

NEWSGRAM

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The Woman Behind The Manuscript

DIANNE MODESTINI CUTS A GLAMOROUS FIGURE IN HER CURATED WARDROBE. HER ensembles are heavily infused with creations from the recently deceased Dutch designer, Koos Van Den Akker. Each piece playfully combines an eclectic mix of fabrics in a range of colors, patterns and textures, and is a unique work of art in its own right. Indeed, when Dianne talks about her Koos assemblage, she speaks as though she is discussing a traditional art collection. Fitting for a woman whose personal and professional lives have largely revolved around the restoration of paintings.

Members and friends of the Conservation Center community are undoubtedly familiar with Dianne's work with the Kress Collection of European paintings. Dianne has served as the faculty member in charge of the Samuel H. Kress Foundation-funded Kress Paintings Program, training budding paintings conservators at the Center, since 1989, when she left a beloved thirteen-year stint in the Paintings Conservation Department of The Metropolitan Museum of Art to teach and to spend more time with her husband.



Mario and Dianne, 1991

Dianne has been very busy over the past few years. In a February 23, 2016 lecture on its history and conservation, she shamelessly confessed to having "unlimited enthusiasm" for the Kress Collection, but Dianne's role as Research Professor in Paintings Conservation is just one of several professional projects she has been juggling of late. *Newsgram* 12 by Jean Domermuth '96 discusses Dianne's involvement in the recent discovery of Leonardo da Vinci's *Salvator Mundi*, a side venture that began with what was thought to be a mundane treatment back in 2005 and culminated in a series of high profile presentations and a press campaign that would have exhausted even the most seasoned of celebrities.

Less publicized is Dianne's work on the extensive memoirs of her late husband, famed Italian paintings restorer Mario Modestini, who, as Domermuth notes, served as conservator and curator of the Kress Collection for many years, starting in 1949. Mario Modestini's many roles at the Kress Foundation were the highlight of much of his time in America, however, his long life was composed of a series of colorful stories, both personal and professional, which Dianne has been working for some years to stitch together for publication. The work has been time consuming, involving detailed historical research and complicated translations, not to mention the complex emotions surrounding such an enterprise. It is ambitious and, at times, daunting. When distractions on the home front have become too overwhelming, Dianne takes a step back and retreats to Italy for weeks, or months, as a time to re-gain focus in chipping away at the task at hand.

I was flattered and terribly excited when, around Christmas time this past year, Dianne asked if I would like to read the manuscript based on Mario's memoirs, currently titled *Masterpiece*. She was hoping for another perspective from a non-conservator. The tale is engaging—I had trouble putting it down—and sweeping, including numerous firsthand memories of historical importance, beginning with Mario's life in Italy, from his birth in Rome in 1907, and covering his many years spent in America, primarily in New York, where he died in 2006. Dianne cunningly sets Mario's memoirs (translated from Italian) against the various geographical, cultural and political backgrounds through which he lived during a nearly century-long span, with many details garnered from other primary and secondary sources. Prominently featured are the history and techniques of paintings conservation, with specific examples from Modestini's treatment of an impressive number of masterpieces, and the ever-changing climate of the art world and its

many notable characters and controversies. It is a story of passion, of war, of loss and opportunities missed—but also of opportunities gained. Above all, it is a story of all-consuming love...a love of art and its beauty so strong that it shaped an entire life. It was this shared love that initially brought Dianne and Mario together back in the early eighties.

As I made my way through the (almost) four hundred page draft, I found myself wondering if future readers would be interested in learning more about the somewhat enigmatic woman behind the manuscript. Dianne plays a key role in parts of the book. There is a segment on her work with John Brealey at The Metropolitan Museum, for instance, but her appearances are framed in the context of Mario's life and work and in that of the Modestinis' relationship as a couple. Of course, this is intentional. When I mentioned my observation to Dianne, she shrugged and said, "It's Mario's book." And so, beyond her work on the Kress Collection, the Leonardo and *Masterpiece*, the inspiring woman I have come to know so well over our six years of working together at the Conservation Center, would remain a mystery to the outside world. I took this as a prime opportunity to sit down with Dianne, on the eve of her 70th birthday, and ask her to elaborate on some of her other experiences and interests.

