It was in 2013 that Maria João Sá Couto, a mutual friend, in her particular manner of hinting ideas in the same fashion as one takes off a glove, handed me, during a dinner party, a beautiful book, along with the suggestion: "You don't want bringing this to your museum?" It was the catalogue of the exhibition of Franco Maria Ricci's private art collection which he had curated in 2004 at the Doria Palace of Genoa: La collezione d'arte di Franco Maria Ricci, editrice e bibliotecario. This was not the kind of challenge to which I could answer promptly. It was only after, more seriously, that it had crossed my mind to consider the book. Under my eyes played an intermittent sequence of beautiful objects, paintings, sculptures, books, many of which any museum would envy. Above all, it was a fascinating mise-en-scène not only museologically but also graphically: masterfully set on pages, many by Massimo Listri - Ricci assembled with both the discipline and seduction that have always distinguished himself and his work. Distinct objects of distinct ranges, periods and materials – pieces gathered one by one during a lifetime – which he had integrated Ricci's own inner sanctum, were now placed in dialogue at the magnificently located Reggia di Caserta, the previous seat of the sovereign dukes of his native Parma. Although the displayed works were not, in their vast majority, very well-known to the international circuits of the arts, not even the splendid portrait of the Duchesse d'Aiguillon by Philippe de Champaigne... their attraction and interest immediately resonated. At this point, it is important, to add that, as everyone else, I perceived Ricci solely from his editorial career, popular among those passionate about the arts (particularly art books). Presented to me from that moment was something entirely new, his collection. The seed was planted. Once again propelled by Maria João Sá Couto and magnificently hosted by Laura and Franco at their Fontambrina's private estate, I was allowed entrance to the estate, divided between Parma and Milan. While sensing my intentions were being delicately scrutinized, I was met with the utmost generosity as being guided through the bamboo paths of the extraordinary labyrinth Ricci envisioned to magnificently encase the museum that holds his collection. During these days, the Lisboa exhibition was born. For the first time, the collection was set in a place to some place outside of Italy. We knew that, upon their return, the works would no longer be hung on the previous sites, but instead be placed in the museum Ricci meticulously projected for them. To me – as for the MNA, Museo Nazionale delle Arti Antiche (National Museum of Ancient Arts) - this appeared to be an extremely sensible mission. First of all, the monumental task of choosing, from a collection where each element individually occupied its place, the pieces that would integrate the exhibition in figure that ended surpassing 200 items; the creation of a concept that could vividly harmonize with the vicissitudes of the museum and its public while keeping, however, the collector's eye, to put up an art exhibition that, already precious in itself, could as well provide a genuine portrait of the versatile collector whose prestige is no intimately linked to a brilliant career of designer, editor and bibliophile; and last, but not least, in order to not jeopardize the entire project, it was vital to meet its final approval from Ricci. Somehow candidly I was underestimating the rare qualities and panache of the man - that others have described as a renaissance prince transported to our days - I was dealing with. The project was entirely approved and pleased Ricci, I dare to say, as he generously volunteered to design the exhibition's catalog and invitations. The doors opened in November 2014 in a one and only choreography that culminated at the museum's library extraordinarily made available to the public, converted as a temple to Bodon. Triumph unexpectedly came at a press conference during the opening morning when I came aware of a myriad of journalists, holding old FMR (the legendary magazine edited by Franco Maria Ricci) issues, that couldn't miss the opportunity of asking the editor himself to sign them. Not only the MNA succeeded in bringing to Lisboa, once again, a prime collection, it brought the Franco Maria Ricci Collection. The importance of the deed was evident. Months later, concurring with the conclusion of his prestigious Labirintos della Masse, the collection (in all its width) found a definitive realm. While this moment crowned Ricci's extraordinary adventure, it did not seal it. His career didn't cease and the adventure continues as the publishing house keeps thrilling and FMR magazine rekindles.
ANTÓNIO FILIPE PIMENTEL: Let me start with this question: How does a man deal with his own myth?
FRANCO MARIA RICCI: Myth and dreams are fun to start and carry on the broader premises and the search for beauty.

Your art editor facet is well known, the prestigious seal inherent to Franco Maria Ricci and the FMR magazine is an internationally recognized water mark. On the other hand, less disclosed is your bibliophile side and your passion for Bodoni. When did your Bodonian passion emerge, to the point of compelling you to dive in the adventure of editing the Manuale Tipografico?

It all began in the 1960s when the Biblioteca Palatina in Parma was setting out material to be stored in the museum dedicated to Giambattista Bodoni, which opened in 1963. Although I had graduated in philology, my interest in art and graphic design were well known in the city, and so became involved in the undertaking.

