IN THE EYES OF THE BEHOLDERS

■ By Lucy Gordan

Il Mondo Novo ("The New World") by Giandomenico Tiepolo, from the Prado, Madrid. Below, *The Girl in a Frame* by Rembrandt, from the Royal Castle Museum, Warsaw

Maffeo Barberini (1568-1644) became Pope Urban VIII on August 6, 1623. During his reign he expanded papal territory by force of arms and advantageous politicking and reformed church missions. But he is certainly best remembered as a prominent patron of the arts on a grand scale.

Barberini funded many sculptures from Bernini: the first in c. 1617 the "Boy with a Dragon" and later, when Pope, several portrait busts, but also numerous architectural works including the building of the College of Propaganda Fide, the Fountain of the Triton in today's Piazza Barberini, and the *baldacchino* and the *cathedra* in St. Peter's Basilica.

Besides Bernini Barberini also patronized the painters Nicholas Poussin, Claude Lorrain and Pietro da Cortona, who celebrated Urban VIII's papacy in his huge fresco *"Allegory of Divine Providence and Barberini Power"* (1633-9) on the ceiling of the large salon in Palazzo Barberini.

For, when Barberini became Pope, he wanted to build a magnificent home for his family. So, when Cardinal Alessandro Sforza met with financial hardships, in 1625 Barberini purchased Sforza's villa and gardens, today at the base of Via Veneto and near the Quirinal Palace, but at that time on the outskirts of the city. The architect Carlo Maderno, assisted by his nephew Borromini, in 1627 began expanding the Sforza's villa. When Maderno died in 1629, still with the help of Borromini, Bernini took over. The exterior, inspired by the Colosseum and similar in appearance to the Palazzo Farnese, which had been constructed between 1541 and c. 1580, was completed in 1633.

When Urban VIII died, his successor Pamphili Pope Innocent X (r. 1644-1655) confiscated the Palazzo Barberini, but returned it in 1653. From then on it continued to remain the property of the Barberini family until 1949 when it was bought by the Italian Government to become the art museum it is today. But there was a problem: in 1934 the Barberinis had rented a section of the building to the Army for its Officers Club. The lease ran out in 1953, but the Officers wouldn't leave so the Government renewed the lease until 1965 hoping to give the Officers the necessary time to relocate their club. Finally, after more years of tug-of-war, in 1997 a solution was found and, after a decade or restoration, in 2006 the *Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica*, one of the most important painting collections in Italy with works from the 13th to the 16th centuries, opened to the public. Its permanent collection includes Raphael's portrait of his mistress *La fornarina,* Caravaggio's *Judith Beheading Holofernes,* and a Hans Holbein portrait of Henry VIII of England, who is dressed for his wedding to Anne of Cleves, his fourth wife.

Thank goodness, after two months of a second cultural lockdown the museums in Rome reopened on February 1. However, sadly they're accessible only to visitors who are in Latium because not even

inter-regional travel in Italy is yet permitted much less international tourism. Nonetheless, luckily for me, at Palazzo Barberini I recently saw one of the most unusual temporary exhibitions of paintings I've ever seen. Otherwise, unless there is a miraculous breakthrough in the next six weeks, only other Italian-speakers will be able to enjoy this temporary exhibition by ordering its catalog from its publisher Campisano Editore for 40 euros at *campisano.editore@tiscali.it*.

Here's what I saw. On at the Palazzo Barberini until April 5 is "*L'ora della Spetttore. Come le immagini ci Usano"* or *"The Hour of the Beholder: How Images Use Us."*

Above, *Butcher Shop* by Bartolomeo Passerotti.
Below, *The Passion* by Hans Memling

The brainstorm of masterful curator **Michele Di Monte**, its 25 paintings are divided into six sections: "The Threshold," "The Passion of the Gaze," "The Appeal," "The Indiscreet," "The Accomplice," and "The Voyeur".

The aim of the exhibition, made clear in an entryway introductory section, "The Audience's Expectation," is for the visitor to participate in the painting, metaphorically-speaking to enter its canvas, to be part of the action, not just an observer.

Above, *Pope St. Gregory the Great* by Jusepe de Ribera.
Bottom, *Fortune Teller* by Simon Vouet

This point is made clear immediately by two antique mirrors at the entrance where the visitor is both the observer and the observed and from its only painting, "Il Mondo Novo" (1765). On loan from the Prado in Madrid, it's by Giandomenico Tiepolo, the son of his much more famous father Giambattista. Both artists are depicted in the painting, Giambattista in a red coat followed immediately behind by Giandomenico holding a kind of monocle. The painting is of a crowd waiting its turn to look through a kind of "magic lantern", not visible in the painting, which is said to project imaginary scenes of exotic unknown places. All but one person has their backs to you the visitor. Thus you too become part of the crowd. Everyone here is waiting patiently to see a new invention just as we are today for the vaccines to end the pandemic. Hence Del Monte's choice of this painting!

