

Saint shot by Nazis

by Victoria Laurie, *The Australian*



Barbieri's Saint Andrea Corsini (1630), with bullet holes where it was shot by Nazi soldiers.

The Corsini collection saved – Now On Tour in Australia

‘Madam, your collection is not worth my life,’ said the terrified servant to Donna Elena Corsini in August 1944 when she asked him to drive a truck filled with the Florentine - family’s artworks away from the advancing German army to her family’s country villa.

When the servant refused, a resolute Donna Elena clambered behind the steering wheel and drove the Corsini family’s precious works to safety. At the villa, she ordered the hasty installation of a false wall; behind it, the precious paintings were hidden and sealed in.

A large oil painting of Saint Andrea Corsini, the family’s beatified relative, was hung on the inside wall as a kind of talisman to protect the collection.

‘They created a false wall before the German army passed through and occupied the farm for a couple of days,’ says Stefano Carboni, director of the Art Gallery of Western Australia, where the saint’s image will go on display this week as part of *The Corsini Collection: A Window on Renaissance Florence*.

‘But a German lieutenant could smell that the plaster was still wet, which was odd,’ says Carboni, ‘and in frustration he shot a couple of bullets into the false wall.’ One of the bullets pierced the painted forehead of the saint, although, according to family lore, he saved the rest of the collection.

The Corsini collection survived the ravages of World War II and is making its first journey outside Italy to New Zealand and Australia for exclusive showings in Auckland and Perth.

That single bullet was a shock to the Auckland Art Gallery when it took temporary custody of 60 Corsini paintings and objects for display late last year.

Nobody had informed the gallery staff that the wartime damage to the canvas remained; when he gingerly removed the Saint Andrea Corsini portrait from its travel case and saw the bullet hole, one unpacker nearly had heart failure.



Madonna and Child with Six Angels (c1500), from Sandro Botticelli and his workshop.

The Corsini collection has embarked on its Antipodean tour in a deal brokered between the family, the two Australasian galleries and a Rome-based art exhibition broker, Mondo Mostre.

It is a gift that gives both ways. A suite of privately owned paintings by Renaissance artists of the calibre of Botticelli, Mantegna and Caravaggio will be seen outside Italy for the first time.

In return, the family benefits from the curatorial expertise of its partner galleries, which have researched some undocumented work and footed the bill for conservation work on a few canvases.

There's also an intimate side to this curious cultural exchange. According to Corsini countesses Livia Branca and Elisabetta Minutoli Tegrini — who will attend the exhibition opening in Perth — Australians and New Zealanders are worthy recipients of the show.

The women's earlier attendance at the Auckland opening was an emotional one. They recalled vividly how the allied forces that forced the Germans out of their part of Italy included Australian troops and the 28th Maori Battalion. "We have a duty to send the collection," they observed, "we owe [you] a debt."

So what does this niche collection offer in the way of insights into Italy's Renaissance and baroque art? It's a rich array of paintings that begins with portraits of the Florentine family itself over seven centuries — from medieval banker to family saint, pope, rural scion and 20th-century female art patron.

That last image, of Donna Elena herself, is a handsome picture painted by popular 20th-century portraitist Pietro Annigoni. The severe-looking matriarch is posed in a lustrous grey cape, sitting on a rock in hilly Tuscany, where the family has owned vast properties. It encapsulates the Corsini family's history of rural conquest, textile-derived wealth and lofty noblesse oblige.

Hanging in pride of place in the exhibition is the bullet-damaged saint's portrait, dated 1630, by Giovanni Francesco Barbieri; another prominent work, from 1710, is Hyacinthe Rigaud's extravagant portrait of a brocade-clad Don Neri Corsini.



Art Gallery of Western Australia director Stefano Carboni.

AGWA director Carboni, an Italian native and expert on the medieval art trade between Italy and the East, says the Corsinis were as prominent as the Medici family in the 15th and 16th centuries.