I spent countless hours in the silent corners of the Palazzo della Pilotta, where the Biblioteca Palatina housed the Bodoni imprint; I would deliberately touch the dies and center punches, or leaf through the printed works, enchanted by the rigor and outstanding elegance with which the markings—whose lines could either be thick or slender—had been impressed on the wonderful sheets of Biedermeier paper by hand. That aesthetic experience encouraged me to become a publisher. I made my debut in 1964 with a reprint of the Manuale Tipografico by Bodoni and from that year on, I started to collect also all the books printed by Bodoni. The whole collection I own today counts about 1200 volumes!

On the same line of thought, what set in motion your decision of re-editing (alongside personal remark) the Encyclopedia of Diderot & d'Alembert and all the others that followed?

The decision of re-editing the Encyclopedia comes from my passion for the Enlightenment. Also, what fascinated me most in the Encyclopedia were the plates. They were a celebration of human wisdom and talent, they represented all the artist's skills; the attention for details, the manual precision and so on… I believe in these values too, I would say that whether realistic or neoclassical, my mind is deeply linked to Enlightenment.

With its compromise between the magnificent images and graphic rigor but also with the editorial nature that always manages to unveil hidden beauty, FMR is an absolutely unique magazine. Inherent to its editorial character, there is also a clear and rigid coherence between the first and last number. May it not be, perhaps, too rigid for such a long course project?

I think FMR, thanks to some recurring elements, was able to establish a long-lasting style. Along with the Bodoni typeface, the color black was one of the elements that characterized most of my publishing activity. In order to appreciate and evaluate the works I was reproducing, I have to use the color black, the color of elegance and beauty. If it is true that such a way of presenting art has become widespread, for example in numerous exhibition catalogues, I would like to believe that it is to a certain extent—valuable, to a great extent—thanks to me.

Alas, the rigidity was completely absent in the vision of the figures. The only rule was to avoid narcistic attention (of the 162 issues I edited, it is impossible to find a single photograph of a living person: a world viewed at a time when periodicals are based mainly on the republication of well-known classical faces).

What about KOS? Does it derive directly from FMR?

The principles that ruled FMR were the same ones for KOS. In particular, while FMR showed unknown masterpieces in even very well-known works of art with an equal point of view, KOS tried to do the same but with themes regarding science, medicine, nature. I like to think to KOS and FMR as two sides of the same, humanistic culture. In history there had been many times close links between art and science, for example Ugo Aldrovandi, who was a naturalist and a botanist, made several books with beautiful illustration regarding nature, animals or anatomy, and was the creator of one of the first Natural History Museum, in Bologna. Another wonderful iconography linked to science is the one I recently published in Portugal with the collection of the Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga.
"...my objects and artworks reflect my taste, my personality, my soul"
“...everytime I’ve felt my life had become too reasonable, I beseched folly to intercede for me”

The busts of Vittorio Amedeo III di Savoia and Maria Antonia Fernanda di Barbone... These have been, some years ago, a wonderful discovery. I bought them from an art dealer but they were previously in the collection of Gianni Agnelli. The author has never been really studied but he was very good in using different materials: wax, resin, paper mache. Apparently, he had a great success when he exhibited at the Salone di Cervi, some were sculptures representing famous paintings, such as The Death of Marat by David. His works may seem different from the other busts but they look as impressive and “alive” as the others.

From a different point of view and in fact to a collection where the art of the portrait assumes such a strong precedence, the presence of an impressive set of Vasilius (including one from Lipari) seems to mirror that fallacious notion of eternal beauty being encapsulated by time. Is it not the case?

In my opinion, the busts are a reminder of the fact that nothing lasts forever, everything is ephemeral. But there is something eternal, as the busts from Santorini and Ithaca suggest. This beseches painting always / without wishing to offend the many enthusiasts / because, as a celebration of the eternity of art...”

The interest you have in Ligabue - of whom you own three remarkable paintings and whose recognition is so linked to the book you have dedicated to him - how did it surface? Why was it your decision to concurrate him the first monographic exhibition presented at the newly opened lapithoth? The French word here means holy, but it is also the name given in architecture to those buildings that, between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the artificers and rich bourgeoisie built in their parks and gardens to host concerts, dance parties and other forms of entertainment. These follies were referred to as such because of their extravagance, and also because they involved great expense, often leading to their owners ruin. Some might be tempted to call them lapithoth the folly type, I wouldn’t mind if they did, actually. Folly is a powerful goddess: every time I have left my Mr had become too reasonable and I had become rather fond of her. I perceived her to intercede for me. It was folly that enticed the poor and wretched love of Antonio Ligabue and Patrizia Grassi, the protagonists of the first temporary exhibition. The idea, suggested to me by Vittorio Speri and Augusto Rega, to host the opening of my lapithoth was coincident with an exhibition dedicated to both painters was immediately to my liking, also because it offered the idea of continuity. Half a century ago, in the days when I published Ligabue, my publishing activity was just about to get off the ground. Today, along with my collaborators, I am experiencing an undertaking that is profoundly different but also similar in some respects.