Of the 25 paintings on display, eight: Ottomar Elliger II's *Young Lady in the Window*, Bartolomeo Passerotti's *Butcher Shop*, Jusepe de Ribera's *St. Gregory the Great*, Simone Vouet's *The Fortune Teller,* Guido Reni's *Salomé*, Giovanni Lanfranco's *Venus Playing the Harp*, Jacopo Zucchi's *Bathsheba at the Baths*, Pierre Subleyras's *Nude* belong to the Palazzo Barberini's permanent collection. Several of the others are on loan from the National Gallery in London, the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, the Royal Castle in Warsaw, the Capodimonte in Naples, the Uffizi in Florence, and the Galleria Sabauda in Turin.

"Outside of Europe, in the United States and in Australia, where there are other important paintings with this same intent of making the observer a participant," Del Monte told our small, tenfold social-distanced group of journalists at a press preview, "but sadly the uncertainty of the pandemic made their loans impossible. It also has prevented the exhibition from travelling elsewhere after April 5."

In the first section, "The Threshold", windows, curtains, and frames invite the viewer to cross the separations between our real world and that of the painting. For example, Rembrandt's "The Girl in a Frame", probably the exhibition's most famous painting on loan from Warsaw, is not a formal portrait. She is gripping an inner frame, a kind of windowsill, which is part of the painting. Thus, she seems to be looking out and ready to talk to us through a window.

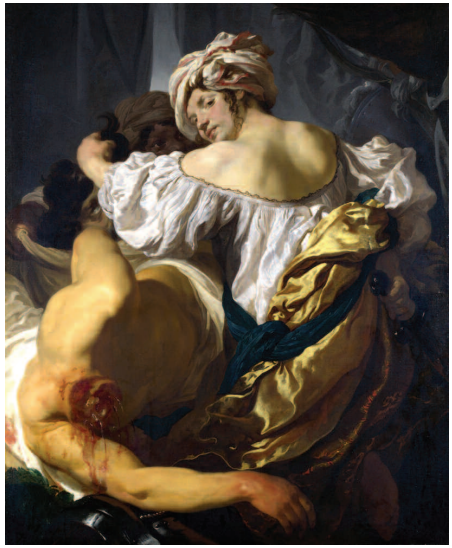
Likewise, in the section "Appeal" in his portrait by Sofonisba Anguissola the poet Giovanni Battista Caselli, from Cremona like the artist, is pointing at a painting of the Madonna, baby Jesus, and St. John the Baptist presumably to let us know he's a religious man and again the butchers in Passerotti's *Butcher Shop* also seem to be demanding our attention to buy their meats.

Instead, the only painting in the interim section, "The Passion of the Gaze" is *The Passion* (1471) by Flemish Hans Memling for his wealthy sponsors Maria and Tommaso Portinari, head of the Floren-

tine Medici Bank's branch in Bruges, each of whom is painted in the painting's two lower corners. Meant for private devotion it's a sort of *speculum* or mirror, a kaleidoscope of the *Via Crucis* of Holy Week from Jesus's arrival in Jerusalem on Palm Sunday in the upper left hand corner to his crucifixion in the upper right. The eye has to go "on a journey and follow in the footsteps of Christ along the tormented pathway of the 23 stations of his Passion," relates its wall panel.

In the next section, "The Indiscreet," we become nosey-parkers. We peak over St. Gregory's shoulder without his consent or realization as he writes and we do the same to the two young painters, who seem to look out of the canvas annoyed by our presence, in Van Oost's *In Front of the Easel*. Another scene we should not be witnessing is Simon Vouet's Caravaggesque *Fortune Teller* who with an accomplice is robbing her all too innocent unaware client.

In "The Accomplice," the section with the most religious paintings we are witnesses to many Biblical scenes: *Salomé* by Guido Reni, Mattia Preti's *Christ and the Adultress*, and Andrea Sacchi's *Drunken Noah*.



Judith Beheading Holofernes by Johan Liss, from the National Gallery, London

Very horrific is Johan Liss's *Judith Beheading Holofernes*, now in the National Gallery in London. Of the many depictions of this scene, one of Caravaggio's favorite subjects, Liss's version is unique. Judith has already beheaded Holofernes whose head is on a plate held by a servant, both barely visible in the nearly dark background. Judith with a horrified expression is looking at us over her shoulder as she holds Holofernes's corpse whose neck in the foreground is spurting blood directly at us. Our presence was certainly unexpected. A shock to Judith and to us!

In the final section, "The Voyeur" in Van der Neer's, "The Wife of King Candaule," we are twice voyeurs: of the Libyan king's naked wife, but also of his soldier hiding behind the bed whom Candaule had invited to show off his wife's beauty — in short to be a voyeur. Instead in Lavinia Fontana's *Venus and Mars* an intensely in love Mars is admiring the beauty of his beloved Venus. He's awaiting the perfect moment; so is a voyeur. She, instead of looking dreamingly into his eyes, is looking provocatively over her shoulder at us, her other voyeurs.