"If you go to the Trevi Fountain in Rome and you look at the crest at the top, that's the Corsini family crest," he says.

At certain times, the Corsinis eclipsed the more ruthless Medici powerbrokers, who sold their Florence palace to the Corsini family in 1457 and had virtually run out of heirs by 1837.

“The exhibition is a little gem that tells the story of collecting in one family,” says Carboni. “Because there are so many key periods represented, it’s like taking a course in Italian - History 101.”

The Corsini family owes much to those members who wrote themselves into the history books, Tim Parks writes in his 2016 article “One of Florence’s Oldest Families and its 600-year-old Archive” in *The New York Times Style Magazine*. Park says the family archive began in 1362, when merchant Matteo Corsini vowed to write down “everything of mine and other facts about me and my land and houses and other goods of mine”.

He adds: “Again and again, huge old books of accounts begin with an invocation to God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, then proceed to list endless incomings and outgoings, profits and losses. But mainly profits. By the 17th century, the Corsinis would be among the richest families in Florence.”



Giovanni Martinelli's Music (1650).

The family stayed close to the source of political power. Having initially made money in the textile trade and early banking operations in London, in 1730 it installed one of its own as pope Clement XII.

With his nephew Neri Corsini, who was elevated to the rank of cardinal, Clement oversaw the acquisition of Palazzo Corsini in Rome, and proceeded to fill it with precious art and books. Says Park: “Whether it was business or religion, the goal was always to enhance family prestige.”

Clement’s descendant Tommaso Corsini donated the Roman collection to the state in 1883. It now forms the main body of Italy’s National Gallery of Antique Art, which houses priceless masterpieces such as Rubens’s *San Sebastian Healed by Angels*, Andrea del Sarto’s *Madonna and Child* and Caravaggio’s *St John the Baptist*.

But the family history unfolds predominantly in Florence; as mayor, Tommaso Corsini laid the foundations for the University of Florence.

Auckland's curator and Italian Renaissance expert Mary Kisler says the Corsinis gifted their Rome collection into public hands, but the one in Florence remains a private collection that is open for viewing and limited loans.

"Not every painting is a famous one, but every one has something fascinating about it." She says the collection acts as a mirror of successive Italian eras, and the tastes, collecting habits, accomplishments and downfalls of a family dynasty.



Carlo Dolci's Hope (1653).

Kisler undertook detailed research into the Corsini artworks for the catalogue, after discovering that few works had been reliably documented and even fewer appeared in the comprehensive Oxford Collection of Art.

One of the more celebrated early Renaissance works was produced by Sandro Botticelli and his workshop about 1500. *Madonna and Child with Six Angels* depicts Christ in his mother's lap surrounded by angels; he trustingly looks up at her and she looks away, as if weeping.

Botticelli was an ardent follower of Dominican friar Girolamo Savonarola, a hectoring priest who urged Florentines to transform their debauched city into a pious "city of God". - Savonarola staged "bonfires of the vanities" in which precious books, artworks and other "decadent" objects were burned.

His own life also ended on a bonfire, depicted in *The Execution of Savonarola and Two Companions at Piazza della Signoria*. Painted by an unknown Florentine artist in the 16th century, it is a portrait of a handsome city, with belltower, cathedral dome and wide public square. But in front of the stately palace is a long platform ending in a large bonfire; dangling above the licking flames are three hanged figures, including the hapless priest.



The Execution of Savonarola and Two Companions at Piazza della Signoria (16th century), artist unknown.

Among the strongest works are baroque paintings that sought to re-elevate Catholic sentiment after the revolt against the papal church in 1517 by Protestant leader Martin Luther, and the Sack of Rome in 1527.

Art's role became that of a devotional aid, says Kisler, a medium through which to engage personally with the suffering of Christ.

“Barbieri’s painting of Saint Andrea shows a single tear rolling down his cheek at Christ’s suffering on the cross, which reflects Counter-Reformation beliefs that art should create empathy in the viewer.” One of baroque’s greatest exponents was Caravaggio who, in 1598, was commissioned to paint a close associate of the Corsini family.