CL: *Some people turn 65 and say, "I've had it." They slow down. By all accounts, you've sped up. What drives you?*

DM: I really love my work. I love paintings. They've been the focus of my life, they center me, and they've given me so much pleasure over the years. From the Leonardo to a little wrecked Sano di Pietro to innumerable other pictures...paintings always move me. And I enjoy teaching. I think it's very important. The reason I started teaching was because I had great teachers. I was very, very lucky. I wanted to pass what I had been taught along to younger generations of students.

Who was your best teacher?

When I was in graduate school, I studied with two very famous conservators, Sheldon and Caroline Keck. Their strongest suit was in the field of American paintings. This was ultimately instrumental in that I was hired by the Met shortly after I graduated, in 1974, to work on the American paintings collection there. I will always be grateful to them for that. I was just out of school and was handed all this responsibility with very little supervision. This particular collection had never received much attention and there were lots of things to do. I would go to the storeroom and choose whatever I wanted to focus on. I worked on one painting after another—all major artists. My passion was European old masters and I hadn't studied American art so it was a great voyage of discovery. I was on my own for about a year before John Brealey arrived. John was an incredible teacher. He was an excellent restorer and an exceptionally articulate man. He had a remarkable ability to talk in front of a picture, surrounded by a group of young conservators and curators, and evoke exactly what he was seeing. He was on a crusade, which he had begun in London during the National Gallery cleaning controversies, to prevent the mutilation of old master paintings. It was tremendously exciting and I later felt a real necessity to teach and to continue to impart the approach I had learned, first from John, who was also, effectively, the paintings instructor at the Conservation Center at the time. He had a real commitment to training American conservators and to giving them a chance at the Met where, prior to his appointment, conservators had



Dianne working in the paintings studio at the Conservation Center

always been European. John was on a mission to proselytize a humanistic, considered method. My training very naturally continued after I met Mario.

When I read what you wrote about John's teaching, I felt as though I was reading about your teaching style.

Yes, I absolutely modeled my class on the way that John taught.

It is relatively well publicized that you went to Barnard College, Columbia University, for your undergraduate degree in Art History and proceeded to obtain your M.A. and Certificate of Advanced Study in Conservation from the Cooperstown Program at the State University of New York, Oneonta. The latter was with the Kecks. What about pre-Barnard Dianne?

I was raised in a suburb outside Boston. I went to parochial schools and a girls' Catholic high school. I was a very shy child. I spent my childhood reading, which is not a bad way to spend your childhood. I never really wanted to stay in Boston. I wanted something more. I wanted out of that provincial, Irish Catholic world.

Have you always known that you wanted to work in the art world?

No. I wanted to write because I read so much and I wrote well. I discovered paintings when I was at Barnard. I had a great teacher, a famous Rubens scholar, Julius Held. He always talked about paintings as physical objects and gave classes in the museum. It was also the time of the flood in Florence so there was an awareness of restoration because the field was getting so much publicity at the time. When I was a senior, I became passionate about pursuing a career as a restorer. After graduating, I went to live in Florence for nine months. I learned Italian and I studied art history. If I hadn't been so shy, I probably would have been able to talk myself into some restoration studio. Held introduced me to some contacts in the conservation world. He knew about the Kecks and the program they were starting at Cooperstown so I wrote to them.

In another life, if you weren't a conservator, what do you think you would be doing professionally?

I was never good enough at science to have had a true career in it, but I really love medicine. There is something in my character, a need, to take care of people and things.

Isn't being a conservator like being a doctor for art?

Yes!

Do you have any regrets about the trajectory you've taken?

No, I don't. It's been absolutely wonderful. As I said, I've been very, very lucky. It's a fortunate thing to love your work.



Dianne at home with Cleo

We have to talk fashion. Would you agree that there is a tremendous overlap of fashion and art? Is fashion art...or can it be art?

I think there is. It certainly can be—even if you're not a designer. The way one presents oneself is a kind of art. I've always cared about that. I've changed my style over the years but I've always loved clothes.

