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Stephen Haller: Remembering Morandi



Stephen Haller with a book on Morandi. The frontispiece photo comes from Haller's personal archives

When he was a young man, the New York art dealer Stephen Haller had a brief but life-changing friendship with Giorgio Morandi, who was nearing the end of his days. Following his intuition to Italy, Haller sought out the solitary painter whose work touched something at his core. There, with Morandi as mentor and friend, he found his calling, which became a career and a life's work.

"I have always thought of Morandi as my personal sage," said Haller when we talked at his Chelsea gallery late last month. "It's been a long time since I've reflected on that period—even during the recent Morandi exhibition at the Met."

What follows is Haller's narrative recollection, based on my interview with him.

A 'Pilgrimage' to Italy

Some 40 years ago, in the early Sixties, I was at a turning point in my life. I was unhappy in medical school and knew there was something else I wanted but that had not yet revealed itself to me. Where I felt most comfortable was visiting museums. In particular, on visits to MoMA the work of Giorgio Morandi called a special attention to me. There was a disquieting isolation in the paintings, which was how I was feeling myself. I remember thinking, 'These bottles are not bottles; they're people. They're shoulder to shoulder and yet they're not making any contact.' At that time I didn't have any formal background in art, so my response was visceral and emotional.

I also remember a small Morandi exhibition on Madison Avenue that had probably a dozen works: paintings, watercolors, drawings. I knew, or sensed, that there was some connection with these works and the person who made them and myself. So after that school year I set out to find Morandi-Bologna.

Finding Morandi

My first stop was to Perugia to learn the language. Then I went to Rome—sometimes we're guided by things yet to be known—where I met a friend from college who was in med school in Rome. He said he was transferring to Bologna. We took an apartment in Bologna.

As people got to know that I wanted to meet Morandi, a connection was made. Someone who knew Morandi told him that a young man would be interested in visiting. Morandi gave permission for me to call him. I called and asked if I could visit.

The First Meeting

I can't remember if it was his sister who opened the door to let me in (Morandi had three sisters with whom he lived), but I remember him standing there. My first impression was that he was tall and slightly stooped. He was taller than me, and I'm six feet tall. He was very gracious and cordial. We sat down at the kitchen table, as we did in subsequent visits, never in armchairs, and I remember being surprised that the apartment was so dark. The windows must have been shuttered.

Morandi asked me what I did. I said I had been a student in medical school but that I was finding no satisfaction there. I was more interested in the arts. I told him I admired his work and addressed him as *maestro*. He said, "Please don't call me that." He may have told me to call him Morandi, but I can't remember how I addressed him. Probably *signore*. Sir.

I was uncomfortable, as first meetings can be, because of how meaningful this meeting was to me. Morandi put me at ease by asking me if I would like to see his studio.



Full view of the book photo: the young Stephen Haller with Morandi. This framed photograph rests on the ledge in the gallery's viewing room

Morandi's Studio

We walked from the kitchen table through several rooms of dark, heavy furniture. Much of it was covered with cloths. We walked down a corridor, past doors that were probably bedrooms. At the end of the corridor was his studio. I'm in awe of being in his presence and in shock that I'm actually experiencing this intimacy with him. Things I remember: It was a small room. There was a printing press that was also covered with a cloth, unfinished paintings and finished paintings on the walls, and in the corner, a bookshelf that held the bottles and objects he painted. What startled me was that some of the bottles were painted over with white. I thought those painted bottles were quite unattractive in person. On subsequent visits, I noticed that some of the boxes were painted as well, but it was the bottles that startled me.



At the Museo Morandi, Bologna: A recreation of the artist's studio. Note the bottles painted white and the boxes covered with paper. Photo courtesy of Ariel Churnin



Still Life (Natura Morta), 1956, Museo Morandi, Bologna

Visits to Grizzana

I called Morandi a few weeks later. I was getting up the courage to ask him about acquiring a work. The person who answered the phone—it must have been one of his sisters—told me that he was at the country house in Grizzana [about 18 miles away] and asked if I would like the phone number. I called Grizzana and he invited me to come out and visit with him. So I drove out. He again greeted me at the door. Here the furniture was light, Scandinavian, very different from the heavy period furniture in the Bologna apartment. We sat at the table. He was always on the long side and I usually sat at the end. He liked that I wasn't interviewing him or asking him any questions. He liked that I was looking to have a career in something that was meaningful to me. The more I was with him, I felt his presence: someone so calm and assured about his place. I realized that *that* was what I was looking for in my life.

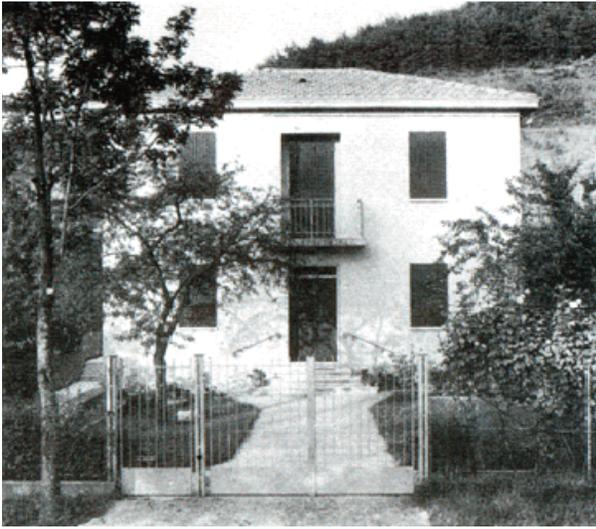
It's hard to remember the conversations. My Italian then was pretty good, good enough

for conversation, but he spoke very little. He was a very private, solitary person who had no need to call on people and would only have an association if they made the initiation to be with him. I was content knowing that I was in the presence of someone special. I didn't have to talk. Some of the time I was there he was painting, or finishing a painting, or cleaning up.