Scholar Maffeo Barberini, who played a role in the canonisation of Andrea Corsini, is bathed in the dramatic light and shadow made famous by Caravaggio.

Another arresting image comes from artist Ridolfo del Ghirlandaio. His *Portrait of an Unknown Man*, circa 1540, could be a modern portrait of a man looking out with a direct and intense gaze. “His unembellished hat and costume suggest a person who places the intellect over worldly possessions,” observes Kisler, “and the stubble on his chin and the shadow under his cheekbone imply a man of ascetic tastes.”

Prometheus and the Eagle shows a helpless young man being disembowelled by an eagle. The gruesome painting is attributed to Sir Anthony van Dyck, a Flemish Baroque artist who became the leading court painter in England, but Kisler says he is widely considered not to be the artist responsible.



Niccolo Codazzi's Architecture in the Countryside (c1685-1693).

She put the puzzle to her research students, who discovered another version of the same picture in Antwerp by Theodore Rombouts, an artist who studied under Caravaggio.

“He also worked with Van Dyck and Rubens and, if it’s a Rombouts original, it has a special place in the art hierarchy.”

Another chance discovery she made relates to *Madonna and Child with Saint Joseph and Saint John the Baptist*, from 1527. A work in the style of Mannerist painter Andrea del Sarto, it shows a madonna in a striped headdress and unusual double-strand gold chain. A double chain in another painting from the era led Kisler to identify the work as the product of two different studios.

The Corsini family bears a heavy responsibility for the upkeep of the paintings, sculptures, drawings (including a large hand-drawn portrait by Raphael) and the Florentine palace building that houses them.

As part of Italy’s cultural heritage, and despite being in private hands, the collection is subject to close scrutiny by Italy’s Ministry for Cultural Heritage, which intervenes to protect artworks against neglect and thwart the kind of looting and export that saw many of the nation’s prized artefacts lost during wars.

Yet the most recent threat came from nature, not looters. In 1966, floodwaters from the Arno River rose and threatened to ruin the Palazzo Corsini and its art collection. Fortunately the water subsided before it could reach the first-floor galleries where valuable works were housed.



*Anton Domenico Gabbiani's Glorification of the Corsini Family:
sketch for the ceiling fresco of the Presentation Room of the Palazzo (1694-1695).*

Today the Corsini family has branches in London, Florence, Rome, Milan, Belgium, the US, The Philippines and Brazil, says Kisler, with the Italian Corsini branch still farming for olive oil and wine on its estates. It was ranked among Tuscany's richest families in the 19th century, but the current heirs struggle to keep up with the job of conserving their material past. The massive family archive, dating back to 1357, was moved 18 months ago from Florence to Villa le Corti, half an hour's drive away, but it remains uncurated. "Bundle after bundle of raw papers are tied together with string and squeezed into shelves, from floor to ceiling," observed Park when he visited. "To digitise here would cost a fortune and take an age."

Kisler says when she met the two countesses and their Italian curator to work out how to frame the exhibition, "we decided to focus on the family, and I think people have loved that".

The exhibition begins with an elaborately drawn family tree and includes a few personal items, from costumes to furniture and kitchen implements. A formally arranged dining table is set out with a banquet identical to one held at Palazzo Corsini in March 1857. The menu included fish with shrimp hollandaise, fillet of beef in madeira sauce, chicken breast and woodcock in aspic, roast guinea fowl, lobster and garnished ham.

"It was exciting for the countesses to come out and see the collection displayed publicly outside the palace for the very first time," says Kisler. "The Italians have felt it is a rich - exchange."

As the collection's showing in Auckland drew to a close last month, an Englishman living in New Zealand came forward to tell Kisler he owned four letters dating back to the 1600s by Bartolemeo Corsini, written in London for his family in Florence. "A good exhibition doesn't end the day it goes up but the day it comes down," she says. "You keep discovering new things."