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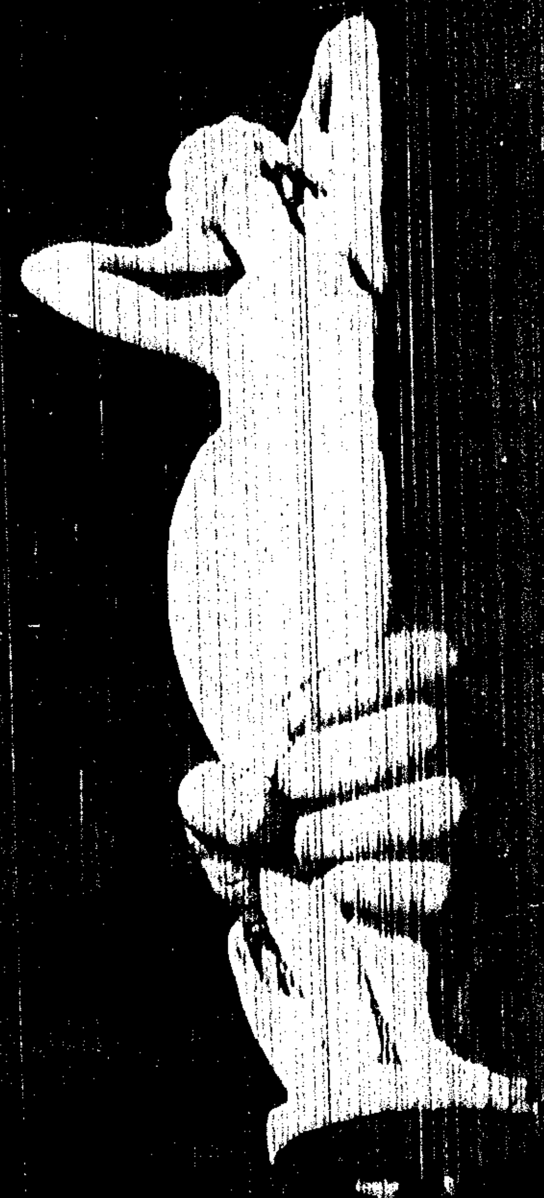

London

A Struggle of the Titans

It was in the summer of 1988 that I first encountered Franz Armin Morat and his cache of Giorgio Morandis. Although I now know with certainty that this was a real occurrence, it still strikes me as a dream—or a complete mental fabrication. Compounding the problem, I recently had an equally surreal experience concerning those very same artworks. Underlying that second unexpected development there lurks "a tragedy"—according to one of its key players—"of Old Testament dimensions."

The final act of that "tragedy" was being played out at Sotheby's London on November 28 and December 1, with the single-artist sale of 13 Morandi oils, 22 watercolors, 35 drawings and 38 etchings. Such a superlative group of Morandis going on the block together would be story enough. But what is truly astounding about the sale are the circumstances behind it.

Like any Morandi enthusiast, I had for many years been aware that a number of the richest yet most subtle works—the ultimate Morandis—came from the Morat Institute for Art and Art Research in Freiburg im Breisgau, Germany. In June 1988, a mutual acquaintance arranged for me to call on Morat. When my taxi pulled up at the given address on Goethestrasse, I felt, alarmingly, that I could have been in any of a number of older American suburbs.

A large man, with a full beard tinged in white, opened the door. He wore a striped silk dressing gown, much like the one spotted by André Derain in Balthus's portrait of the artist. He greeted me pleasantly, if with reserve. "Do you like Morandis?" he asked, almost immediately. "Very much, which is why I am so pleased to be here," I offered. "Good. And do you like white asparagus?" "That as well," I answered. "Then make yourself at home, and I will fetch you in two hours." With that, Morat—whom I assumed this must be—gestured with his hand as though opening the way to a series of rooms beyond him, and evaporated up a flight of stairs. The lights were all on, and ample daylight was streaming in. In one room, I found nothing but Morandi landscapes: richly calming, the essence of Bologna and its surroundings. The simple frames on these paintings were perfect, the airy and spacious installation impeccable. There were several more rooms of still lifes, works of a beauty and integrity that made clear why Morandi has achieved his saintlike status in our century, especially among figurative painters. Other rooms featured watercolors, drawings and etchings.