The well known personal relationship you had with Jorge Luis Borges, which started through literature and culminated in a truly unique friendship, led you to create for him the very famous Library of Babel collection (the lapithoth itself being an ex-pot) Borges referred to, in which moment you have realized you had to edit your very own lapithoth? The work was far from the unpredictable, originating from encounters, experiences, emotions, thoughts that, at some point, flowed together into one project. Before the meeting with Borges I didn’t pay too much attention to lapithoth, but looking back at my past experience I can say that I came across them many times in the first place, when I was a child. I remember being very fascinated by a maze made of mirrors created by some gypsies in France. From time to time they used to come there to bring carnivals. I was also enchanted by the teatro romano lapithoth and so on. I graduated in pedagogy and during my studies I frequented many of them, including the ones in Sarnia, Rufigia, Cannebiere... The fact that at a certain point, much later, these lapithoths were embroidered as if they were a sort of oblivion and began to attract my attention was first because of my readings, and then because of my meeting and befriending Jorge Luis Borges.
Why have you envisaged a labyrinth of green hammers, lacking in its heart an\nUtopian construction (Boullée and Ledoux\ncoming to mind) inside of which, in turn,\nare assembled the works of art you have\ncollected? It is not frequent to find con-\nstructions enclosed inside of labyrinths as\nthey usually stand for their self hypophreg-\nic statement. Is this green labyrinth only a\nmetaphor or does it serve a protective func-\ntion? To tell the truth, it is the opposite of a pro-\tection. I warn you that my collection be\nvisited by everyone, but in Italy (I'm not sure if it's\nthe same in Portugal) many great collec-
tions have been opened to the public, but\nnobody goes to visit them! The labyrinth is a\nforced to attract people to culture, giving them a place where they\ncan also relax, meditate and feel the little\nshiver of being themselves.

One who today looks at the Labirinto della\nMasone (and especially those who were\nprivileged enough to watch it being built)\nis overwhelmed with its boldness and entre-
preneurship. These recall two dimensions of\nFranco Maria Ricci that are invisible to his personality: the union between science\nand humanism. Do you accept the world that you are a Renaissance man?\nI may say that the boldness takes origin\nfrom the Neoclassical period: the architect\nPier Carlo Bandeppi and I were inspired by\nthe great architects, who lived during the\nFrench Revolution: Boullée, Ledoux, Le\nClerq, but also the Italian architect Anton\nelli, who presented Napoleon with a mission-
ary project for the Farnese Palace in Milan.\n
Undoubtedly due to the circumstance\ns, none of these men have left us with\ngreat buildings; however, drawings and\npoems, dictated by a love of geometry,\nEgypt, the Greek and Roman world, and a\nvisionary talent, nurtured by the Utopian\nspirit of the age in which they lived, recall as\nthat neo-classicism was not the classical,\nbut rather, fertile ground for the modern\nenvironment. I must admit that the architect\ncomplied our relationship to the same\nbetween a Renaissance prince and an\narchitect working at his court.

Back to Borges: how did your fascination\nwith a brilliant author, who, already\nblind, ran the National Library of Buenos\nAires appear? Thinking of Borges as a\nliking a character from a novel who\nlived himself a labyrinth of which,\nhowever, he had Araldo's thread?\n
Borges was my guide on several occasions\ nin Milan and in Fontanellato.\n
The paths the harrowing steps of this blind\nman draw in spaces that were not easy\nand familiar to me reminded me of the\nuntellable situations that move amidst\nand emerge from the maze.\n
While walking through the hall where my\nLabirinto now stands, I asked him to direct\na fiction series for my publishing house: small\nvolumes that collected the best writings of\nhis favorite authors. Thus was born Il\nColosseo d'Amore.\n
I also told him that, sooner or later, I would\nhave liked to build a labyrinth, adding, with\ntouch of annoyance, that it would be the\nlargest in the world.

It was one of those things you say without\nreally thinking: it was not easy to\ngive, nothing to lose and nothing to gain.\nAt the time it did not correspond to any\nspecific project of mine.\n
Borges objected to saying that the largest\nlabyrinth in the world already existed. It\nwas not the same. One thing seemed certain\nto me at the time: I was never going to\nbe able to build one of these endless or\nalmost endless labyrinths that Borges had\ndescribed in some of his stories. In fiction\nas in The Aleph. What I was now going to\nbe able to build was what Borges was holding\ncalling the considerable resources Omnipo-
sence offers.

There was once a mundane and cosmo-
politan woman who visited his Labirinto della\nMasone and, if I may say, becoming progressively an\nabstraction. What changed?\nTime passes for everyone, and today I feel\nhappy because finally my dream of build-
ing a place that reflects myself, my activity\nduring my entire life, my life, came true.\nThe Labirinto still needs attention and\nservice, and I am always making new pro-
jects: together with my wife, Laura Cadini,\n"The Lady of the Labirinto" and my old\nand new co-workers, coordinated by Edo-
ardo Procopio.