

THE ART COLLECTION AND THE EXHIBITION

The new-look layout is in keeping with the previous display. The increase in space, as well as the development of a more functional exhibition project, has made it possible to increase the number of works on display and enrich the exhibition, offering a clearer didactic approach more closely focused on the chronology of the historical-artistic works and on the relationship of the collection with the city of Prato.

As such, the exhibition begins with two early 15th century frescoed tabernacles, focusing on the relationship with the city and its patron saints, before moving on to the work of Filippo Lippi, who represents the zenith of an artistic movement that was already proving to be important in the area in the Middle Ages.

The exhibition continues in chronological order focusing on specific artworks, from Giovanni Bellini's masterpiece to the 16th artistic tradition, from the Counter-Reformation to Caravaggio, and from Prato's devotion to the Cintola to the glittering paintings of the 17th and 18th centuries, displayed in the form of a traditional Gallery to be enjoyed for its aesthetic values and the multiple talking points it inspires. Moving into the 19th century, there is the work of Prato's Catani Chiti and Lorenzo Bartolini, and this is followed by 20th century works of pure Tuscan heritage.

Filippo Lippi, key Renaissance painter

"In Prato, near Florence where he had some relatives, in the company of fra' Diamante del Carmine, his companion and apprentice, he stayed many months working on many things all over the land." This is how Vasari remembers the long Prato sojourn of Filippo Lippi, renowned Renaissance artist who from 1452 to 1466 worked on the *Stories of St. Stephen* and *St. John the Baptist* fresco cycle in the main chapel of the parish church (now a cathedral). This cycle is regarded as his finest work and a genuine masterpiece of Renaissance painting. In this period, also known for the artist's affair with Lucrezia Buti, a nun in the Augustinian convent of Santa Margherita, he produced many paintings with the help of his collaborators. Some of these works have been lost (San Francesco), some are still in their original location (Santo Spirito) and others are housed in the Diocesan Museum and the museum of Palazzo Pretorio.

At the origin of Lippi's artistic output and enigmatic style is the small panel exhibited here which, probably a fragment of a slightly larger composition for private devotion, already contains, around the middle of the 1530s, the foundations on which his art would be based. In spite of the small proportions, the monumentality of the enraptured Madonna reveals the teachings of Masaccio, just like the robust figure of the baby Jesus, whose dynamic and emotional gestures recall the work of Donatello, while the architectural frame evokes the spatiality of Brunelleschi. Then there is the colour, the stirrings of the soul, the soft arrangement of the folds: on the small surface of our panel everything speaks of the highest figurative culture of the Florentine Renaissance, summarised with exceptional poetry by one of the most important Italian painters.

***Crucifixion in a Jewish cemetery* by Giovanni Bellini**

This painting, an absolute masterpiece and the apex of Giovanni Bellini's stylistic development, was already conserved in Palazzo Niccolini da Camugliano in Florence in the 17th century, underlining the importance of the circulation in Tuscany of masterpieces of Venetian painting that influenced the local artistic culture. Widely attributed to Giovanni Bellini, critics are nonetheless divided on its date of production, which ranges from 1480-1485, consistent with the panel of *St. Francis* belonging to the Frick Collection in New York, to 1501-1502, because of the much-discussed date on one of the Jewish tombstones and the stylistic consistency with the contemporary *Transfiguration* of Naples.

Because of its setting, the work is unique in terms of its iconography; based on stories repeated in the Gospels, the cross is located in the Jewish cemetery, right in the centre of the composition which has at least three distinct planes, a Nordic approach that Bellini enriches with new and original elements. The foreground features a series of tombstones with Hebrew inscriptions located in a barren, rocky garden which, on the other side of the cross, transforms into a meadow rich in vegetation, evoking the rebirth made possible by Christ's sacrifice. The rendering of the numerous plant species, all identifiable and referable to a complex symbolic system, is precise and accurate. On the second plane there is a group of houses, a stream that powers a mill and a road that winds from the foreground to the background where the town is located. A composite city, both real and idealistic, in which some buildings stand out, identifiable as the cathedral and the Torre di Piazza of Vicenza, the bell tower of Santa Fosca in Venice and the cathedral of Ancona.