A "tragedy of Old Testament dimensions"? Giorgio Morandi's Natura Morta, *1957, is one of the artist's works on the block at Sotheby's London.*

My host did not show up after the appointed two hours, nor did he appear in a reasonable time after that. Throughout my time in Morandi heaven, I had heard someone practicing Beethoven piano sonatas on the floor above, so I knew there was life up there. But I saw no one. Finally, thinking I might have misunderstood the plan, I ventured up the stairs. The man resurfaced, now dressed in tweed and flannel. After I expressed my incredulity over the Morandis, he showed me some of his other collections. His etchings included pristine examples of Mantegna, Martin Schongauer, Dürer, Rembrandt, Jacques Callot and Claude Lorrain. There were also some 250 Goya prints and, among the modern works, prints by Max Beckmann, James Ensor and Wols. There were numerous oils by the 19th-century German Karl Schuch, and a cabinet held Renaissance medals of superlative quality. Morat introduced me to his wife—the person practicing the piano—before whisking me off to a restaurant in the countryside for the promised asparagus. But on the way we stopped at a modern commercial building in what seemed the middle of nowhere. There, in a room the size of a basketball court, Morat had assembled life-size African figures and large canvases by contemporary artists. Everything, he explained, was owned by his foundation, the Morat Institute, funded by money he had inherited from his father, who had made his fortune manufacturing knitting machines. The main function of this foundation was to support relatively unknown living artists he believed in by purchasing the work on a regular basis. Indeed, the organization had provided essential backing for many years to some 20 artists.

Morat knew from this and subsequent conversations that I considered his institute a refuge of connoisseurship, and even as late as this May, when we met at the Museo Morandi in Bologna, Italy, he never suggested that he had any changes in mind. Therefore, when I had occasion to walk through an office corridor of Sotheby's London in October and saw four fine Morandi still-life pencil drawings leaning against the wall, it did not occur to me that

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they might have come from Freiburg. But when my rapture over the drawings prompted the person with whom I was meeting to usher me into another office, I was stunned — and disbelieving. There, as if in a pirate's lair, stacked like booty, were the landscapes I had savored in Freiburg. The incredible Morandi watercolors that I have known from books for decades were there as well. I was quickly told that, yes, they were Franz Morat's and were all headed for the auction block.

As of this writing, it is impossible to gauge how this bulk sale will affect the Morandi market (see next month's *Art & Auction* for results of the sale). The estimates seem somewhat low—all but 3 of the 10 still-life paintings are expected to bring less than £150,000 ($236,000), although in June a Morandi still life fetched £245,000 ($387,000) at Christie's London—but it is hard to judge. "Aggressive estimates deter buyers," explains Lavinia Calza of Sotheby's Impressionist and modern art department. "Reasonably estimated works attract buyers."

But the bigger question remains: why the sale in the first place? A few days after my London shock, I spoke on the telephone with Morat. He explained that, because of financial difficulties with the foundation, "In January 1994, I started negotiations about a possible unification of the museum in Bologna with our foundation. These negotiations continued for one and a half years without any result. For the museum to get between 250 to 350 works,"—as they would have with the addition of the Morat pictures—"would have been a good thing, but the Italians didn't function. Then there suddenly appeared at my house one day,"—just one week prior to our phone call—"Michel Strauss from Sotheby's. I didn't even know in advance that he was coming, and he took everything away."

Franz Armin Morat: "This is a battle between someone who detests art and someone who would sacrifice everything for it."

