

FOR COLLECTORS: A MORANDI TROVE

The Morat Institute in Freiburg Celebrates the Artist's Work

By Nicholas Frix Weber

GIORGIO MORANDI holds a unique place among artists of our century. The art world launches its annual fests, and biographers tell us which of an artist's mistresses did the fox-trot and which preferred to tango. Morandi, meanwhile, painted with dutiful constancy and lived in relative quietude. Except for an early flirtation with Surrealism, he devoted his life to the same themes: He patiently evoked the landscape near Bologna, where he was born in 1890, and diligently pursued the rudimentary forms of bottles and other small objects in his studio. He always lived in Bologna, leading a simple existence conducive to the development of his vision and technique. When he died in 1964, he was still hated at it.

Some twenty years ago a New York still-life exhibition called "Homage to Morandi" included current work by almost every well-known figurative painter in America. There were few who wouldn't willingly pay tribute to this master. Morandi's own work, however, has been meted out to the public in meager amounts. Most American and European museums

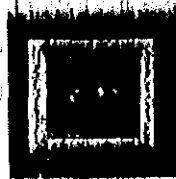
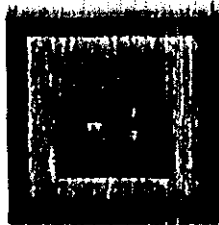


PHOTOGRAPH: WOLFGANG FAHNE

"I've collected them from around the world," says Franz Morat (above) of the 144 works by Italian artist Giorgio Morandi (1890-1964) that are exhibited at his Morat Institute of Art and Art Research in Freiburg, Germany.

hang at best a single small Morandi, even then it is generally too close to work that disturbs its calm. There have been etching shows in private galleries, but usually only about once every ten years. And in the last decade there has been just one national retrospective. To be alone with Morandi under ideal conditions has long been a feat difficult to arrange.

Imagine, then, the treat of visiting a pleasant, well-proportioned house in which almost a hundred and fifty Morandi works can be viewed at leisure, and where visitors are made to feel that detection in the artworks is someone else's personal goal. This is what happens at the Morat Institute of Art and Art Research in Freiburg, Germany, founded by Franz Morat.



ABOVE: While most museums usually display only a few pieces by Morandi at a time, the Morat Institute has devoted several rooms to his work. In one, fifteen of the artist's still-life bills from the late 1950s are set off by a basalt sculpture by contemporary Austrian artist Karl Franz.

LEFT: Located in a quiet residential area near the city center, the Institute is also Morat's home. The red brick house, built in 1892, provides an intimate setting for the appreciation of the drawings, etchings, watercolors and oils by Morandi that Morat has collected over the last 16 years.

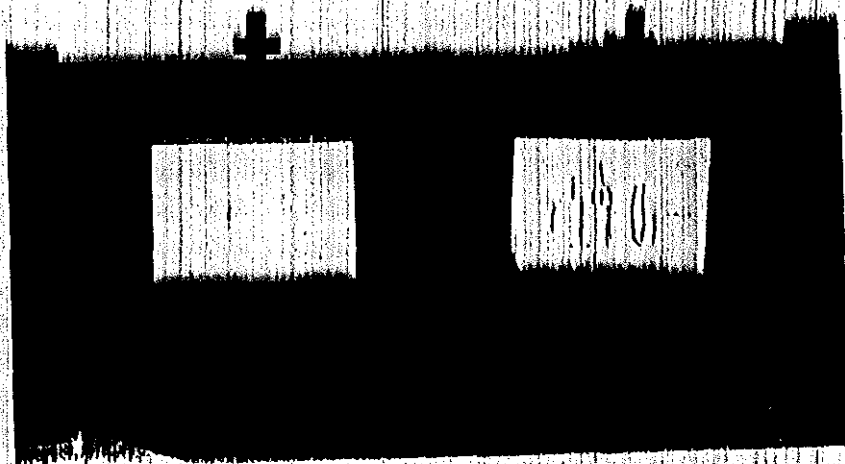
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Surrounded by the Black Forest, Freiburg is in the southwest corner of Germany, less than an hour from either Switzerland or France. The Moat Institute, on a residential street not far from the center of town, occupies a house that is not unlike the neighborhood's other nineteenth-century dwellings. But inside, it is a world of its own.

