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“After Caravaggio: 17th-Century Neapolitan Art on Show in Prato”, till April 13

The exhibit that graces us with 19 paintings that have never been publicly seen explores the influence of the turbulent painter who invented chiaroscuro

Italian Hours

by Lucy Gordan



Museo di Palazzo Pretorio--Nicola Malinconico, Il buon Samaritano, 1703-1706

Jan 13 2020

On May 29th, 1606 during a brawl in Piazza Navona, **Caravaggio** (1571-1610) murdered the pimp from Terni, Ranuccio Tomassoni, who had VIP clients: nobles, notaries, cardinals. The painter was sentenced to death. To avoid papal justice, this hot-headed and often violent master of *chiaroscuro* escaped to Naples, which was outside the jurisdiction of Rome's authority and where he could count on the protection of the powerful Colonna family.

Thus the most famous painter in Rome became the most famous painter in Naples. During his first stay from October 1606 to June 1607, he painted numerous masterpieces. These included the breath-taking altarpieces with the *Seven Works of Mercy* for the *Pio Monte* and

the *Flagellation* for the Church of *San Domenico* (now in Naples' *Capodimonte* Museum). Like his Roman canvases, these works are characterized by an intense naturalism of their human figures and of light, and by an unprecedented and seemingly irreverent interpretation of sacred themes because his models were frequently his tavern companions, beggars, and prostitutes. The most famous painting of Caravaggio's second stay in Naples from October 1609 to July 1610, during which time his face was badly disfigured in yet again another brawl, is his dramatic *Martyrdom of Saint Ursula*, his last work (now in Naples' Baroque *Palazzo Zavallos Stigliano*, at Via Toledo 185, an art museum since 2014).



Museo di Palazzo Pretorio–Mattia Preti, Ripudio di Agar, 1635-1640

The exhibition “Dopo Caravaggio: Il Seicento Napoletano in Mostra a Prato” (“After Caravaggio: 17th-Century Neapolitan Art on Show in Prato”) will remain on display until April 13th in this Tuscan city's *Palazzo Pretorio*. As the title clearly states the exhibition is not about Caravaggio, but about the painters, his contemporaries and others of the next two generations, who lived in Naples, studied his Neapolitan, and sometimes Roman, works and were deeply influenced by his style and subject matter.

Sixteen of “Dopo Caravaggio”’s 19 paintings, never exhibited publicly before, belong to the **Fondazione De Vito** and the other three to the Civic Museum in Prato’s *Palazzo Pretorio*, home to Tuscany’s second most important collection of 17th-century Neapolitan paintings after the *Uffizi*. The three are “**Battistello**”’s “*Noli Me Tangere*” (1618), Mattia Preti’s “*Repudiation of Hagar*” (c. 1635-1640), and Nicola Malinconico’s “*Good Samaritan*” (1703-6), the exhibition’s final painting. Nicola Malinconico (Naples, 1663-1721) was a student of Luca Giordano, protagonist of the Neapolitan Baroque. The *Good Samaritan*’s brilliant colors, its softness and the freedom of its brushstrokes are evocative of Giordano and its subject of Ribera.



“Battistello” Caracciolo- *San Giovannino*.

The Fondazione De Vito, headquartered at the *Villa degli Olmi*, *Via della Casa al Vento* 1774, in Vaglia, a picturesque hamlet 20 km. north of Florence, was founded in 2011 by Giuseppe De Vito (Portici, a neighborhood of Naples, 1924-Florence, 2015). He was a successful engineer, scholar, collector of 17th-century Neapolitan art, and in 1982 founder/contributor of the scholarly journal *Ricerche sul ‘600 napoletano*, still published annually with the updated title of *Ricerche per la storia dell’arte moderna a Napoli*. The

Fondazione's intent "is to promote studies on the history of Modern Art in Naples with exhibitions, seminars, conferences, publications, and scholarships for young students." Its headquarters house De Vito's 60 paintings, a library, a rich photo archive, and a collection of documents' transcriptions. Scholars can visit by appointment:

fondazione@fondazionedevito.it, tel. +39-055-549811.

De Vito's collection of 17th-century Neapolitan paintings, perhaps the most significant in private hands, includes works by Giovanni Battista Caracciolo, nicknamed "Battistello", **Jusepe de Ribera**, "Il Maestro dell'Annuncio ai pastori", Giovanni Ricca, Francesco Francanzano, Massimo Stanzione, Bernardo Cavallino, Andrea Vaccaro, Paolo Finoglio, Luca Giordano and Mattia Preti, among many others.

Very few of De Vito's paintings have ever been exhibited publicly and, before Prato, only with De Vito's direct intervention: in 1982-3 "*Paintings in Naples 1606-1705 From Caravaggio to Giordano*" was on show in London's Royal Academy, Washington D.C.'s National Gallery, Paris' *Grand Palais*, and Turin's *Palazzo Reale*, and in 1984-5 "*Civiltà del Seicento a Napoli*" in the "Capodimonte" Museum in Naples.

Prato's show, displayed in chronological order, is divided into four sections: "Giovanni Battista Caracciolo 1618-35", "Jusepe De Ribera e "**Il Maestro dell'Annuncio ai Pastori** 1632-1650", "Protagoniste Femminili 1634-1652", and Mattia Preti e la Seconda Metà del Secolo". It opens with two paintings by "Battistello": the recently-restored "*Young St. John the Baptist*" belongs to the Fondazione and the "*Noli Me Tangere*" to Prato's Museum. The latter is considered his masterpiece.



