

In 1973, after seeing Robert Irwin's Disc and some of Larry Bell's works exhibited in Paris and New York, the Panzas went to Los Angeles. Together with James Turrell, they visited some of the most significant *Land Art* interventions, such as *Double negative* by Michael Heizer (1969) and *The Lightning Field's* test site by Walter De Maria (completed in 1977), as well as Turrell's *Roden Crater* site (under construction as of 2015).

California's innovative culture and the art of the Light & Space movement marked a turning point in the collecting of Giuseppe and Giovanna who began commissioning site-specific and site-conditioned works to Irwin, Turrell and Maria Nordman for the Villa. The Light & Space environments became permanent, whereas at that time they were mainly realized on the occasion of temporary exhibitions in university museums in California. The Biumo Villa, then opened to the public by appointment, became the place where viewers could experience their own psycho-physical perceptions through transformative paths.

"Light and silence are the same thing... An elevation to infinity, to an opening beyond material limitations. What's fascinating is that this experience, which begins on a very individual level, can at the same time be shared."

Giovanna Panza, 2009⁹

The collectors' commitment to California art would lead them to include works and projects by Eric Orr, Doug Wheeler and Hap Tivey. Giuseppe saw a substantial development in the history of art in Californian creativity: the passage from visual representation of space and light to their artistic use as physical and immaterial elements with regard to man's inner faculties.

The Art of Exhibiting Art

In 1976 Giuseppe stopped purchasing and didn't resume until 1987. From that time on, he devoted himself to turning his private collection into a public one, thus avoiding its dispersion, and to identifying appropriate venues for exhibitions of specific groups of works. This led him to develop an extensive number of museum projects and installation designs.

With the *Environmental Art Museum* (1974), he aimed to promote the first international institution entirely devoted to environmental works and projects, including in it Minimal and Conceptual art as well. Even though the program never came to fruition, it was the basis for negotiating long-term loans to museums and for important exhibitions, such as *Minimal + Conceptual Art aus der Sammlung Panza* (1980-81) held at the Museum für Gegenwartskunst in Basel.

"For me, a museum should be a sort of secular temple, a meditative place where you can find yourself and experience plenitude."

Giuseppe Panza, 2009¹⁰

In order to establish the first museum of contemporary American art in Italy, from 1976 he developed a series of projects and salvage plans (never materialized) for historical buildings to be used as art

museums. These projects included: the Medici stables at Poggio a Caiano, Villa Doria Pamphilj in Rome, the Rivoli Castle and the Venaria Reale in Turin, and many others. Along with projects for industrial buildings, this *leitmotiv* of Giuseppe's activity would lead him to contribute organizing exhibitions in historical architecture, such as the Centro de arte Reina Sofia in Madrid (1988), and Palazzo Ducale in Sassuolo (2001) where he commissioned permanent site-specific works.

The collector's curatorial work, which he pursued until the end of his life, included exhibitions organized in collaboration with museums and institutions on the occasion of acquisitions of specific groups of works, such as *The Museum of Contemporary Art. The Panza Collection* held at MOCA, Los Angeles in 1985, and *The Panza Collection: An Experience of Color and Light* at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo, in 2007-2008.

At the core of Giuseppe's exhibition criteria and approach to the presentation of art is an in-depth focus on individual artists and the reciprocity between lighting and architecture. These features produced innovative research on spatiality that was acknowledged in 2005 when he was awarded an honorary degree in architecture from the Università della Svizzera Italiana in Mendrisio.

Through Organic, Color and Object-Reductionist Art

"A dialogue exists between the works of the Panza collection, which means they share a common language, the language of a presence that can only be perceived in silence."

Giuseppe Panza, 2009¹¹

From 1987, the Panzas formed the third segment of the collection opening up to new tendencies in contemporary art, which they pursued until the end of Giuseppe's life. During the first two years they complemented the earlier corpus with new Light & Space projects and with works by Richard Long, Fulton, Highstein, Barry and Flavin, among others. The couple became interested in African-American sculptor Martin Puryear, and his metalinguistic work on natural forms that prompted them to purchase a new body of work of traditional African art as well as artworks by Peter Shelton, Ross Rudel, Allan Graham, Meg Webster, Emil Lukas and Christiane Löhr, representing various developments of the Organic tendency.

Alongside the diverse sculptural languages of Lawrence Carroll and Ettore Spalletti, the Panzas discovered monochrome and color in paintings by international artists such as David Simpson, Phil Sims, Anne Appleby, Winston Roeth, Alfonso Fratteggiani Bianchi, Ruth Ann Fredenthal, Roy Thurston, Timothy Litzmann and others.

"For me, a monochrome is an absolute. Like a trace of the infinite that has materialized. Like a piece of sky that has fallen to earth. A quality monochrome is a work whose beauty opens the way to the immaterial."

Giovanna Panza, 2009¹²

Their purposeful research of poetics unexplored by the art world and the market led them to the object-reductionist art of Stuart Arends, Ron Griffin, Jonathan Seliger, Robert Tiemann and Carole Seborovski, whose works emphasize the aim to present an alternative cultural view to Postmodernism.

“Obviously an interest in what is small expresses an attitude based on intimacy, the private, the individual... It is the small world on our table that keeps us company when we write, read, or think. It is the silent witness to our life.”

Giuseppe Panza, 2006¹³

At the same time, the third collection is characterized by a diversity of artistic currents and includes artists like Max Cole, Robert Therrien, Ford Beckman, Roni Horn, Barry X Ball and Gregory Mahoney, as well as photographer Franco Vimercati and sound installations by Michael Brewster.

The Collection Goes Public

The collection's international renown, which began at the end of the 1960s, as well as Giuseppe's increasing role in the art system fostered exhibitions, long-term loans, acquisitions and gifts to cultural institutions worldwide.

