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Arts

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Cortona, Tuscany, Dedicates a Major Exhibition to Native Son, Luca Signorelli

On the 500th anniversary of his death, the works were selected to represent his evolving style over six decades



Italian Hours

Lucy Gordan





The Miracle of St. Nicholas (1508-10), on loan from Atlanta's High Museum of Art. Courtesy of the Museo dell'Accademia Etrusca e la Città di Cortona.

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"Signorelli 500. Maestro Luca: Pittore di luce e poesia" will be on exhibit in the Tuscan city of Cortona at its Museum of the Etruscan Academy until October 8.

The major exhibition is dedicated to native son painter Luca Signorelli (c. 1445-1523) on the five-hundredth anniversary of his death and 70 years after the last exhibition that Cortona dedicated to him.

Curated by Tom Henry, Professor Emeritus of the University of Kent and former director of the School of Classical and Renaissance Studies at the English University of Rome, the thirty paintings on display are on loan from private collections and from 24 museums worldwide: Uffizi Galleries (Florence), Museo Nazionale Capodimonte (Naples), Foundation Jacquemart-André (Paris), National Gallery (London), Museo dell'Opera del Duomo (Orvieto), Pinoteca Comunale (Sansepolcro), National Gallery of Ireland (Dublin), The National Gallery (Washington D.C.) and the High Museum of Art (Atlanta, Georgia), to name a selection.





The Birth of St. Nicholas, (1508-10), on loan from Atlanta's High Museum of Art. Courtesy of the Museo dell'Accademia Etrusca e la Città di Cortona.

Displayed in chronological order and selected to represent the changing style during each decade of Signorelli's 60-year-long career, the exhibition opens with *Presentation at the Temple* (1464-65) on loan from a private collection in New York. Commissioned to Pietro della Francesca for the *Chiesa della Santissima Trinità di Arezzo* according to Vasari, Professor Henry considers it Signorelli's earliest work, painted when Signorelli was probably still an apprentice in Piero della Francesca's workshop, where he learned about foreshortening, refined backgrounds, and the use of light.

Cortona's exhibition has three other American connections: the financing of the restoration of his *Tondo of The Madonna and Child with the Saints of Cortona: Michael, Vincent, Margaret of Cortona, and Mark*, one of Signorelli's few paintings never to have left his birthplace; and the loans of two panels of a predella: *The Birth and the Miracle of St. Nicholas* from Atlanta, for the first time

back in Italy from the United States as well as the *Calvary* panel mentioned below from the Matelica altarpiece.

Another reassemblage for the first time are six of the seven panels of the Matelica altarpiece, made in 1504-5 for the *Chiesa di Sant'Agostino* in Matelica, dismembered and dispersed around the world in the mid-18th century. Two come from private collections, one in England, the other in Italy; one from London's National Gallery, two from Bologna, and one from Washington's National Gallery. Yet another, for the first time is the central panel of the Polyptych of the *Chiesa di Santa Lucia* in Montepulciano, depicting the *Madonna and Child Enthroned*, with its predella, composed of three panels on loan from the Uffizi. Not only the Signorelli works mentioned above were dismembered and dispersed, but also others displayed singly here, thus it was an enormous challenge and overwhelming research project for Professor Henry and his collaborators to assemble the exhibition.



Calvary, panel of the Matelica altarpiece (1504-5), on loan from the National Gallery in Washington D.C.. Courtesy of the Museo dell'Accademia Etrusca e la Città di Cortona.

Another extraordinary feat of Professor Henry was to put on display 11 paintings by Signorelli which date to before 1500, especially since no works painted during the first 35 years of Signorelli's career have remained in Cortona.

Several other paintings by Signorelli, not in the exhibition, are permanently located in Cortona in the *Museo Diocesano*, the *chiese di San Niccolò*, *di San Domenico* and *di Santa Maria Delle Grazie al Calcinaio* and *il Palazzone*.

While it's true that Signorelli was born in Cortona, a place he always loved and returned to frequently, and where he died after falling off a scaffolding while painting a fresco in a cardinal's summer residence nearby, he was peripatetic, traveling frequently in Tuscany and Umbria, and twice to Rome.

After studying with Piero della Francesca in Arezzo, Signorelli painted in Città di Castello, the Monastery of Monte Oliveto Maggiore south of Siena, Orvieto, Siena, Rome (*Moses's Testament and Death* in the Sistine Chapel), Montone, Umbertide, Morra, Citerna, Paciano, Perugia, Loreto, and Arcevia.





The Madonna and Baby Jesus with the patron saints of Cortona: Michael, Vincent, Margaret of Cortona and Mark (1510-12) in the Museo dell'Accademia Etrusca e della città di Cortona. Courtesy of Museo dell'Accademia Etrusca e della città di Cortona.

In addition to the exhibition catalog, Skira (33.25 euros) will be publishing a guide with five different itineraries (including museums) outside of Cortona, all in central Italy within 70 kilometers of Cortona, where it will always be possible to admire works by Signorelli after “Signorelli 500” has closed (12.25 euros). Both are only in Italian.

Although “Signorelli 500. Maestro Luca da Cortona, Pittore di luce e poesia” opened on June 23, commemorations began earlier this spring with concerts and lectures in Orvieto. In March members of the Foreign Press Association were invited to Orvieto to admire Signorelli’s masterpiece: his frescoes (1499-1502) in the Duomo’s chapel of *San Brizio*, murals initially begun by Fra Angelico fifty years earlier.

Signorelli’s frescoes in the vaults and on the upper walls represent the events concerning the Apocalypse and the Last Judgment. The Apocalyptic frescoes begin with the *Preaching of Antichrist*, and proceed to *Doomsday* and *The Resurrection of the Flesh*. Those of the Last Judgment depict *Paradise*, *the Elect and the Condemned*, *Hell*, *The Resurrection of the Dead*, and *The Destruction of the Reprobate*. Michelangelo is said to have borrowed some of Signorelli’s figures or combinations for his *Last Judgment* in the Sistine Chapel.

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Lucy Gordan

Italian Hours

Former editor at the American Academy in Rome and at the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization, with journalistic accreditation in Italy and the Vatican, I'm culture editor of the US monthly Inside the Vatica...

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