“Keep Looking”

On my second visit to Grizzana he asked me if I would like to visit the studio. I saw a much different studio than in Bologna. The Grizzana studio was a more sparsely furnished space, with three or four unfinished paintings on the walls. He had a little reproduction of a Cezanne watercolor landscape above the sink where he cleaned his brushes. I looked at it with no formal art knowledge.

“I don't feel the important of Cezanne.” I said to him. One of my great life lessons was Morandi's response: “*Continua a guardare.*” Keep looking.



The house in Grizzana, about 18 miles southwest of Bologna. Image from the Museo Morandi, Bologna

An Opinion Sought

One time he showed me two paintings on the wall. They were very similar, each having three bottles. One had an aqua blue line around the neck, the other a burgundy line, as I remember. He asked me, “Do you have a preference?” I told him that I preferred the one with the burgundy because I thought the contrast made the painting work better. “*Forse,*” he answered. Perhaps.

Acquiring a Morandi

On one of my visits, I said I’d be interested in acquiring a painting. He said that he had no work available, even though I could see he had work finished or unfinished all around us. They were all promised to dealers or collectors, he said, but he would put my name on his pad. In later visits I would ask, “How am I doing on the list?”

One thing I learned was that different people paid different prices for his work. I was somewhat familiar with the prices for his work in New York, so I mentioned that I knew the dealers were selling his work for considerably more than he was selling it to

them. He said it didn’t matter to him what other people sold the work for, because his only interest in doing the paintings was for himself. He did the work to do the work. Concern with price would be a distraction from the work. The prices he set gave him enough money to cover his expenses for himself and his sisters. It was a life lesson for me about the real purpose of one’s own purpose.

I never bought a painting from him, but I did eventually buy a drawing from him and he gave another to me. That second one was a birthday gift. We were talking at the table around the time of my birthday. Underneath the table was a box without a top where his working drawings were placed. (He was frugal; it was just a cardboard box. And I remember he was always erasing and reworking drawings.) This day he reached under the table and pulled out a drawing, looked at it, and handed it to me. “*Buon compleanno,*” he said. Happy birthday. It was a very unexpected and grand surprise.

Becoming a Dealer

One time when I was visiting Morandi in Bologna, he showed me these beautiful papers and told me he had gotten them from a man who owned an antique bookstore in Reggio Emilia. This book dealer would tear out the end papers of distressed books and save them for Morandi. He said he sometimes used the papers for his etchings.

One day I went to visit that shop. The book dealer also dealt in prints. I bought three graphic works, including a Picasso etching. They were not expensive at that time. Another time I bought lithographs by Chagall and Miro and sent them home to New York to be framed. My mother lived in Manhattan, on the East Side, but she had a framer on the West Side. When the framer put the

prints in the window to show off his framing, people came in wanting to buy the framed prints. My mother called to ask if I wanted to sell them. I said yes, knowing I would use the money to acquire more. That was the day I became an art dealer.

After a few visits, Morandi asked me what I would like to do in the art world. I considered his question. I thought about the painters, academics and collectors I had met. I didn't think of being a painter or an academic, but I really enjoyed their company, especially the older ones because of their knowledge and accomplishments. The collectors were fascinating because of their stories, and the passion with which they collected 'things.' Before I left Italy to return to the United States, I came to realize that I was their go-between.

Addio

I was in Bologna for two years, 1961-1963. Toward the end of my stay, I told Morandi I would be returning to the States soon. As I was leaving Grizzana for the last time, I remember taking a photograph of the house. All of a sudden a curtain parted and he was standing there in the window waving goodbye.

That Christmas in New York I received a note from him: "Dear Stephen Haller, Season's greetings. Giorgio Morandi, 1963. I didn't know this but he was ill at the time with lung cancer. I never suspected. He died in 1964. He was 74 years old.

Morandi was a man who knew what he wanted to do and understood what life was about for himself. And because he was so sure of it, he didn't need to surround himself with people or trappings. He was extremely private, but accessible if you gave him his space. I think you have to understand—and



Photographs from the archive. Top: Morandi and Haller seated together. In the bottom photo, Morandi stands behind the curtain of the window, waving goodbye (he's barely visible even when you view the picture close up). It was the last time the two men would see each other



Still Life (Natura Morta), 1951, courtesy of Museum Morandi, Bologna

I was too young to understand at the time—that he was uncompetitive about what he did because competition just didn't have a place in his life. He was of no school of painting. It didn't cross his mind whether or where he had a place in the art world. His thought was only to do his work.