

Italian culture is very rich. And to buy into it you have to be too. **Richard Boston** on a sumptuous art sale where if you have to ask the price you can't afford it

# Orangerie, no lemons

I HAVEN'T seen the new Bugatti yet, not even a photograph, and I hate cars anyway, but there's a breaking-point for everyone and under torture I would probably accept a new Bugatti. It can do 220mph, which is faster than walking, but who cares about speed? It's probably breath-takingly beautiful, but it can't be as beautiful as the Bugatti Royale. Nothing can. The big drawback of the Bugatti Royale is that the last time one was sold it went (if memory serves) for £4 million. The advantage of the new Bugatti is that it costs only £300,000.

Wherever you look Italian art and culture are cutting a terrific dash, positively flaunting the *bella figura*. A biography of Luchino Visconti is leading the book reviews, Bernardo Bertolucci's new film is swamping the movie columns, in the fashion world there's Giorgio Armani, Umberto Eco's novel Foucault's Pendulum is at the top of the best-seller lists, and the reputations of Italo Calvino and Primo Levi expand like the girth of Pavarotti.

Not only is Italian culture immensely rich but they put it over with immense *brio*. Within a very short period of time London's Accademia Italiana has established itself as a splendid showcase. In quick succession it has given us lavish exhibitions of Morandi, Tiepolo, Futurism and now this splendid, sumptuous, gorgeous Orangerie where about the only thing missing is a Bugatti.

The Orangerie (which in this context has nothing to do with oranges) is a collection of beautiful objects and works of art on a particular theme much as any museum might put on. The difference here is that everything is for sale. It is like a jumble sale for the very, very, very rich.

The objects are displayed in an exuberantly operatic setting of swooping drapes of silks and damasks from Mantero of Como, arranged by the scenographer Mario Garbuglia. They extend over nearly two millennia from Roman mosaics to Futurism. The arrangement is chronological.

Pretending to myself that I was a member of the Bugatti-driving class I was rather tempted by a Tiepolo drawing which is going for not much more than 10 archers (an archer, you will remember, is £2,000, the sum you pay a prostitute to go away). But then my

that if you have to ask then you can't afford it. In fact it's not too hard to find the price if you ask the right person nicely, and uncertainty as to whether the figure you have been given is hundreds or thousands, and whether they are pounds Sterling or Italian lira just adds to the fun, especially as there isn't the remotest chance that you are going to make the purchase.

Each to his own taste, and mine concentrated on the last room which is of 20th century art. There's Marino Marini, and an extremely surprising late Guttuso version of Courbet's two embracing nude nymphs.

There's also a wonderful work by Balla. I knew about Futurist painting, Futurist poetry and even Futurist cooking, but Balla's Futurist garden was new to me. It consists of geometrically shaped interlocking pieces of gaily coloured plywood and is the most attractive Futurist work I have ever seen. Balla originally conceived it in 1916, but this limited edition is more recent. A single flower or tree is yours for about £750, the whole garden for ten times that amount.

Also in this room is the work of David Maude-Roxby-Montalto di Fragnito, who engraves on glass, especially drinking-glasses, with diamond-point stipple. A single work can take six months or more and the results are exquisite.

It is an art that was revived by Lawrence Whistler and is one in which the English have become pre-eminent. David Maude-Roxby-Montalto di Fragnito is more than a splendid name: he is probably the best in the world currently practising this meticulous art.

● At Accademia Italiana, Rutland Gate, London SW7, until December 13. Admission (with full-colour catalogue) costs £10.



**Bella figura . . . art at the Accademia Italiana**

eye fell on a socking great della Robbia, nearly a metre in diameter, and with a description almost as large: "Polychrome enamelled terracotta tondo with a shoulder portrait of a youth in classical manner framed by a border of fruit and flowers." This seemed to me incredibly cheap as these things go at £65,000 — I think.

They are a bit coy about prices, perhaps on the principle