

# Sprezzatura, Museums, and the Gift of Curious Eyes

By Shlomit Miky Dan



Eugenio Schmidhuaser

Fishermen on Lake Lugano

circa 1900

glass plate negative

13 x 18 cm

© Museo d'arte della Svizzera italiana,  
Lugano

What impression do art exhibitions leave on us? Why do we remember some and not others? Is it because we're challenged to critique them? Or because we read an article about them that sparked our curiosity or disagreement? Or is it due to their location? Does our exposure to art since childhood have anything to do with it?

Ever since I realized that I had visited Eugenio Schmidhauser's photo exhibition, *Beyond Malcantone*, at MASI Lugano multiple times, I have been puzzled by these questions.

[Eugenio Schmidhauser - Intervista a Gianmarco Talamona e Damiano Robbiani](#)

Video



[Schmidhauser Masi Lugano](#)

MASI Lugano - Museo d'arte della Svizzera

Curated by Gianmarco Talamona and Ludovica Introini

Eugenio Schmidhauser (1876-1952) was a Swiss photographer from the German-speaking canton of Aargau who later settled in the Italian-speaking canton of Ticino. His studies at the renowned Academy of Photography in Munich influenced his artistic style. His photographs of the region's natural beauty, folklore, and trade, flavored with the *joie de vivre* of its residents, played a significant role in promoting tourism in Ticino and beyond.

Pristine lakes and meadows alongside bustling streets and festive village scenes create a unique visual narrative that immerses visitors in the region's distinctive character.

"I was here with my parents," a woman said, smiling as she pointed to a photo. "Wow! We stayed in a pension that used to be the village post office," said another visitor, also smiling.

"I remember celebrating here with my grandparents!" a third attendee exclaimed, pointing to another photo. Other visitors came from Astano, the village where Schmidhauser lived. Their shared reminiscences transformed the ambiance of the exhibition, turning passive observation into a vivid experience—one that I have witnessed during each of my visits.

Despite their brown tonality, the photos evoke tactile sensations: walking through a flower-scented field or dipping one's feet into a cool, clear lake. I could almost hear a small village orchestra playing during a



festival or the clip-clop of a horse-drawn carriage on a cobblestone street. Other photos reveal intricate details: stone houses with sturdy wooden beams; the rounded back of a plump horse; and donkeys laden with goods slowly climbing a steep path. And I have never been to Astano!

The artist's years of dedicated study in photography are evident in the clarity with which he captures the foreground, middle ground, and background. His mastery is evident in the way he skillfully combines horizontal, vertical, and diagonal lines and shapes, as well as the sublime outlining in his photos. The artist captures nature, buildings, streets, and people engaged in their daily activities, such as a group of children playing. By harmonizing these elements, he creates balanced compositions that draw viewers into the subjects.

The Museum Palazzo, a Renaissance architectural gem, was restored and reopened in 2019, preserving its historical charm. Its arches harmonize seamlessly with those in the surrounding area, creating an ornate and soft ambiance. Another notable feature is the glass window in the ground-level reception hall, which connects with Via Canova street. This fusion between exhibitions and the vibrant street life embodies the spirit of Lugano, as exemplified by its lively folklore and joie de vivre—elements that resonate with Schmidhuser's Ticino photography.

[2019~palazzo-reali~](#)



## Dahra

As you turn right from Via Canova, you'll encounter an arched facade street lined with lush greenery and the Lugano lake at its end. There, you'll enter the captivating realm of Maurizio Romano, the visionary behind the Dahra group of shops. It's like stepping into a jungle

in the heart of the city—a paradise of fragrances, vegetation, and fashion, with charming, bustling cafés scattered throughout.



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In response to my question, Mr. Romano shared his vision of inspiring passersby to stop and immerse themselves in the outdoor display using their senses. Visitors are invited to witness, inhale, touch, and listen to the haunting, exotic melodies playing in the background. This sensory experience may entice them to explore each of the four shops, where they can discover Dahra's unique art and design concepts. Additionally, they may wish to engage with the friendly team in this captivating atmosphere. Regardless of whether they make a purchase, the hope is that these experiences will leave a lasting impression, potentially leading to repeat visits.