“If a collector wishes to preserve the artworks he has purchased because he loves them and considers as a part of his own personality, then he should continue buying only at the condition of setting himself the purpose of documenting art beyond private interest. Art can thus become a function whose destination cannot be but public.”

Giuseppe Panza, 1983¹⁴

In 1980 Giuseppe joined the Board of Trustees of the newly-established MOCA in Los Angeles. In 1984 the museum purchased the eighty works of Art Informel, Abstract Expressionism, Neo-Dada and Pop Art gathered by the collectors between 1957 and 1969. The masterpieces were exhibited in 1985 at *The Temporary Contemporary* (MOCA), based on the collector's installation design.

Following this first acquisition, between 1988 and 1990 European institutions, particularly Swiss and French museums, held a series of temporary exhibitions focused on the second part of the collection, which comprises of Minimal Art: Musée Rath, Ginevra; Musée Saint-Pierre, Lione; Musée d'Art Moderne, Saint Etienne; Musée de la Ville de Paris.

From 1990 to 1992, over 350 Minimal, Post-Minimal, Conceptual and Light & Space works entered the permanent collection of The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York through a combination of purchase and gift, along with a ten-year loan of 230 pieces. This acquisition marked the directorship of Thomas Krens with whom Giuseppe had undertaken negotiations in 1986 in view to a long-term loan to MassMoCA in North Adams, Massachusetts.

In 1994 the Panzas donated to MOCA 70 artworks from the third collection made between 1982 and 1993 by California-based artists. The exhibition *Panza: the legacy of a collector* (1999-2000) celebrated the gift and displayed the works with the previously acquired core. That same year the Special Collections of the Getty Research Institute acquired the collection's archive.

Giuseppe and Giovanna subsequently offered 200 European and American Post-Minimalist and monochrome works to the Museo Cantonale d'Arte in Lugano. The gift also included installations by Thomas Schütte, Jan Vercruyse and Hubert Kiecol.

In 1996 the Panzas donated their Biumo Villa to FAI (*Fondo per l'Ambiente Italiano*), along with a core collection of contemporary, non-Western art, and furnishings. It opened to the public in 2000. Such a decisive event in the history of the collection led to cooperation with some Italian institutions, through a series of exhibitions preceding long-term loans, that allowed historic architecture and contemporary art to come together.

The show held in the 16th-century Palazzo delle Albere in Trento (1996) anticipated the eight-year loan (from 2000 to 2010) to MART in Rovereto, which in subsequent years dedicated dynamic exhibition programming to the third collection. *La collezione Panza di Biumo. Artisti degli anni '80- '90* celebrated the loan of 50 artworks to the Palazzo ducale in Gubbio (from 1998 to 2003).

The exhibit *La percezione dello spazio* (2001), held in the Palazzo della Gran Guardia in Verona, featured works from the second collection. A loan of works from the third collection to the same institution for five years will follow. Since Giuseppe aimed to establish an ideal continuity between diverse segments of the collection, this *modus operandi* was recurrent in his latest activity.

For the Palazzo Ducale at Sassuolo, he commissioned site-specific monochrome works, to replace lost Baroque paintings, from seven international artists. The family donated these works to the Italian Government in 2005.

Giuseppe, who died in 2010, devoted his final years to housing the collection in museums and to exhibition-related projects. In the last ten years some of the foremost American museums acquired specific group of works from the collection: the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo focused the acquisition on monochromatic paintings as well as on artworks from the 1960s (2007-08); the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C. purchased Conceptual and Light & Space works (2007-2009); since 2010 the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art has housed neo-avant-garde art of the 1960s and 70s, including Bruce Nauman's early sculptures.

"The experience of the collection is related to that of the desert, both have to do with asceticism. Both, if we go all the way with the experience, lead to a one-on-one with oneself... Each painting is a path that potentially leads to the collection as a whole."

Giuseppe Panza, 2009¹⁵

¹ *Giuseppe and Giovanna Panza Collectors. An Interview by Philippe Ungar*, translations by Letitia Farris Toussaint, Silvana Editoriale, Cinisello Balsamo (MI) 2012, p. 97.

² *La pagina del collezionista*, in *I 4 Soli*, IV, 6, November - December 1957, pp. 12,13.

³ *Memories of a Collector*, translation from the Italian by Michael Haggerty, Abbeville Press, New York 2007, p. 111.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

⁵ *Giuseppe and Giovanna Panza Collectors. An Interview by Philippe Ungar*, translations by Letitia Farris Toussaint, Silvana Editoriale, Cinisello Balsamo (MI) 2012, p. 62.

⁶ *Memories of a Collector*, translation from the Italian by Michael Haggerty, Abbeville Press, New York 2007, p. 129.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 163.

⁸ *The Biumo Villa and its Part in my Life*, in Marco Magnifico, Lucia Borromeo Dina (eds.), *Villa Menafoglio Litta Panza and the Panza di Biumo Collection*, Skira, Milan 2001, p. 27.

⁹ *Giuseppe and Giovanna Panza Collectors. An Interview by Philippe Ungar*, translations by Letitia Farris Toussaint, Silvana Editoriale, Cinisello Balsamo (MI) 2012, pp. 107-108.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 108.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 101.

¹³ *Memories of a Collector*, translation from the Italian by Michael Haggerty, Abbeville Press, New York 2007, p. 259.

¹⁴ *Il collezionista creatore? La collezione è un'opera*, in *Gran Bazaar*, April 1983, unpaginated.

¹⁵ *Giuseppe and Giovanna Panza Collectors. An Interview by Philippe Ungar*, translations by Letitia Farris Toussaint, Silvana Editoriale, Cinisello Balsamo (MI) 2012, p. 166.