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“The Treasure of the Holy Land” on Display in Florence

87 of the works on exhibit have never before left the Holy Land



Italian Hours

Lucy Gordan



The Altar of Calvary in Jerusalem before being sent to Florence for Restoration. Courtesy of Brother Stéphane Milovitch

The 109 masterpieces on display until January 8, 2025 at the Marino Marini Museum in Florence, chronicle more than five centuries of sacred art commissioned by European Catholic courts—Spain, Portugal, Holy Roman Empire, Genoa, the Grand Duchy of Tuscany, and the Kingdom of Naples, and mostly donated to the Basilica of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem. They include jewels, ornaments, chalices, sacred vestments, codices, icons, and canopies.

Since 2013 the Franciscan Order of Friars Minor, the custodians of Christian sacred places in the Holy Land since 1342, has been cataloguing their share: 87 works of these sacred art treasures, which, after their donation, have never left the Holy Land before this exhibition and have never even been exhibited in Jerusalem.

The remaining approximately 20 sacred artworks are on loan from Italian Museums: the Uffizi, Palazzo Reale in Naples, Museo e Real Bosco di Capodimonte (also in Naples), Biblioteca Centrale di Firenze, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Biblioteca Riccardiana, Archivio di Stato di Firenze, Fondazione Banco di Napoli, and private collections.



The Rucellai Chapel. Courtesy of Ufficio Stampa Mailander

The choice of the exhibition's Florentine location is for a specific historical reason. From the Middle Ages to the early 19th century, it was the site of the Church of San Pancrazio behind the Palazzo Rucellai. In the mid-15th-century Giovanni di Paolo Rucellai commissioned Leon Battista Alberti to build him a tomb in the family chapel of the church. Completed in 1467, this sepulcher was inspired by the Holy Sepulcher's Anastasis in Jerusalem.

Its exterior is decorated with green and white marble intarsia; inside, decorated with frescoes by Giovanni da Piamonte, a student of Piero della Francesca, are the tombs of Giovanni Rucellai and his family. When the Church was deconsecrated, the Rucellai chapel was not, and today is in the Marino Marini Museum, the only museum of contemporary art in a deconsecrated church to house a still consecrated chapel, visitable since February 2013.

According to Leyla Bezzi, executive curator, the exhibition is intended to be a journey to Jerusalem in three parts. The first part covers the history of the Holy Sepulcher, the church which contains both the site where Jesus was crucified at Calvary and the location of his empty tomb— as well as the history of the Rucellai Chapel; the second is a geographic pilgrimage where visitors will retrace the itinerary followed by pilgrims to Jerusalem. On display here are engravings from

Breydenbach's "Book of Chronicles" depicting the ports of Venice, Ancona and Jaffa and ending with a panoramic view of the Holy City. On display in the third section are the artworks and treasures donated by Europe's royalty.

The star of the exhibition is the Altar of Calvary from the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem. This masterpiece and its the massive gilded bronze Ornament, now an integral part of the Altar of Calvary, were donated by Ferdinand I de' Medici (1549-1609) to guard the Stone of Unction, but the stone was too large. For a complete chronology of the altar click on www.terrasanctamuseum.org.

The Ornament was made in Florence between 1587 and 1588 under the direction of Father Domenico Portigiani of the Convent of St. Mark. It contains six splendid bas-reliefs attributed to Pietro Francavilla and his master, the sculptor Giambologna. These six bas-reliefs each represent an episode of Christ's passion and resurrection: The Elevation of the Cross, The Crucifixion, The Deposition from the Cross, The Anointing of Christ's Body, The Burial and Resurrection. (These bas-reliefs are comparable to bas-reliefs by these same artists on the bronze doors of Pisa's Cathedral.) Now for the first time in nearly five centuries, the Ornament has left Jerusalem to return to Italy for restoration and display.



A silver bas-relief showing the Resurrection of Christ (1736), a gift of the Kingdom of Naples. courtesy of the Terra Sancta Museum

Other highlights are a gold and silver altar frontal, a gift of Charles of Bourbon, King of Naples, made in 1731 by the Neapolitan master goldsmith Gennaro De Blasio as well as two canvases depicting St. Francis and St. Anthony of Padua, painted in the 18th century by Francesco De Mura.

Before arriving in Florence several of these sacred objects were displayed at the Museo Calouste Gulbenkian Museum in Lisbon from November 10, 2023 to February 26, 2024 and then at the Cidade da Cultura in Santiago de Compostela in Spain from March 22 to August 4, 2024.

Brother Stéphane Milovitch, Director of Cultural Heritage of the Holy Land and Superior of the Franciscan Monastery of St. Savior in Jerusalem, informed me that "After Florence, the exhibition will travel to three destinations in 2025. One will be New York, the other two in Europe, but no venues or dates have yet been confirmed. The treasure will return to

Jerusalem in 2026 to go on permanent display in a new section of the Terra Sancta Museum in St. Savior’s Convent in 2027.”

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Lucy Gordan
Italian Hours

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Lucy Gordan



Planning a Pilgrimage to Italy for 2025's Holy
Year

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