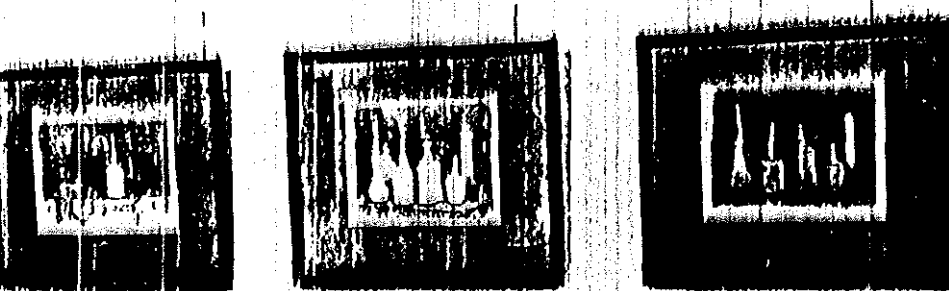
Franz Morat has turned the first floor of his residence into a permanent one-man museum for Giorgio Morandi. It is a perfect showcase, totally subservient to the masterpieces



ABOVE: Morat has been fascinated by the simple forms in Morandi's work, which are particularly evident in his early-1920s drawings. Each is presented in a manner that betrays the subtle nature of the drawings to stand out.



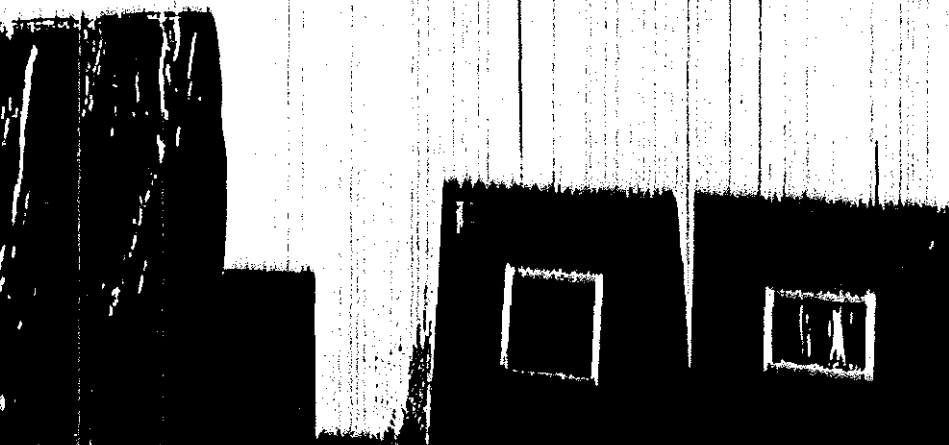
ABOVE: A 1919 photograph by Herbert List captures Morandi contemplating some bottles and jars, the artist's signature subjects. Morandi also achieved recognition for his landscapes of the area near Bologna, where he was born and lived most of his life.



of his houses. The setting throughout the rooms devoted to Morandi is humble and efficient, bearing the hallmarks of a good modern exhibition space: track lighting, industrial gray carpeting, a plain wood floor molding. All of these features ensure that Morandi's work can hold forth with maximum effect.

In the sun porch, three of Morandi's quintessential landscape oils hang on one side, seven superb still lifes on another. Their presentation is ideal: indirect daylight pours in from a wall of sliding plate-glass panels; simply woven off-white cloth over curved skylights filters the sun's rays; rough plaster walls are painted a luminous white. The ample space between the works, as well as wood-and-bronze frames uniform in design but varied in tone so as to harmonize with the paintings, without, allows the landscapes and still lifes to achieve their fullest glory.

