



Un altro sguardo. Opere dalla Collezione Gemma Testa" at Villa Panza, Varese, 2025. © Villa Panza. Un Altro Sguardo. Foto di Lorenzo Penicari, 2025 © FAI

“Un altro sguardo. Opere dalla Collezione Gemma Testa” at Villa Panza, Varese

The Collection of Gemma De Angelis Testa

With the show devoted to the Gemma De Angelis Testa collection, Villa Panza inaugurates a cycle of exhibitions on the subject of Italian and international collecting. The aim of this initiative is to open up the temporary display premises of the museum to a comparison between different ways of conceiving and creating an art collection, set off against the magnificent collection of Giuseppe Panza di Biumo, the absolute protagonist of the permanent itineraries of the Villa. Here, in what is indisputably a temple of contemporary art, the project will showcase an opening towards new and different approaches, namely different ways of collecting. It will also in a certain sense dare, for the first time, to propose an unprecedented colloquy with the marked spirituality of the collecting vision of Giuseppe Panza, with which experiences of a different kind—albeit driven by an equally coherent and authentically sincere search for value—ought to profitably and confidently bear comparison.

A different gaze

By titling her autobiography *Con l'arte . . . in Testa* (2021), Gemma De Angelis used a very effective pun to describe her long career as a collector: a confession of the liveliest passion for contemporary art that continues to occupy her time and her days in enthralling adventures of imagination and spirit.

Gemma has an important surname, but curiously enough her passion did not arise from her marriage to Armando Testa, undoubtedly one of the most talented Italian graphic designers of the twentieth century. Far from it. As she herself relates in her autobiography, Armando was a great art lover and assiduously frequented shows and museums, and it was no coincidence that they met in Venice in 1970 during the Biennale. “After that meeting,” she recalls, “I was never again separated from Armando or from that world so brimming with inspiration, messages, and images that is contemporary art.” However, Armando just didn’t want to know about collecting and surrounding himself with masterpieces. In Turin, where they lived for many years, he fitted the house with large picture windows, and it was nature that they embraced with their gaze from these big windows that “decorated” their flat, all of the walls of which were strictly white.

The real beginning of Gemma Testa’s collection coincided with the early 1990s—1993 to be exact, as she recalls—and over the following three decades that bring us up to today it was certainly an undisputed passion for contemporary art, especially for young talents and for the world of female creativity. It may possibly also have been an unconfessed compensation for the loss of her beloved companion, who died in 1992, and to whom she owed much of her cultural vivacity. Chiefly, however, it was the expression of her commitment to action in civil society which, from the foundation of ACACIA in 2003 up to the donation in 2022 of around a hundred masterpieces to the Fondazione dei Musei Civici of Venice, destined to the Galleria Internazionale d’Arte Moderna Ca’ Pesaro, make her career an extraordinary example of enlightened patronage, most rare and precious for our nation.

Towards the end of the 1980s, Armando was party to Gemma’s first steps in the world of collecting, and he was fully aware of the persistence of her enduring and permanent desire for beauty. This was a species of imperative that drove her not only to admire art but also to want to possess it, so that she could enjoy it in the course of her daily life. After the purchase of the first works, by Cy Twombly and Gino De Dominicis—works which Armando greatly appreciated—he saw them being hung on the white walls of the apartment in Turin and was immediately convinced that a true collector had come into being and that, from that moment on, their house would be inhabited by new, irreplaceable presences. And that’s exactly what happened.

For Gemma, the world of contemporary art was not easy to conquer. She was discreet and timid and not talkative, and at the beginning she entrusted herself to famous galleries, who accompanied her along the pathway of her first collection. This included works by historic names such as Mario Merz, Joseph Kosuth, Pier Paolo Calzolari, and Francesco Lo Savio: simple choices compared with the works that were to make their appearance in the collection in the following decades. Indeed, very soon Gemma became dissatisfied with the advice and recommendations of others, however authoritative. She wanted to act on her own, to follow her own wishes in buying what could in some way be “useful” to her in her life, as a source of emotion, as civil admonition, as a stimulus to critical reflection, because, with the passage of time, Gemma had increasingly more need of all this.

There are several chief reasons soliciting Gemma’s interest and attention. Listening to the voices from the world, enriching one’s imagination in relation to other cultures: important examples of this in the collection are works ranging from artists such as William Kentridge to Goshka Macuga. Expressing solidarity with the world of women in the long and still unresolved battle for equal rights, with eloquent witness in the works of Pipilotti Rist, Shirin Neshat, and Monica Bonvicini, and against the oppression of “the last,” championing freedom of thought in the complex world of international geopolitics, addressed in the works of Ai Weiwei, Adrian Paci, Pascale Marthine Tayou, and Yan Pei-Ming, among others.

But that's not all: there is also the quest for beauty and harmony in a disenchanted conceptual vision (Joseph Kosuth and Gianni Piacentino), for the meaningful silence of meditation (Francesco Lo Savio), for the miracle of matter that spreads over the canvas design and form/color, as in Cecily Brown and Elisabeth Neel. There is the attraction for the quality of the painting and the composition, further enhanced when painting is left behind for the experimentation of other techniques such as photography (Thomas Ruff, Vanessa Beecroft, and Francesco Vezzoli), video (Grazia Toderi, Bill Viola and Sabrina Mezzaqui), and performance (Marina Abramović).

Gemma's precise and meticulous character permits no approximation or improvisation in her choices and acquisitions. Consequently, every approach to a new work is carefully prepared through reading and research, and preferably when knowledge of the work derives directly from dialogue with the artist. In this sense, her approach is very similar to that of Giuseppe Panza, who made most of his acquisitions in the studios, allowing himself to be convinced by direct contact with the artist, whom he visited regularly over the course of time. Even the mercantile aspect is similar, since they share an indifference towards the economic value of art, future revaluations, and auction prices. What is important for both of them is the mystery of the creation, the force that is reproduced in the message of the work, the universality of the artistic gesture that is perpetuated over time, evidence of a nourishing and consoling spirituality, a gaze stretching into the future that alerts and reveals. And further, an enduring lesson about the complexity of life that the artist conveys, conveys, and continues to convey . . .

—*Gabriella Belli*

at Villa Panza, Varese
until October 12, 2025