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The exhibition of 33 Renaissance Artworks: "Pinturicchio, the Borgia's Painter: Unveiling the Mystery Concerning Giulia Farnese"

by Lucy Gordan



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The exhibition is on in Rome's Capitoline Museums until September 10th and it shows the story of the painter Bernardino di Betto, nicknamed "Pinturicchio." Between 1492 and 1494, he decorated a suite of rooms in the Apostolic Palace for the apartments of the controversial Pope Alexander VI.



Bernardino di Betto Betti, nicknamed "Pinturicchio"
(1452-1513)

October 12, 1492 is one of the first dates that American school children learn. It marks the date that explorer/navigator **Christopher Columbus** (c. 1451-1506) landed on one of the islands (which is still unknown) in the Bahamas and "discovered" America. The year 1492 is also important to Italy because Columbus was born and grew up in Genoa and to Spain because King Ferdinand and his wife Queen Isabella of Spain subsidized Christopher Columbus voyage intended to be a search for a new route to India and because another famous but unscrupulous Spaniard Rodrigo de Borgia, a well-known womanizer, already the father of seven children, was elected Pope Alexander VI.

On June 22nd I visited the exhibition "Pinturicchio, the Borgia's Painter: Unveiling the Mystery Concerning Giulia Farnese" with a group of foreign journalists. It's on in Rome's Capitoline Museums until September 10. We were accompanied by Francesco Buranelli, former director of the Vatican Museums, former Secretary of the Pontifical Commission for Cultural Patrimony of the Church, former Inspector of the Pontifical Commission for Sacred Archeology and presently one of this exhibit's curators.

On display are 33 Renaissance artworks: drawings of then contemporary Rome, paintings with religious subjects, and portraits of Borgia and Farnese family members, as well as seven ancient Roman sculptures and sarcophagi. As the opening wall panel explains, the exhibition, particularly the first half, "shines a light on the incredible late-15th century period, one of the most fruitful for Roman culture, when the cultural and political elite experienced an intense expansion of humanistic ideas, espoused by intellectuals but strongly controlled by a Roman curia that saw itself a new Athens... Its central theme is the attempt to identify, in the writings and arts of the period, the memory of Ancient Rome, both Republic and Empire, upon which the Church based its own political and religious 'renaissance'". Alexander VI's controversial papacy lasted until his death in 1503. It was a papacy of family intrigue, jealousy, and violence and became the subject of a 2011 TV series, "The Borgias".

Immediately after his election, so still in 1492, Borgia, the nephew of Pope Callixtus III (1455-58), commissioned the **famous painter Bernardino di Betto, nicknamed "Pinturicchio"** (meaning "little painter" because of his small stature), to decorate a suite of rooms in the Apostolic Palace for his apartments. Inspired by the art in the recently discovered Golden House of the

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on a complex iconographic program that used themes from medieval encyclopedias, adding an eschatological layer of meaning and celebrating the supposedly divine origins of the Borgias.” Pinturicchio’s frescoes include the Hall of Mysteries of the Faith depicting the *Annunciation*, *Nativity*, *Adoration of the Magi*, *Resurrection*, *Ascension*, *Descent of the Holy Spirit*, and *Assumption of the Virgin*; the Hall of the Saints with frescoes of *St. Catherine’s Disputation*, the *Myth of the Bull Apis*, *Martyrdom of St. Barbara*, *Paul the Hermit*, the *Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian*, and *The Visitation*; and The Hall of Trivium and of Quadrivium: *Grammar*, *Rhetoric*, *Music*, *Geometry*, and *Astrology*. On display here are high-resolution photographs of many of these frescoes. Pope Alexander VI’s famously beautiful daughter, Lucrezia (born 1480), fathered with Vanozza (Giovanna) dei Cattanei, his mistress of the longest duration, poses as the saint in *St. Catherine’s Disputation*, and the Pope himself is portrayed in *The Resurrection*.



According to the father of art history, Giorgio Vasari, these were not the only portraits Alexander VI had Pinturicchio (1454-1513) slip into his frescoes. In his *Lives of Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, (the editions 1550 and 1568 are displayed here), Vasari writes: “in the palace he also portrayed over the door of one of the living rooms Signora Giulia Farnese in the features of Our Lady and in the same picture the face of Pope Alexander, who is adoring the Madonna.”

“This might not have been so scandalous,” reports an article on the website www.thepinesofrome.com, “if the Giulia Farnese in question hadn’t been the Pope’s teenage mistress at the time. It is a well-documented fact that the already married Farnese, called *La Bella* and known for being the most beautiful woman in Rome at the time, was not only the Pope’s official mistress, but had also borne him a child.” (Some commentators even supposed that their baby daughter Laura, born in the eventful year 1492 when Giulia was only 18, was the model for the Baby Jesus.