A delicate and solemn depiction of the Italian countryside in which Bellini depicts, to use Longhi's words: "a full and deep agreement between man, the footsteps of manmade history, and the cloak of nature."

***The Crowning with Thorns* by Caravaggio**

Revealed by famous art historian Roberto Longhi as an ancient copy of a composition by Caravaggio, the 1974 restoration of this canvas, which spared it from extensive repainting, restored its exceptional artistic qualities and enabled it to be traced back directly to the great painter, as the diagnostic work conducted in 2001 by the Opificio delle Pietre Dure later confirmed.

The canvas depicts one of the most dramatic moments of the Passion of Christ, when Jesus is crowned with thorns. The violence of the scene is captured in a flash of light which, cutting diagonally across the image, invests the anonymous back of the executioner, highlights the body of Christ with his bound and trembling hands, caresses his suffering face and brushes the thoughtful expression of the soldier. Natural and spiritual light at the same time, the darkness of sin and glimmers of redemption, the proud truth of things and ancient, subdued meditation, this canvas captures all of the poetry of Caravaggio, which revolutionised the painting of the time. Painted in Rome after the commissions in San Luigi dei Francesi (1599-1600) and Santa Maria del Popolo (1600-1601), and around the time of the *The Entombment of Christ* in the Vatican (1602-1604), it is probably to be associated with a similar work the painter claimed to have carried out prior to 1605 for the nobleman Massimo Massimi, of which a copy is kept in the church of San Bartolomeo della Certosa di Rivarolo in Genoa. The connection with the Roman nobility, educated and linked to the pauper spirituality of St. Philip Neri, is not only the basis of this work but of all of the contemporary work of Caravaggio, who in Del Monte, Massimi and Giustiniani found clients sensitive to the poetics of reality and the poor. Giustiniani's collection, which numbered about fifteen of his works, included the *Crowning with Thorns* now preserved at the Kunsthistorisches Museum of Vienna which, though more complex in layout, shows the same artistic and spiritual temperament that made this painter, both brilliant and cursed, so unpopular in academic circles.

17th century: the sacred and the profane

Beginning with Caravaggio's *Crowning with Thorns*, a fundamental model for every artist of the time, the beautiful and extremely important collection of 17th century works provides a pictorial overview of the many features that characterised the art - mainly Florentine - of this period.

The far-sighted choices made in the 1970s and 80s by Giuseppe Marchini, expert on the 17th century art and culture of Prato, enables us to appreciate exceptional quality paintings by the most prominent artists of the time, understand their relationships and differences, discover movements and recognise models. Through a series of cross-references and suggestions, we will discover at first glance the impetuous naturalness of Anastagio Fontebuoni in dialogue with Caravaggio, which also inspires the work of Bartolomeo Salvestrini, and then the crystalline and intense truth of Lorenzo Lippi, the sumptuous historic paintings of Matteo Rosselli, the refinement of Bilivert, the warm and nuanced colours of Vignali and the classical inspiration of Cesare Dandini. Not to mention the sensual sweetness of Furini, the unblemished spirituality of Carlo Dolci, the noble portraiture of Suttermans, the eccentricity of Rosi or Mehus and the exceptional quality of all the works, as evidenced by the extraordinary *Maddalena* by Martinelli.

Sacred but above all profane works, an incredible collection of subjects and literary sources, all of which to be enjoyed for their individual values without any pretensions to identify their historical backgrounds, because, as Marchini recalls, the Florentine environment of the 1600s, a constant reference for the suburbs and in particular for Prato which in churches, palaces and museums houses works by these same artists, "didn't create its own consistent and uniform style in the strict scholarly sense of the word, but with extreme individualism welcomed diverse experiences, eclectically opened itself to external contributions favoured by the personalistic politics of the Medici princes who invited in passing artists in all periods and were participants in the various cultural trends of the time".

