

Family de Salis: an exhibition of paintings and textiles

This exhibition presents works from the present generation of the de Salis family living at the Palazzo Salis, Bondo in Bregaglia: Jessica and Lilith de Salis, and Luke Piper.

Family History

The first Salis came from near Como into the Bregaglia in 1300. Since then, different branches of the family have rooted themselves in the Grisons. Originally gaining wealth through controlling the passes, the Salis family became envoys and governors for the Republic of the Grisons. As their influence increased, they built several Palazzi Salis in the Grisons and the Valtellina

Our family are descended from Battista Salis and Barbara von Meiss who were living in the Casa Battista in Soglio (now the Hotel Palazzo Salis), which burned after the Spaniards set fire to the building in the early 1600s. Battista and Barbara escaped and later returned to rebuild the house. Battista's great-grandson, known as Pietro l'Inviato (Peter the Envoy), visited England in 1708 on behalf of the Republic of the Grisons, and encouraged his son Jerome to become English. Peter lived in Chur in the *Altes Gebäu* and in Chiavenna. In 1713, he signed the Treaty of Utrecht on behalf of the Grisons, for which the Emperor Francis 1st made him Count of the Holy Roman Empire in 1748.

Jerome became English and was made the English minister to the Grisons in 1730. In the same year, he married an English woman, Mary Fane, and his son, another Peter, was born in England, educated at Chur and Eton, and then became an officer in the Grenadier Guards. On returning to the Grisons he successively married three cousins, including Anna de Salis, and became Governor and Captain General of the Valtellina along with various other posts in the Republic. He reputedly helped relieve the poverty and the impact of famine in Chiavenna, and in 1782 a statue was erected to him in the main square. Dismembered in 1797 in response to the French Revolution, the statue has recently been reinstated in the Paradiso gardens at Chiavenna.

Both Peter and his father Jerome wanted a grand house in the Bregaglia, and so the Palazzo Salis at Bondo was built. Jerome paid, with Peter superintending the work. Through his friends the Scartazzini family, Peter was encouraged to build in the village of Bondo. He wrote to his father in England that he would build "the finest staircase in Europe"... some of us think he succeeded. The house was built in the 1770s from plans produced by Francesco Croce of Milan with fine stucco work by Domenico Spinelli. Spinelli, who liked the cooler climates of Bondo and was fond of food and drink, chose to be paid in part through wine. The beautiful rose and blue glass chandeliers were created in Murano and transported across the mountains in crates of sand. With its high ceilings and grand staircase, this summer palace cannot be heated and was never intended to be used in winter. We find it chilly enough in Spring. However, several of our predecessors did live there all year round.

Our grandfather, Count Charles de Salis (born in 1930), came to Bondo in the winter of 1936 when his grandfather, Count John de Salis, was dying (in fact he lasted another three years). When they arrived at Maloja, the pass was closed due to snow and he remembers his father carrying him on his shoulders down the hairpin bends towards Bondo. At Casaccia,

a friendly person took them by a horse-drawn sleigh, which over-turned twice. Since this memorable first visit, our grandfather's love for Bondo and the Grisons has grown: he is never happier than when he is painting and walking in the mountains. He has come to Bondo most years except during WWII and later when he was fighting in Malaya with the Scots Guards. As a young man, he was a rally driver, winning his class in the Coup des Alps and Monte Carlo rallies, and was part of the St Moritz "Jet Set", a member of the St Moritz Tobogganing Club and competed on the Cresta Run. He has always loved the Swiss summer and climbed with local guides Aldopho Salis and Arturo Giovanoli. When he was 76 years old he ascended the Piz Badile... and nearly got to the top.

Although our grandfather enjoys the family joining him in the summer (his four daughters, sons-in-law and 12 grandchildren), he also really likes to be in Bondo during the Spring and Autumn when there is "peace and quiet". Some of our favourite times with him are painting the landscape in the mountains and then going for a Campari soda followed by a delicious lunch at his favourite restaurant.

Like all Bregaglians we were greatly saddened by the recent landslide (la Frana). It is a reminder of the destructive side of nature and that the mountains are always changing. Nevertheless, the landscape and the mountains are a continuous source of joy, inspiration and nourishment. The Bregaglia is in our blood and bones. We swim in their pools and rivers, walk in their meadows, climb their rocks and delight in their flowers, trees and light.

Jessica de Salis (b.1993), the daughter of Isabel de Salis and Hugh Herzig, has been coming to the Bregaglia every summer since she can remember. In 2017, she graduated from Manchester School of Art with a First Class degree specialising in printed textiles. Jessie now lives and works in London and has a business making and selling printed silk scarves and wall hangings, bespoke wallpapers and dress fabrics. Her work is characterised by bright colours, intricate patterns abstracted from nature, buildings and machines, and bold images of plants and creatures. To combine motifs such as birds, fish, plants or flowers, with architectural, geometric or linear structures, Jessie might use embroidery, digital and silkscreen printing in the same design.

"I love to find surprising combinations of organic and man-made imagery as I create new patterns..."

Coming to Bondo every year inspires me. There's so much beauty and variety in the landscape, the architecture, the natural world. I'm attracted by everything I see here. I'm amazed by the changing landscape, as I walk from flower-filled meadows through the beautiful chestnut forests and up above the trees to the blue-grey glittering granite mountain tops...

It was very sad to come to Bondo in Summer 2018 and see the damage from the terrible rockfall the previous year. But, although the disaster was upsetting, perhaps it has created a stronger sense of community and cooperation between everyone who lives in our village and up the Bregaglia valley. As a summer visitor, it's important for me to remember the dreadful and destructive power of these beautiful mountains."