When you step into Maurizio Romano's first shop, you're awestruck by the team arranging bouquets of fresh flowers. They layer bouquets by their ton-sur-ton hues, adding a giant green leaf here and a bare brown branch there. Constantly shifting their positions, they check the display from every angle, creating an orchestrated harmony that exudes a sense of rhythm.

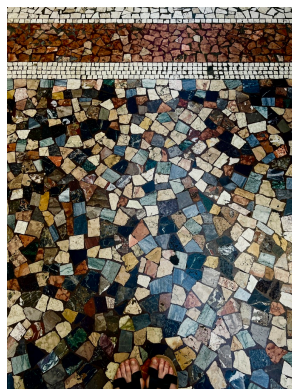




The second shop boasts opulent, handcrafted flowers and greenery that appear natural. As you approach, they transform into three-dimensional sculptures.



Cross the street to the third sister shop, where an outdoor display of white, sand-colored, gray, and silver-toned scarves and other garments sets the sensual celebration in motion. Hovering scents and background melodies transport you to desert destinations and barren landscapes, enticing you to step inside and explore the shop's offerings further.



Following your visit to the three stores, you might want to stop, take a seat on one of the stone benches outside, and ponder your experiences.

Then, feeling refreshed and ready for more, head to the fourth store. You will be captivated anew by its sophisticated display of art, design, and antique objects. The shop also features exclusive perfumes in ornate glass bottles, sorted by scent, shape, and color. They are displayed in groups reminiscent of Byzantine paintings. You will also find a collection of books of renowned figures such as Gio Ponti and Santiago Calatrava. The friendly staff welcomes you to engage in conversation. <https://www.dahraliving.ch/>



You may want to take another break at the café en face, located in a 16th-century building, a few steps from the Masi Museum. As you enjoy an afternoon espresso, admire the café's original ceiling fresco and its clever design that makes such good use of the small space. [https://](https://www.dahraliving.ch/)



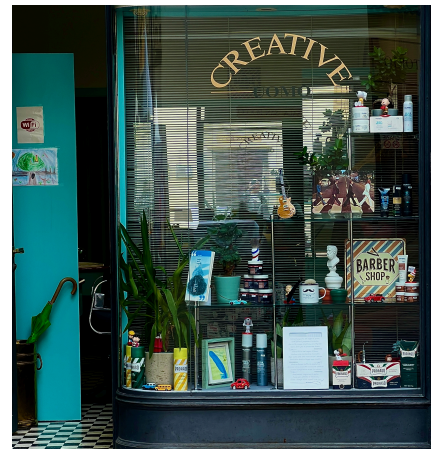
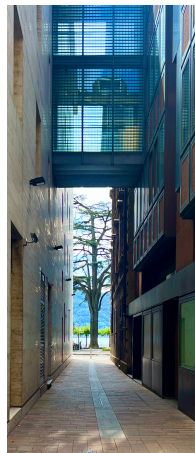
[www.instagram.com/barpaninodivino/](https://www.instagram.com/barpaninodivino/) Take your time, enjoy your surroundings as you reflect on your visit. As Maurizio Romano said, you will likely be enriched by the experience, and perhaps challenged to come back for more.





## The Weekends Market

On weekends, the area transforms into a lively yet relaxed hub of activity, featuring a variety of antiques, vintage items, handmade crafts, and contemporary and vintage paintings and photographs. Some of the artwork captures Ticino's landscapes and scenery, reminiscent of Schmidhauser's photographs. Visitors and locals alike immerse themselves in this vibrant atmosphere. [mercato-antiquariato](#)









Taking a break for one more coffee while strolling along the colorful stands allows you to savor another delicious cup and marvel at how it is served in Lugano. Each café serves coffee in a visually appealing way that would inspire a design curator to organize a Lugano coffee exhibition—or at least allow us laypeople to admire it. <https://www.mauriconcept.ch/#FOOD>

How about adding this to the list of living museums?