Have you held on to any of your vintage clothes?

No—for many reasons. Styles really do change. There was the period of huge shoulder pads in the eighties. They got so exaggerated. Those things had to go.

Speaking of past decades, what did you do in the seventies and eighties? Did you party like everyone else? Did you go to Studio 54 or take part in the club scene?

No—I totally didn't. I've always had this very studious side and I've always been shy and serious. I told you I didn't have any regrets but I do regret that I don't really know how to party. I just don't know how to do it. I've always had a few close friends who share my love of books and art but, somewhere deep down, I'd kind of like to be that person who knows how to party. I com-

pletely missed out on the eighties. And I'm sure it was fantastic fun to go to clubs. The Met was a very conservative place, socially, at the time. There were almost certainly a few people who partied but I didn't know them.

Tell me about Koos. Why does Koos speak to you?

I discovered Koos when I moved to my neighborhood in 2001. There is a Koos store a couple of blocks away from my apartment. I used to wear tailored clothes, suits and wool dresses. Koos appealed to me because I've always loved fabrics and I especially love the combination of textiles. When I was a child, my mother would only shop in Filene's Basement. You could buy fabulous clothes that were left over at the end of a season from great department stores, like Saks and Bergdorf's, and they were deeply discounted. That's where I learned about clothes. Filene's was always like a great treasure hunt.

Did your mother care about clothes?

Yes. She was an expert at Filene's Basement. I never had conventional clothes because my mother would always shop there. All the other girls had the little Peter Pan collars and sweater sets but I never had a sweater set because Filene's Basement didn't sell them.

Is it accurate to say that you are a Koos connoisseur? Is it like an art collection for you?

Some of the pieces are works of art—some of the pieces that Koos made himself. His assistants were hugely inspired by him and also made, and continue to make, some great pieces, but they're not the masterpieces that Koos would turn out. I have a few of his couture pieces. They're like paintings! I came to this game rather late. Koos initially became really big in the seventies.

I knew you were cool when I saw you carrying Keith Richards' autobiography one day back in 2010. You're also a huge fan of some contemporary shows: "Orange Is the New Black" and "Shameless," among others. What are you reading and watching outside of work these days? What music have you been listening to?

I have mainly been reading things that have to do with my art research. I used to read fiction extensively—all sorts of novels—but I sort of stopped a few years back. There are so many historical subjects I'm interested in. I'm always reading a few things at any given time—but I don't read as much as I used to. There are so many great shows on television now. I used to never watch television, although I have always loved films. *Brooklyn* and *Spotlight* are some of my more recent favorites. I started getting hooked on TV series with *The Wire*. I couldn't believe how good it was...and it was television! I think it was prescient in its focus on the very complicated relationship between the police and the black community. I also loved *Boardwalk Empire* and *Homeland*. As for music, I tend to stick to the rock and roll that I grew up with, from the late sixties, when I was in college. I stopped listening to contemporary music in 1970, during the year I spent in Italy. I kind of lost the thread of popular music at that time and never caught up. I love the opera. I love piano music and string quartets. I like singing and songs. I frequently listen to the *Great American Songbook*...Cole Porter, that whole genre. I'm a big fan of Frank Sinatra, who I think is one of the greatest vocalists of all time.

You are well acquainted with the art market. Do you have any insights on the trends we've seen of late and where we're going from here?

Yes. When I came to New York and when I was working at the Met and with Mario, old master paintings ruled. Now, you practically can't give them away. It's a good time for collectors to buy old master paintings... great pictures for a fraction of the price of modern and contemporary. The connoisseurship issues interest me. I have a collection of old master paintings, mainly 17th century Italian, and I still enjoy looking at pictures with old friends and colleagues during the sales. I think that we are currently at the extreme end of a pendulum shift towards modern that began in the sixties. Of course, the great era of being able to collect masterpieces of old master paintings, as you could in the post-war years, is gone, however, there are still wonderful pictures available on today's market, fantastic bargains, comparatively speaking.

