ALMINE RECH

Sonnabend Collection Mantova

Permanent collection | Palazzo della Ragione, Mantova, Italy

The collection, built over a lifetime by Ileana Sonnabend (1914–2007) together with her husband Michael Sonnabend (1900–2001) and their adopted son Antonio Homem, offers a testament to the experiments in visual culture from the mid-20th century, outlining a veritable map of contemporary creativity. Through her Sonnabend galleries in Paris and New York, Ileana was able to anticipate and disseminate the artistic trends that redefined the collective imagination: from the experimental language of Neo-Dada to the iconic force of Pop Art, from the rigorous structures of Minimalism to the poetic ones of Conceptual Art, up to the visionary languages of Italian Arte Povera and the development of contemporary photography.

The exhibition path, curated by Antonio Homem and Mario Codognato, unfolds as a continuous narrative that restores Ileana Sonnabend's pioneering vision and her ability to anticipate the transformations of contemporary art between the United States and Europe. The 'Sonnabend Collection Mantova' is articulated across eleven rooms that guide the public through a chronological and thematic journey from the post-war period to the present day. The 94 exhibited works, including paintings, sculptures, installations, photographs, and conceptual works, compose a story that highlights Sonnabend's role as a mediator between worlds, languages, and generations.

One room is dedicated to Pop Art, a movement that Ileana Sonnabend intuited and promoted in Europe with extraordinary precocity. Works by James Rosenquist, Andy Warhol, Tom Wesselmann, and Roy Lichtenstein mark the overcoming of painterly gesture in favour of images with flat, brilliant colours, derived from advertising and mass media. In dialogue with them, the sculptures of Claes Oldenburg and George Segal translate everyday reality into three-dimensional forms, balancing irony and immediacy. The room testifies to how Sonnabend's vision grasped Pop Art not as a critique of consumer society, but as the capacity to transform its imagery into a new universal artistic language.

Another room explores Minimalism of the 1960s which, parallel to Pop Art, established itself as a reaction to the emotional intensity of Abstract Expressionism, favouring essential forms, specific materials, and structural clarity. Donald Judd and Robert Morris abandoned painting to confront space and material directly, while Larry Bell and John McCracken delved into light, transparency, and colour as structural elements of sculpture. The route also includes conceptual practices, with the wall drawings of Sol LeWitt, the rigorous installations of Mel Bochner and Barry Le Va, and the Text Paintings of John Baldessari, works that challenge the property and permanence of the artistic object. The path concludes with Peter Halley, who in the 1980s reinterpreted minimalist geometry in an urban and social key. Thus, the room tells the transition from a search for formal reduction to an inquiry into the very meaning of the work.

The final room presents Jeff Koons, Haim Steinbach, and Ashley Bickerton, protagonists of the American Neo-Geo movement of the 1980s. Koons transforms everyday objects and popular icons into monumental sculptures, celebrating kitsch with surprising creative autonomy. Steinbach arranges common objects on shelves, restoring a formal balance that dialogues with the conceptual typology of the Bechers and the Pop tradition, where the everyday becomes poetic material. Bickerton, on the other hand, merges geometric rigour and Pop-inspired colours in works that evoke Minimalism only to subvert its codes, transforming surfaces and structures into reflections on identity and perception. Together, the artists reinterpret the legacy of Pop and Conceptual Art in a new and lucidly contemporary language, capable of transforming mass culture into an icon of the art of the time.