

Meet the art patron trying to save Venice's Grand Canal from decline

Giovanna Zanuso is preparing for a wholesale revamp of the Ca' d'Oro palace and hopes to inspire a generation of art patrons to rescue decaying buildings



James Imam, Milan

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She has commissioned iconic sculptures, restored paintings by Renaissance masters and, last week, donated to a museum a painting of Rome's Pantheon that was once owned by Lord Nelson's brother and allegedly cost her €3 million.

Now Giovanna Zanuso, Italy's leading art patron, is gearing up for her most ambitious project yet: a wholesale revamp of the Ca' d'Oro palace that overlooks Venice's Grand Canal. If all goes to plan, she hopes, other budding heritage financiers may be inspired to follow her lead.

"It is a masterpiece," Zanuso says of the Ca' d'Oro, which takes its name from the sparkling gilt decorations that once adorned its exterior. "Reviving such ancient splendour makes this a dream project."

The Ca' d'Oro was built in the 15th century by the Contarini family that produced eight Venetian doges and was bought by the baron Giorgio Franchetti in 1894 and turned into a museum filled with paintings by Titian, Mantegna and Van Dyke. The third act of Amilcare Ponchielli's opera *La gioconda* is set there.

Years of weathering and poor maintenance mean the palace has fallen into a "pitiful state of total disrepair", Zanuso says. Spectacular floor mosaics have faded, wooden beams rotted and stucco plasterwork come unstuck.

Zanuso, who is founder and president of the Giulio and Giovanna Sacchetti Foundation, has provided €2 million to restore the building, with Venetian Heritage, an international non-governmental organisation, preserving heritage, raising a further €4.1 million.

Paintings have been put into storage or lent to museums around the world so that restoration and building work, including on a new entrance hall, can begin in the coming weeks. The museum is due to reopen by the end of next year.

"The legacy will be a Ca' d'Oro returned to its golden age," promises Zanuso, who lives in a Milan penthouse decorated with paintings by Damien Hirst and Mario Schifano.

Zanuso was born into an upper-class family in Rome in 1945 and moved shortly afterwards to São Paulo, where her father had found work as an engineer. She recalls being reluctantly dragged around museums and antique furniture shops in the Brazilian financial centre by her mother.

She returned to Italy in the 1970s, working in a Rome art gallery, organising election campaigns for left-wing and centrist political parties and marrying the marquis Giulio Sacchetti in 1985.

Sacchetti's ancestor Giulio Cesare Sacchetti, heir to a leading Florentine household cited in Dante's *Paradiso* and hostile to the Medici, had been elevated to the cardinalate in 1626 before nearly being elected pope twice.

By the time Zanuso married him, the younger Giulio Sacchetti was working as the most senior laical official at the Vatican. He had recently ordered the restoration of Michelangelo's *Last Judgment* fresco at the Sistine Chapel. Apostles, martyrs and trumpeted angels were returned to multicoloured glory in a project lasting more than a decade.

"I went often and I could climb up the scaffolding," Zanuso says. "It was incredible, because I could stretch out my hand and touch Michelangelo."

Zanuso and Sacchetti's many donations included a bronze sphere by Arnaldo Pomodoro for the Vatican's Cortile della Pigna in 1990. Three years after Sacchetti's death in 2010, Zanuso created the foundation to continue their work.

Zanuso has since sold the Palazzo Sacchetti in the heart of Rome, the setting of scenes in Paolo Sorrentino's 2013 film *La Grande Bellezza*, before buying her Milan penthouse, which overlooks the former home of Alessandro Manzoni, the founder of Italian literary realism.

Her recent projects include the construction of glass cases to display modern art at Milan's Brera museum in 2019, and the restoration of Mantegna's *Madonna con il Bambino* in 2020.

In one of her most significant projects to date, on Tuesday she donated a 1743 painting of the Pantheon by the 18th-century artist Giovanni Paolo Pannini to the Poldi Pezzoli museum in Milan.

It had previously been owned by William Nelson, a country clergyman elevated to earldom and given £90,000 to buy an estate when his brother, Horatio, was killed in the battle of Trafalgar. Zanuso, who bought the painting from the Richard Green gallery in London a decade ago, declines to comment on the alleged €3 million price tag reported by Italian media.

"This work has given me incredible emotions for ten years. I don't have heirs and thought 'it will end up at an auction'," Zanuso says. "So I donated it instead."

Zanuso says her brand of "modern patronage", focused on restoring existing works for public good, takes inspiration from the United States, where families like the Guggenheims have built entire museums. She laments that in Italy, where donors do not enjoy comparable tax benefits and heritage lovers prefer to keep masterpieces in the family, she is a rare breed.

"I'd really love to inspire the next generation of patrons in this country," she says. "In Italy, that is no small feat."