Your most recent professional focus has been in Renaissance old master paintings. Do you ever feel pigeon holed by that concentration? I know you have a huge appreciation for modern art, for example. I've spoken to some of your former students who have ended up in modern and contemporary paintings conservation after training under you and they all seem to agree that a background in old masters is essential to their work. If I can draw a parallel...is your appreciation for modern art similarly founded in your love of the old masters?

I like painting in general. As I said, I was in charge of the American paintings collection at the Met. I actually worked on all kinds of paintings from other schools and periods while I was there, but we didn't really focus on modern and contemporary. When I left the Met, I had a studio for a couple of years and I worked on many pictures for galleries and collectors, lots of modern and contemporary works...Picasso, Braque and even Fontana. I did a lot of work for Bill Acquavella, on paintings from the Pierre Matisse estate. I like all sorts of paintings.

While we are on the topic of modern and contemporary art, who are your favored artists or what movements do you most appreciate in this category?

I love Abstract Expressionism...Pollock, de Kooning. I love Diebenkorn. There are lots of modern painters that I love! I don't know contemporary art because I don't have the time to follow it. I like painting with brushwork. For example, Andy Warhol doesn't speak to me. I recognize that he is a very important figure in the art world but his is not the kind of painting that excites me.

Can you describe the contemporary art world in a single sentence?

No. I'm too out of touch with it.

I may not be able to ask this on record. Several years back, we took a poll of least favorite artists in our office. Do you care to share your answer?

I don't remember what I said. It was Walter Keane, I think. Well, I don't really consider him an artist. His work is more commercial.

Do you consider yourself an artist? Do you make original work?

No. I might be able to but I don't. I have an apartment in Florence and, at some point, I would like to enroll in a traditional academic drawing course that is offered there, 19th century life drawing.

But would you already know it all? Do you think you have something to learn?

No—I do!

Many people are eagerly awaiting the final publication of "Masterpiece." Any thoughts as to when the book will go to press?

It's my responsibility to get it out there. My plan is to send it around to some publishers as soon as I've finalized edits. I'm close to finishing the latest revision. It's not a commercial book and it's not really technical either. It's a collage of elements, which may make it interesting to diverse audiences. I'm going to have it published in America or in Italy, in English. It will be available in the States regardless.

You've had a fascinating life in the United States and abroad and you have some amazing (not to mention highly entertaining) stories and experiences of your own to share. Is there any chance that we might see any of it in writing? You do have a knack for this sort of thing...and you said you initially wanted to write...

I do and I would like to write something else but not a memoir. I have some ideas way, way, way in the back of my mind but I'm not prepared to share them yet.

What's next on the horizon for you? Do you have any major projects in the works? If you could do anything, what would you do? What's on your bucket list? Skydiving? 70 is like the new 50...

On the work front, I'm very much looking forward to continuing collaborations with colleagues in selecting pictures from the Kress Collection for student treatment in my courses over the coming semesters. As usual, I am excited to see the class projects progress from start to finish. It's always interesting when unexpected condition issues arise during conservation. As for my personal ambitions, I'm not very sporty. I never have been. Physical adventure doesn't draw me. Intellectual adventure and visual adventure are more my speed. I would like to spend more time in Florence, as a base for more extensive traveling. Oh, there are so many places in the world I want to see! I very much want to explore India. I think it will take years and many trips to know India. It's so vast and it's such an ancient culture. I love Indian sculpture. It's so refined. Where else? There are so many places I haven't been to—even in Western Europe—or where I would like to re-visit. I'd like to spend more time in Naples. I would love to go to the Middle East, to see early cities and archaeological sites, and back to Africa—Kenya, which I visited once before, among other countries. Cambodia is also on my list. I love animals and I'd like to see lots of different species in the beauty of their natural habitats while they still exist in the wild. Nothing that involves too much hiking! There are so many extraordinary sights! It's time to do it.

—Cat Lukaszewski

Manager, Laboratories and Study Collection (2010-2016)

HAPPY 70th BIRTHDAY to Dianne, who will enter her new decade this May, with love and warmest best wishes from the entire CC Community!
We are anxious to see what you will accomplish as a septuagenarian. CHEERS to YOU!