Jusepe de Ribera–Sant'Antonio Abate

“Battistello” (Naples 1578-1635) is the only painter on exhibit to have met Caravaggio in person, probably around the time of Caravaggio’s Radolovich commission in 1606.

“Battistello” was also among the first to adopt Caravaggio’s startling new style of “*chiaroscuro*” with its human figures defined by spotlight. His “*Immaculate Conception*” for the Church of *Santa Maria della Stella* in Naples is considered to be the first documented Caravaggesque painting. In stylistic and thematic relationship with

“Battistello”’s two paintings is Massimo Stanzione’s *St. John the Baptist in the Desert*, datable to c. 1630. Again the saint is depicted as a cherubic youth with a lamb. **Stanzione** (Naples 1585-1656) was painter Artemisia Gentileschi’s lover and protégé as well as the arch rival of Spanish-born (Xàtiva near Valencia) Jusepe de Ribera. Ribera is the subject of “*Dopo Caravaggio*”’s second section together with his pupil, also born in Xàtiva and known as “The Master of the Annunciation to the Shepherds” before De Vito identified him as Juan Dò (1617?-1656?).

Stanzione and Ribera, who was active in Naples from 1616 to his death in 1652, both dominated the painting scene in Naples for several decades, depicting primarily religious subjects. Ribera was the most important painter for the development of Caravaggesque

naturalism. He moved from Spain to Rome in 1612 where he lived on Via Margutta, joined the Academy of Saint Luke, and collaborated with other foreign admirers of Caravaggio. In 1616 he moved to Naples to avoid his creditors.

Ribera soon headed a workshop with numerous pupils and collaborators. In addition to sacred scenes, he painted half figures of saints and philosophers. His "*St. Anthony Abbot*" (1638), on display here, is an almost photographic portrait, very similar to many of Caravaggio's saints, especially his two St. Mark the Evangelist, (one was destroyed during World War II) in Rome's Church of *San Luigi dei Francesi*.

On the same wall with "*St. Anthony Abbot*" are three portraits with philosophical themes by Ribera's student Juan Dò. "*Man in Meditation in Front of a Mirror* (1640-45) is identifiable as a Socratic philosopher. "*Old Man in Meditation with a Cartouche*" (1648-52) has a Latin inscription about the transience of material goods and life itself. The realistic wrinkled low-class faces of both these half-length portraits are Caravaggesque. Less so in appearance, but not thematically, is Dò's "*Young Man Smelling a Rose*", also an allegory of the transience of life. Moreover, in appearance this *Young Man* (the exhibition's logo) seems sickly like many of Caravaggio's portraits of musicians and of Bacchus.

Section 2 ends with a half-length portrait of a *Prophet* (1640-45) by Francesco Francanzano (1612-1656), another student of Ribera. Francanzano's portrait is similar to Dò's two older philosophical men, grizzly in appearance, but the *Prophet's* cartouche is blank, awaiting divine inspiration.



*Maestro dell'Annuncio Ai Pastori (Juan Dò) -
Young Man Smelling Rose*

The canvases of Section 3, painted in the 1640s and '50s, are still Caravaggesque with the protagonists spotlighted, but their brighter and greater variety of colors show a new Venetian and Flemish influence—a major turning point. Moreover, their subjects are female, not male, protagonists from the Old and New Testaments and female martyrs, Catherine, Ursula, Lucy, and Agatha, very popular saints in 17th-century Neapolitan painting. The spotlighted saint in "The Martyrdom of Saint Ursula" (1634-6) by Neapolitan Giovanni Ricca (1603-1656?) is similar to Caravaggio's painting of the same subject in *Palazzo Zevallos Stigliano*. Likewise is "Saint Agatha" (c. 1636-40) by Antonio Vaccaro (Naples, 1604-70). "The Mystic Marriage of Saint Catherine" (1635) by Neapolitan Paolo Finoglio (1590-1645) shows an affinity to the light and layout of "Battistello's" "Nolo Me Tangere". In contrast "Saint Lucy" (1645-8) by Neapolitan Bernardo Cavallino (1616-56), who is said to have trained with Stanzione and worked with Francesco Francanzano, has a softer

diffused light and brighter colors including a Venetian red curtain. So does Francanzano's "*Loth and his Daughters*" (1652), painted more than a decade after "*The Prophet*" and of unknown authorship until De Vito's attribution.

Section 4 centers around four works by Calabrian Mattia Preti (1613-1699), who trained in Rome before living in Naples from 1653 to 1660. He helped to bring Caravaggio's naturalism into a fully Baroque style. His recently-restored "*Repudiation of Hagar*", one of his favorite topics, was painted in Rome and was heavily influenced by Caravaggio's *chiaroscuro*. Instead his "*Charity with Three Beggar Children*", painted soon after 1656's horrific plague in Naples, is unique. No other contemporary painting has the same iconography.

Prato is only a 20-minute train ride from Florence. The permanent art collection in the *Palazzo Pretorio* with its Renaissance masterpieces by Paolo Uccello, Filippo Lippi, Filippino Lippi, Fra 'Diamante, and Andrea Della Robbia, its 10th-century Cathedral, Medieval Castle and city walls, medieval *Piazza Mercantile* (one of the largest market squares in Europe), magnificent Textile Museum, and Italy's largest Chinatown make it worth a detour.

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