“The Farnese were provincial nobility,” Buranelli told us. “They were social climbers, particularly Giulia’s mother, Giovanna Caetani, who encouraged her daughter’s affair with Rodrigo de Borgia, in spite of 43-year age difference. Thanks to their intimacy, Giulia was able to get her brother Alessandro (the future Pope Paul III (1534-49) created Cardinal in 1493. When she died in 1524, at age 50, she left Alessandro her bed perhaps as a symbol of the sacrifices she had made to increase her family’s

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“The intent of the exhibit’s second half,” Buranelli continued, “is a kind of detective story. We have been able disprove with new evidence that Vasari’s slanderous remarks are fake news. Vasari’s accusations were malicious speculation that became a hard-to-die myth.” What follows here is the evidence of Buranelli’s rebuttal.

Because of Alexander VI’s loose morals and corruption, almost 200 years passed before another pope took the name Alexander. During his reign (1655-1667) the moralistic Alexander VII Chigi decided that the fresco of his homonymous predecessor adoring his mistress was blasphemous and had it hacked off the wall. However, it seems, according to www.thepinesofrome.com, “that at least a few of its pieces were salvaged by either the Pope himself or someone in his family because a small fragment of a fresco depicting a beautiful Christ child held by a pair of graceful hands with another hand caressing his foot (eventually dubbed *The Baby Jesus of the Hands*) was listed as part of the collection of Flavio Chigi, relative of the late Alexander VII Chigi, in 1693, as well as a half-figure of the Madonna.” “The portrait of Alexander VI went lost, is still lost, and probably will remain so forever,” Buranelli said, “because, when the Borgia family fell out of favor after Pope Alexander VI’s death, his apartments were little used for centuries. Only in 1889 did Pope Leo XIII have the rooms restored and opened for public viewing and today most of the rooms are used for the Vatican Collection of Modern Religious Art, inaugurated by Pope Paul VI in 1973. Fast forward 300 years! “The two fragments,” continues the website, “were passed down through the Chigi family and on display at Palazzo Chigi, on Rome’s Via del Corso, until 1912, when Eleanora Chigi married Enrico Incisa della Rocchetta and brought the fragments with her, eventually passing them down to their descendant Marchese Giovanni Incisa della Rocchetta, who was an art historian.”



“In 1940, Marchese Giovanni, [while visiting Mantua], happened to see a painting on canvas that looked very familiar to him. It was the work of a 17th century copyist Pietro Facchetti, who had been commissioned by Francesco Gonzaga in 1612 to recreate [Pinturicchio’s scandalous work]. The Gonzagas were looking for a way to ridicule their rivals, the Farnese. [This thesis was confirmed by Buranelli]. Contemporary chronicler Stefano Infessura reports that Facchetti managed to gain access to the Borgia Apartment...by bribing a guard. Even during the reign of Pope Paul V [Borghese, (1605-1621)] the work had been considered inappropriate and therefore was covered by a veil of fabric. Facchetti convinced the guards to uncover the work and eventually painted a copy. When Marchese Giovanni saw Facchetti’s work, and carried out some more research of his own, he concluded

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portrait by Luca Longhi of Giulia Farnese, *Lady with a Unicorn* (the unicorn is the symbol of the Farnese family), on loan from the National Museum in Rome's Castel Sant'Angelo. Cesare Borgia, one of Pope Alexander VI's sons, described Giulia Farnese as having "dark coloring, [luminous] black eyes, a round face and a particular ardor", as well as long flowing chestnut-colored tresses in keeping with Longhi's portrait, painted around 1535. Therefore she certainly did not resemble Facchetti's blond Madonna or the several other blond ones painted by Pinturicchio in the exhibit's last room, all of whom have slender noses, sweet oval-shaped faces, and nearly closed eyes. Also on display there are the only two surviving fragments of Pinturicchio's fresco. This is the first time they have been exhibited in public together. In 2004 the fragment of *The Baby Jesus of the Hands* resurfaced on the antique market and was purchased by the Guglielmo Giordano Foundation with headquarters in Umbria near Perugia; the Madonna fragment belongs to a private collection, which Buranelli refused categorically to identify. He did say, however, that "after the exhibition in Rome closes, the Madonna will undergo a badly-needed restoration and then the exhibition will hopefully travel. Its destinations are still to be decided."

Another interesting fact revealed by Buranelli is that Pinturicchio's inspiration for Pope Alexander VI's caressing Baby Jesus' foot, the only similar iconography Buranelli knows of, was probably a 9th century mosaic in the Roman church Santa Maria in Domnica showing Pope Paschal II caressing the Madonna's foot.

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