The ten oils in the next room also benefit from the sun porch's



LEFT: Visitors will find that the depth of the collection offers new insights into Morandi's artistic vision. One of the oilings are grouped with another sculpture by Franz

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light. Morandi's bottle shapes emerge staccato and alive. His fascinating brushwork is clearly visible. The pale blues and grays and tans and whites respond to one another in a refined and muted way.

Other rooms yield additional riches. Several contain nothing but belongings—the complete trove. One room has been turned over to Morandi's late watercolors, another to drawings. Double-faced drawings sit on a table covered with miniature easels, inviting visitors to contemplate both sides. Everything adds up to a rare level of quality and care.

Morat began to look at art before he could read. When he was five years old he discovered his mother's one art book, and he fell its enchantment time and again. He attended a progressive school where no one protested his lack of interest in writing. "The idea was to instill a spiritual independence, and although his father subse-

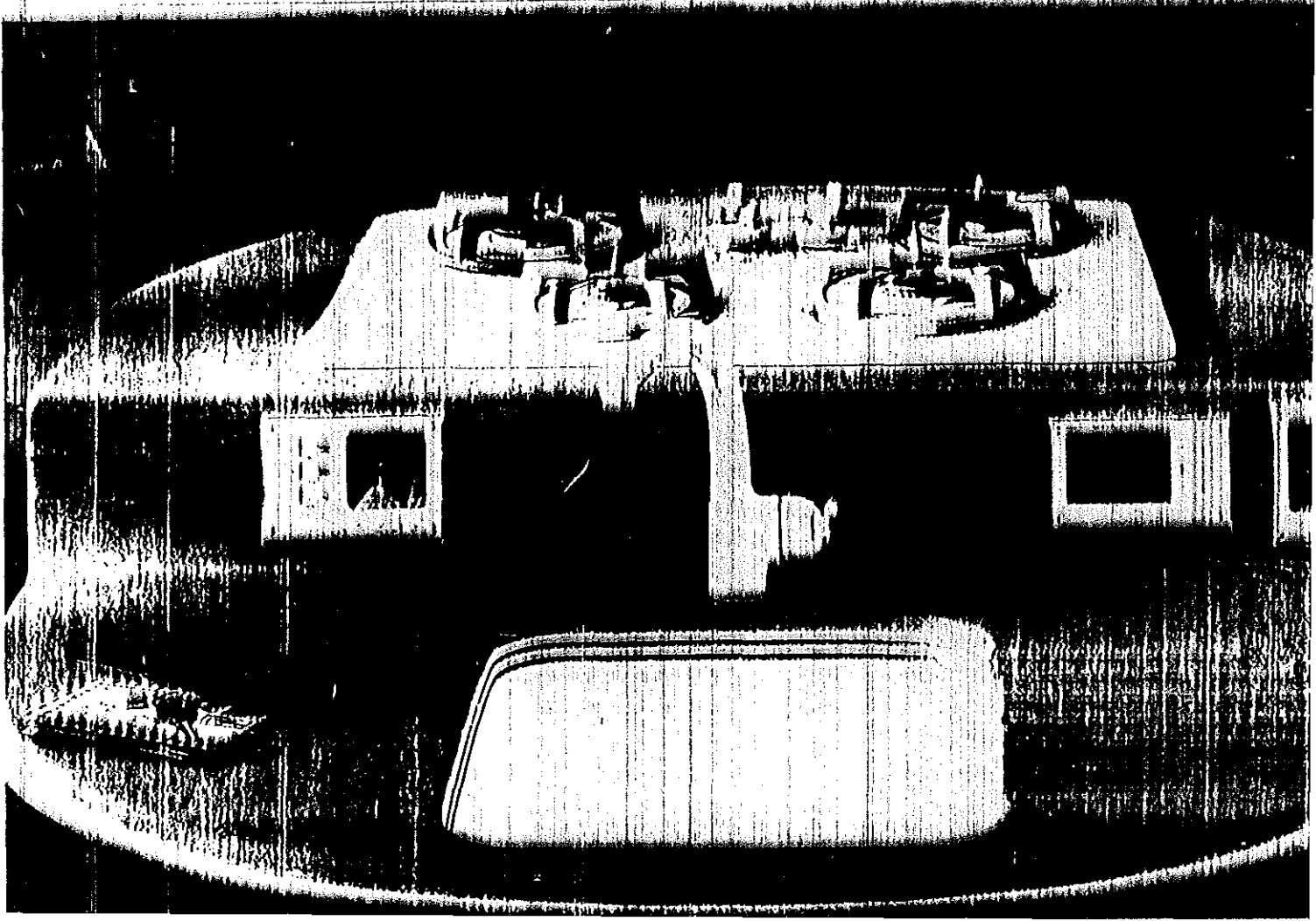
quently enrolled him in a traditional public school, Morat's free will was firmly established. At college he studied philosophy and later art history. When Giorgio Morandi died, Morat was in his early twenties and scarcely knew the artist's name. It was in 1967 that he became captivated by one of Morandi's works in the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, the great collection of twentieth-century art in Düsseldorf. It was not until 1972, however, that Morat saw a volume of Morandi's etchings. In 1976 he decided to collect Morandi—at first almost to the exclusion of everything else. In 1983 he established a foundation with which he further systematized his collection.