### Storica

Lugano's captivating allure beckons just a five-minute stroll from the MASI museum. As I passed by bustling cafés, boutiques, the tourist office, and the post office, my eyes were drawn to a mesmerizing deep red carpet in the window of Storica, a carpet store. Intrigued, I stepped inside and was enveloped by a dimly lit, cave-like ambiance. The store was adorned with a diverse collection of old and new carpets, each one a masterpiece of intricate geometric and nature-inspired patterns in a vibrant array of colors. It was like stepping into a kaleidoscope of colors.



Khaden carpet, Tibet, ca. 1900 AD, Wool, Hand knotted, 155 X 84 cm, Storica, Lugano [www.storica.ch](http://www.storica.ch)

The enthusiastic yet patient shopkeeper welcomed my questions and invited me to touch and feel the textures of the varied rugs. Each pattern, he explained, held its unique cultural significance, representing the traditions of its region. A curated selection of books on these themes further enriched the store's ambiance, transforming it into a visual treasure trove of artistic inspiration and information for those curious to expand their horizons.

The red carpet that caught my eye in the window was a 19th-century Tibetan Khaden rug, crafted from wool and woven using an ancient knotting technique unique to Tibet. Its vibrant, varied red hues were achieved through the dyeing process with madder plants, renowned for producing deep shades of scarlet and crimson.

I noticed that some rugs, like the red Khaden, lacked borders and had half medallions along their edges. These intricate designs held profound Buddhist symbolism, representing freedom and the absence of strict boundaries for the spirit. I also learned that these ancient Tibetan rugs served various purposes. Occasionally, as with the red Khaden, they were used to cover round columns, completing the half-medallions to wholes. As I left, I felt as though I had just visited a small museum.

A few days later, I passed by the store and noticed a different, yet equally captivating rug in the window. This one had a different color scheme and design. It was accompanied by a book about Caucasian carpets. In Lugano, there's no need to plan a visit ahead of time. With a curious eye we can discover adventures that cater to each of us. Visiting such stores can enrich studies our studies of culture and design.

### Just About Style

When you travel often, you get into the habit of collecting and savoring treasured memories of different cultures and landscapes. When you first arrive in Lugano, you'll notice the Luganese's sophisticated yet nonchalant style, executed with flair and infused with a sense of place.

Enter a street café at lunchtime and observe how they accessorize with humorous details. They might wear a thin, tiny, turquoise, handcrafted-looking beaded wristband or a muted-color scarf thrown asymmetrically over one shoulder. These details complement the outfit perfectly, adding a lighthearted *je ne sais quoi* to an otherwise formal, sophisticated ensemble. And it just looks perfect.

Lugano, a significant Renaissance center in the 16th century, resembles an open-air museum today. Its cultural attractions and official museums blend into the city and are easily accessible. Visitors are welcome to wander around without planning ahead and be captivated by unexpected views.

Via Nassa, lined with arched historic buildings, restaurants, renowned cafés, and high-fashion boutiques, is just a short walk from Via Canova. The area is often filled with the sounds of children from the nearby elementary school. Notable sites include Renaissance masterpieces, such as the Santa Maria degli Angioli church and its restored monastery, which feature frescoes attributed to Bernardino Luini, a disciple of Leonardo da Vinci. [2682.html](#)

It borders the impressive, contemporary architecture of the Lugano Art and Culture Museum. [home.html](#) This short route runs parallel to a green boulevard that offers breathtaking views of the lake. The city's scenery symbolizes its successful integration of cultural history, art, and architecture. All you need is a sense of curiosity and a taste for adventure.

The MASI Lugano Museum's exhibition by Eugenio Schmidhauser successfully blends the region's history and heritage with the city's elegant, laid-back, old-meets-new “sprezzatura”, a term coined by [Baldassare Castiglione](#) in his 1528 work The Book of the Courtier.

I believe it is this intricate fusion of elements that accentuates the exhibition's enduring, captivating charm.

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