Heroines and female saints in 17th century art

Despite being periods of modern history in which, at least in Italy, the image and social role of women enjoyed less prestige (aided by the rigid constraints imposed by the Counter-Reformation), the 17th and 18th centuries also contributed most to establishing the iconographic canons, both classical and biblical, of the "heroic" woman. Ancient female figures, whose characters were re-evoked through a process of mythologising sacred and literary themes that emphasised their ethics and morals, were exhibited as examples to be followed in contrast to the corrupt customs of modern society, reinforcing an ancient iconographic tradition.

In the Gallery's rich collection of 17th century paintings, one captivating and exemplary way of understanding the light and shadow of this period is through the depiction of female subjects. Protagonists of famous stories, personifications of virtue or poignant heroines: the collection boasts a multitude of sweet, tenacious women, restless but always beautiful to the point of exhaustion.

Resolute in not yielding to adversity, *Sofonisba* and *Ghismunda* become symbols of devotion to their man, defending their wounded dignity to the point of extreme sacrifice. Heroines of love depicted in every way, vengeful in *Tomiris*, sensual in *Angelica*, faithful in *Julia*, introspective in *Magdalene*, paradigmatic in the *Allegory of the Comedy*, devoted in *Charity*. There are also proud women like *Juno* or *Isabella d'Este as Flora*; both sacred and profane subjects are depicted, offering a multifaceted female image that asserts itself in the strength of its expression despite the limitations imposed by the era.

Even that omnipresent sense of ambivalence, more or less marked, which hints at the unspoken sensuality that lies behind the expressions of these heroines, fully symbolising the typical inclination

of a century that was chaste in appearances but equally maniacal in its private behaviour, does not diminish the intense gaze of these women, who still manage to speak for us centuries later.

Lorenzo Bartolini, a Prato sculptor

One of the most prominent sculptors of the 19th century, Lorenzo Bartolini became a standard bearer of his time for the innovative way he balanced naturalness, formal perfection and moral values in his works.

Born to a modest family in Savignano, Val di Bisenzio, in the province of Prato on 7 January 1777, he soon moved to Florence and, though his personal and artistic life took place outside Prato, over time the city has cultivated the memory of this important fellow citizen.

In fact, alongside the body of works exhibited in the Museum of Palazzo Pretorio, this important collection casts light on the key stages of Bartolini's production in his city of origin with works of undoubted quality.

The busts of *Elisa Baciocchi and Marie Louise of Austria*, respectively sister and wife of Napoleon Bonaparte, recall the prolific activity of the artist upon his return from Paris, at the time of his directorship of the sculpture school of the Academy of Carrara and the Banca Elisiana (1807-1814), devoted to the realisation of portraits of the family of Napoleon, of whom Bartolini was a fervent supporter. Belonging to the same cultural climate is the bust of *Paris* which, as a copy of Canova, testifies to the artistic dialogue with the great master of Possagno.

Returning to Florence in 1814, despite the antipathy of academic circles, Bartolini led a prestigious workshop frequented by aristocratic patrons of international renown and created intense and fascinating sculptures, of which *Fiducia in Dio* is a fine example. A smaller replica of the famous commission by Rosina Trivulzio Poldi Pezzoli, this work, together with the *Nymph with a Scorpion*, also a reduced version of the large sculpture now in the Louvre, allows us to understand the methods adopted in Bartolini's works which, despite responding to the demands of the art market, have maintained their qualities intact.

The *Model for the monument to Leopold II of Lorraine*, never made, combines public celebration with the moral and domestic themes that marked the final part of the career of Bartolini (he died on 20 January 1850) who, in the large sculptural group of Maria Maddalena Pallavicini Barbi Senarega, depicted protecting her daughter from the bite of a squirrel, left his final unfinished work, *Maternal fear*, which can be seen in the entrance hall of the Gallery.