The person who had sent Strauss, senior director of the Impressionist and modern art department at Sotheby's London, to Freiburg was Morat's brother-in-law, Werner Brake, a lawyer who lives in Freiburg and who is also on the institute's board. Morat says he holds nothing against Strauss: "It's not his fault. He's quite a good guy. He didn't know the details."

But even as he blames himself for the institute's economic straits and reluctantly agrees with the need to sell—if not the method—in order to preserve it, Morat rages at his brother-in-law. "Now my brother-in-law has forced me out of my house," Morat says. "He kicked us out. The day of revenge will come. He was against the foundation from the beginning. My fault was to spend too much money, and now I am a victim of people not interested in art. It's a tragedy of Old Testament dimensions. And he is a lawyer, but he has nothing in his head but playing golf and drinking champagne. This is a battle between someone who detests art and someone who would sacrifice everything for it."

When I asked Brake about Morat's remarks, the lawyer replied that Morat is "not financially stable." Brake explained how Morat's sister and mother have repeatedly rescued Morat financially. "What he has really done in all the years is cause trouble for his family. He promises every time, 'I will never do this again.' He lost millions of deutsche marks. Now the Morat Institute needs to sell anything that can be sold, and the best things to sell are the Morandis." As for the house on Goethestrasse, "He sold it [to Brake's wife] in free will to get rid of an enormous debt. This is a real sad story. I could make pictures of it."

In the weeks prior to the sale, Morat, now ensconced in a small château south of Freiburg, was still brooding and holding out hope that "serious negotiations" with several institutions might lead to one of them buying all the works, or that "the Italians" might finally feel pressured to "find a solution" to keep the collection intact. He savored the thought that "on November 27, there might be an offer for the whole collection," which might lead to the—virtually unprecedented, to be sure—possibilities that either the auction would be canceled or, if it did go ahead, there would be an announcement at its start that winning bids would only be honored if, after the sale, nobody offered to buy all the lots for a sum £100,000 more than the total realized. (Sotheby's, however, noted that the Morat sale was to be conducted in accord with all its normal conditions of business.) But whatever the outcome, "it's a tragedy," this connoisseur of one of the most subtle and refined artists of our century kept repeating. "This is the struggle of the Titans—a metaphysical fight between Good and Evil. There are two different planets struggling against one another here."

Nicholas Fox Weber

Art & Auction
Jan., 1996

Notes from Around the Block

London—A cache of 108 Giorgio Morandi artworks, offered at Sotheby's London on November 28 and December 1, completely sold, bringing in £3,887,850 ($6.07 million). The works were reluctantly consigned by Franz Armin Morat, director of Germany's Morat Institute for Art and Art Research, in a move instigated by his brother-in-law, Werner Brake (*see Art & Auction, December 1995*). The two men did not speak to one another at the sale. "May he rot in the inner circle of hell," Morat said of Brake afterward.

Paris—The French government has announced that as of January 1, 1998, it will allow foreign auction firms—including Christie's and Sotheby's—to hold sales in France (*see editorial, page 120*). Christie's and Sotheby's are now expected to move many of their Monaco sales to Paris. According to some reports, foreign firms may be permitted to hold sales even before 1998 if they do so with a French auctioneer. Despite the change, many aspects of France's auction system will remain in place, notably its 30-year guarantee of authenticity on all property sold. Still to be hammered out: *droit de suite*, the 3 percent resale fee paid to the artist, and the Value Added Tax on sales (VAT).

Madrid—Authorities at the Centro de Arte Reina Sofía have removed the bulletproof shield in front of Picasso's 1937 *Guernica*. The shield was installed in 1981 to protect the famed anti-Franco painting, which had just been returned to Spain from New York's Museum of Modern Art, during the highly charged political climate that followed the dictator's 1975 demise.

Sussex, England—John Walker III, director of the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., from 1956–69, has died at age 88. A Harvard graduate (*see page 80*), Walker apprenticed with Bernard Berenson at