

# TUSCANY, UMBRIA AND THE MARCHES COMMEMORATE LUCA SIGNORELLI

■ BY LUCY GORDAN

From June 23 until October 8, the Tuscan city of Cortona and its Museum of the Etruscan Academy are dedicating a major exhibition to native son **Luca Signorelli** (c. 1445-1523) on the 500th anniversary of his death and 70 years after the last exhibition dedicated to him in Cortona. The exhibit is entitled “Signorelli 500. Maestro Luca da Cortona, Painter of Light and Poetry.”

At the pre-exhibition press conference held at the Ministry of Culture, Vittorio Sgarbi, the outspoken but erudite art critic and member of the Italian Parliament, provided journalists with several insights into Signorelli's life and art: he was highly admired by his distant cousin, the biographer and artist Giorgio Vasari, who called him “the lighthouse of the great artists of the Renaissance,” and wrote that Signorelli was “the man who, with his profound mastery of design, particularly in nudes, and with his grace in invention and the composition of scenes, opened to the majority of craftsmen the way to the final perfection of art.” In fact, his work greatly influenced both Raphael and Michelangelo, who both overshadowed him into near obscurity until he was rediscovered by the Pre-Raphaelites and beloved by the art critic Bernard Berenson. Sadly, while unappreciated, many of his works were cut into pieces and dispersed around the world, several being miraculously reassembled for the first time in this exhibition.

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 30-some paintings on display are on loan from private collections and from 24 museums worldwide: Uffizi Galleries (Florence), Museo Nazionale Capodimonte

Here below, *Tondo of the Madonna and Child with the Patron Saints of Cortona: Michael, Vincent, Margaret of Cortona, and Mark*  
(Courtesy of the Museum of the Etruscan Academy and of the City of Cortona)



(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 few.

Displayed in chronological order, selected on the basis of their very high quality and to represent Signorelli's changing style in each decade of his 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 Patron 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 the *predella* of the two-sided altarpiece that still stands on the high altar of the small

Church of the Oratory of San Niccolò in Cortona: *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, cut apart and dispersed around the



*The Birth of St. Nicholas and The Miracle of St. Nicholas*  
(1508-10), on loan from Atlanta's High Museum of Art





world in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> 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 reassemblage, 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: the Annunciation, the Adoration of the Shepherds, and the Adoration of the Three Kings, all on loan from the Uffizi. Not only the Signorelli works mentioned above were dismembered and dispersed, but also others on display here; thus it was an enormous challenge and overwhelming research project for Professor Henry and his collaborators to assemble the exhibition.

Another extraordinary feat of Professor Henry was to put on display eleven 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 later paintings by Signorelli, not in the exhibition, are permanently located in Cortona in the *Museo Diocesano*, the Churches of *San Niccolò*, *di San Domenico* and *di Santa Maria Delle Grazie al Calcinaio* and in *il Palazzo*.

It's true that Signorelli was born in Cortona, a place he always loved and returned to frequently, and where he died by falling off a scaffold while painting a fresco in a cardinal's summer residence nearby, but he was peripatetic, traveling frequently in Tuscany, Umbria, and twice to Rome. He was first summoned along with other artists by

From the Chapel of San Brizio:  
*Paradise and Hell.*  
Bottom, *Preaching of the Antichrist*  
surrounded by various scenes that  
refer to the social and political life  
of the time



Pope Sixtus IV in 1478 to fresco the "Old Testament" wall of the Sistine Chapel and then again with several colleagues in 1508 by Pope Julius II to decorate his apartments. They began operations, but were shortly superseded to make way for Raphael, and their work was taken down. Earlier patrons of Signorelli had been Lorenzo de' Medici, known as "The Magnificent," and the powerful politician Pandolfo Petrucci.

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' Testament and Death* are still visible in the Sistine Chapel), Montone, Umbertide, Morra, Citeria, Paciano, Perugia, Loreto, and

Arcevia, leaving us many works to admire in each place.

In addition to the exhibition catalog (33.25 euros), Skira 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 volumes are only available in Italian.

Although "Signorelli 500. Maestro Luca da Cortona. Painter of Light and Poetry," the centerpiece of the celebrations, opened on June 23, commemorations began earlier this spring with concerts and lectures in both Cortona and Orvieto and will continue to the end of 2023.

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 on the ceiling by Fra Angelico 50 years earlier, but abandoned.

## Of Books, Art and People

To Fra Angelico's ceiling, Signorelli added the Madonna leading the Apostles, the Patriarchs, Doctors of the Church, Martyrs, and Virgins.

Signorelli's frescoes in the vaults and on the upper walls represent the events surrounding the Apocalypse and the Last Judgment. The Apocalyptic frescoes begin with the *Preaching of Antichrist* where Signorelli painted his self-portrait next to one of Fra Angelico, and proceed to *Doomsday* and *The Resurrection of the Body*. Those of the Last Judgment depict *Paradise, the Elect and the Condemned, Hell, The Resurrection of the Dead, and The Destruction of the Reprobate*.

Signorelli paid great attention to anatomy. It seems he carried on his studies in cemeteries and his mastery of the human form implies he may also have assisted at medical dissections. Michelangelo is said to have borrowed some of Signorelli's human figures or combinations thereof for his *Last Judgment* in the Sistine Chapel.

Apparently in 1897, when Sigmund Freud visited Orvieto during his first trip to Italy, he remained as if struck by lightning in front of the fresco of the Last Judgment



Detail of the *Preaching of Antichrist* where Signorelli portrays himself next to Fra Angelico

and said it was the most fantastic work of art he'd ever seen.

In an essay he published the next year, *The Physical Mechanism of Forgetfulness*, Freud revealed that for a long time he could not remember the name of the artist of Orvieto's frescoes, even if in his mind's eye he could picture each fresco and describe it in detail. This situation became a central theme of Freud's psychoanalytical research and is known as "Signorelli's Parapraxis."

In addition to the Duomo's Chapel of San Brizio, we visited the Duomo's archives where we saw Signorelli's two contracts. The first, dated April 5, 1499, for 200 ducats, was a kind of trial to complete Fra Angelico's ceiling; the second, dated April 27, 1500, for 600 ducats, to paint the walls, also included lodging and a monthly payment of two measures of wine and two quarters of corn. (Today the equivalent of 1 ducat is about 50 euros.)

For a definitive picture of this masterful artist, purchase the first book-length study of Signorelli, *The Life and Art of Luca Signorelli* by Tom Henry, published by Yale University Press (2012), hardback, 94 pounds sterling. ○