Lilith de Salis Piper (b.1999) is the daughter of Julia de Salis and the artist Luke Piper. She is currently studying Fine Art at Falmouth University, Cornwall UK. Inspired by the relationship between the human form and the land, she works in mixed media: graphite, gouache, watercolours and ink using vivid colours on linen canvas. She works on large-scale canvases and panoramic scrolls as well as more illustratively on paper.

Influenced by the Celtic roots of Switzerland she transforms the raw interconnectedness of life and energy in nature into her paintings. *

“As a teenager, I have discovered that the mountains of Graubünden have also been part of Celtic (Helvetian) consciousness. So, it made sense to me how this energy of the landscape could be transformed into material forms, patterns, decorations, art and abstract symbols...”

I have seen the work of other Swiss artists - like the sculptures of Alberto Giacometti that seem to throb and breathe the bare rock faces and peaks of the Alps within the characters of his life models. They invoke stories of creation and primitive ideas of light coming out of darkness: the great breath of the mother goddess as she timelessly sings life into existence. Giovanni Segantini expresses birth, life and death through his landscapes. I could see that he closely observed the mountain landscapes’ symbolic content, studying the daily lives of peasants and how they connect to the land, for example shepherds and their animals.”

Through the pointillist brushstrokes of Giovanni or the reticulated surface of Alberto’s sculptures, Lilith identifies with the Celtic traditions: the knotwork of Britain and Ireland expressed through manuscript illumination, stone carving and Celtic metal work, becomes formalised decoration of floral patterns and abstract symbols. In art, the term *horror vacui* has been used to describe this way of completely filling the canvas with rhythmical patterns, and Lilith connects back to the Celtic origins of this concept.

“But it’s not just pattern, the Salis family name derives from the willow (Salix in Latin) and is on the coat of arms. It is symbolic of the moon and associated with water – perfect for me. This is what the willow reminds us to do, to let go and surrender to our innermost selves and to gain a deeper understanding of our unconscious...”

Lilith is also making a strong symbolic connection between femininity and Nature, woman and earth, and finding a sense of oneness with the mountains, water and phases of the moon. Whilst celebrating her connection to the land in her Story of Lilith she is also exploring misconceptions of the female in the Genesis story.

“This is the place where I feel most free. Bathing naked in remote mountain lakes and streams and dancing in the meadows, I feel that the natural waters we bathe in flow from the open womb of the Celtic goddess. My inner woman roaming wild, through the soft and earthy scent of pine and chestnuts in the cool mountain breeze. Free yet connected as though on the shoulders of the great matriarch of all women”

*Some of earliest remnants of Celtic, Iron Age culture in Europe are found at La Tène, which continued in continental Europe until Roman times.

Luke Piper (b.1966) is married to Julia de Salis and he first came to Bondo in 1995. His first major painting show was in 1992 at the London, CCA Dover Street Gallery, which also featured work by his father Edward Piper (1938 – 1992) and his grandfather John Piper (1903 – 1992). John Piper and Luke's grandmother Myfanwy played a significant role in the abstract art movement in the 1930's and was friends with artists such as Fernand Léger, Alexander Calder, Graham Sutherland and Henry Moore. John was commissioned by the British war office to record the destruction of the Blitz during WWII in 1940 and 1941 and became one of Britain's leading landscape painters of postwar Britain. John was an extremely diverse practitioner: as well as his painting, he is well known for the stained glass window designs in cathedrals and churches, set designs for plays and opera which were written and co-written by Myfanwy and Benjamin Britten, photography, as well as his ceramics and textiles.

Luke read Geography at Cambridge University leading him to Melanesia on an anthropological assignment to study tribal warfare, and then later to expeditions in Africa. As a landscaper, Luke explores the powerful linkage between ancient beliefs and the physical landscape – an idea both urgent and elemental, and one that, as his experience in the Aboriginal lands of Australia has revealed, goes right to the heart of human traditions.

“Like the paintings, the journeys we take in the Engadin are about the character of places that comes from not just the geology and underlying strata but also the unseen magic that is beyond the pure physical appearance of a place. It's a voyage of discovery into the collective relationship with our landscape that inspires us and connects us both to each other and to nature...”

Working *en plein air*, these recent paintings are a response to the air, ever changing light and weather in the mountains, valleys, lakes and streams that seem to be part of the culture.

Here in the mountains we are really surrounded by the natural world in such a way that it cannot be ignored. You look into the landscapes, not over them. Like the villages, high up stalle and steep meadows, the agriculture and buildings are arranged within the vertical folds and geological niches of the landscape. Yet our perception is constantly drawn out and away to infinite peaks in a way that it never could in the lowlands. The sheer power of the wild, of Nature, is ever-present. Untouched, unspoilt places abound just a stone's throw from the mountain path; fields and valleys can be swept away and changed overnight or with the extremes of the seasons. The incident light of morning and evening and the Alpine weather adds to the spectacular theatre of it all like in the dramatic scenes captured by J.M.W Turner in 1809 when he travelled through. There is, therefore, a great contradiction of calm, sublime serenity coupled with the colossal, harsh reality of Nature. This conflict invades the emotions. It can be seen in the work of artists who come from and have lived here; the Giacometti family of artists, Giovanni Segantini, Varlin and Ferdinand Hodler. In the Engadin, somehow the line between the inner and outer self, reality and surreality, life and death is also much finer and in places almost translucent.