For Franz Morat, the Italian artist offered an extraordinary degree of artistic quality and integrity. "The fundamental reason for my interest in Morandi's work was that it was entirely singular," he says. "It was the

incarnation of painting on its highest level." To him, it is not that, rather than referring to extraneous subjects, addresses the nature of art itself, both aesthetically and technically.

Morandi's ability to master both different media—pencil drawing, etching, watercolor and oil—also appealed to Morat. "Morandi is special in that he worked equally well in all four areas," he explains. "Mondri, for example, was a great artist, but he did no watercolors or prints; he worked primarily in oils. Our collection pays tribute to Morandi's diversity. In Bologna, there are five Morandi oils at the museum, but only three or four drawings. Here, we have sixty-three."

Morat has concentrated on the drawings of Morandi's last four years. With many elements left out and with voids as telling as the delineated forms, they are, for Morat, the artist's ultimate achievement. He enjoys solving the mystery of what is be-



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ing represented—determining that a shape is in fact the void between two bottles or the shadow on part of a Persian jug—even when nothing more of the bottles or the jug is visible. "Morandi didn't think of the viewer but of what he saw—which differs very much from reality," Morat says. By owning such an assortment of work, Morat can look at other drawings related to one under consideration to see that an angled line is the sole remainder of a bottle that has otherwise been removed or that an unattached horizontal indicates the top of a jug.

To acquire such a range of Morandi's art, Morat has turned to a variety of sources. He has worked with dealers in Europe and the United States who specialize in Morandi, and he has been alert to works at auction. And people have come to know that if they have a Morandi to sell, Morat might well be interested.

Nothing in the Institute has oc-

curred by accident. The framing method, for instance, was conceived by Morat. Morandi himself used narrow wood strips, and although Miral liked this, he was more taken with a system Morandi's sisters had designed, which is how he came up with the combination of sheet and

"Our collection pays tribute to Morandi's diversity."

wood for all the oils. "I saw nothing better. It's the most neutral method—it doesn't affect the painting itself. It steps back and behind the art, which is the most important thing."

Morat's passion for Morandi has recently led him in new directions, such as the collection of old-master etchings he is building. To consider the

history of etching was a natural consequence of his immersion in Morandi's work, and he has acquired pieces by Schongauer, Dürer, Mantegna, Rembrandt, Claude Lorrain and Callot, as well as a group of etchings by Goya. And then there are paintings by Karl Schleich and the more modern graphics by Ensor, Beckmann, Wols and Giacometti. The upper floor also collects such unexpected treasures as Renaissance medallions, African fetish figures and a library with over forty thousand volumes.

At the Morat Institute, there is always another surprise around the corner. And if a visitor is lucky, he or she will encounter a genial man whose sparkling eyes and full beard suggest both the life and the mystery of the world he has created. There is no saying what Franz Morat may be up to next, except that it will reflect the independence and vision of a singular collector. (1)