

Free luca signorelli: vivid colors and dramatic expressions through the italian r...

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With Luca Signorelli (1445/1450 - 1523) was accomplished, with a clearer awareness, the transition from painting as a representation to painting as example of a more aware artistic poetic. The antithesis between the pictorial formal system of Piero della Francesca and the Florentine method was essentially the antithesis between being and becoming, between stasis and movement. The historical moment was of a great religious crisis: the Catholic Church needed a form of art that did not search the absolute, on the contrary the role of a work of art was to speak and persuade the shaken believers with clear arguments.

Luca Signorelli was born in Cortona, a small city on the border between Umbria and Tuscany, in a date between 1445 -1450. Although there are many documents related to Signorelli, the only one that cover the period of his training as painter is “ Summa de Arithmetica, Geometry, Proportions and Proportionality” by Luca Pacioli. Thank to this book we know that after 1470, Signorelli was close to Piero della Francesca, from which he inherited the crystalline light that pervades his early works and the monumentality of the figures.

Berenson (1926) attributed to Signorelli, as three early works, three panels of the Madonna and Child from the school of Piero della Francesca that are now in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford and at the Fondazione Giorgio Cini in Venice. The influence of Piero della Francesca in the first certainly identified work of Signorelli (1474) is quite obvious. It is a fresco in the Bishop's Tower in Città di Castello, and now stored in the Municipal Picture Gallery. Before that fresco, around 1470 he probably participated in the decoration of the organ of the church of San

Francesco Cortona commissioned by the Society of Laudesi.

In the Flagellation of Brera (1480, Milano, Brera Gallery), Signorelli had mastered in full the style of his old master. The painting was originally created for the Santa Maria del Mercato Church in Fabriano as a processional picture.

In the later frescoes, in the Sanctuary of the Holy House of Loreto, it has to be noticed a radical stylistic change in Signorelli. This was a consequence of his Florentine experience that provoked some topics closer to the works of Antonio del Pollaiuolo. Exemplifies those changes the fresco in Loreto's Sanctuary: " Conversion of St. Paul" (1477-82). In this painting it seems that the figures have been instantly and dramatically stopped: the light is no longer abstract, as the one of Piero della Francesca, or natural, but empirical like the one used by Leonardo. Supposedly a brief apprenticeship of Signorelli was taken at the workshop of Verrocchio: one of the most important art workshops in the Renaissance Florence. This fresco concentrates the attention on every motion of each figure in order to highlight physicality and muscles of the bodies with strong contour lines. The result of such new poetics was the creation of choreographic paintings because, even in the most complex representations such as the one in the cathedral of Orvieto, each figure was placed at that precise point in space where it could fulfill its gesture and receive its light beam.

Even in the decoration of the Sistine Chapel, that was commissioned by Pope Sixtus IV della Rovere, Luca Signorelli had engaged in solutions extraordinarily effective in structuring and composing in order to coordinate the narrative sequences of numerous episodes. When August the 15th 1483,

the Sistine Chapel was consecrated with the dedication to the Virgin had already worked there in the ceiling, with a representation of a starry sky, Pier Matteo d'Amelia and, since 1480, had created some frescoes, along the sides of the medians walls, with the stories of the Old and New Testament the painters: Pietro Perugino, Sandro Botticelli, Domenico Ghirlandaio, and Cosimo Rosselli. Only during the fall of 1482, had intervened Luca Signorelli, who was commissioned to perform two frescoes: “ The Testament of Moses” and “ The struggle around his body,” sadly, this last work is now lost: It was remade in full at the time of Gregory XIII by Matteo from Lecce, a sixteenth-century mediocre Mannerist.

The “ Assumption of Moses” by Signorelli is divided into five episodes setted in a large hilly landscape. The episode on the right depict the Prophet in the act of reading the laws; on the center is the figure of a stranger and on the left a naked Moses delivers to Joshua the rod of command. In the background an angel shows Jerusalem to Moses from the top of Horeb Mount. The iconographic program of the Sistine Chapel, it was not left to the free will of the painters called to accomplish the frescoes. It in fact presents a multiplicity of meanings ranging from traditional illustration of the Old and New Testament. There was opposing episodes of either cycle paired as logically connected. Alongside these content, that should be obvious to contemporaries of Sixtus IV, it was clear the intention to bring the message that Moses was presented as leader, legislator, priest, the same features that was attributed in the episodes of the New Testament to the figure of Christ. Signorelli adapted and fully explored this message. Concepts similar to those expressed in the stories of the Sistine were employed often in the writings of

Pope Sixtus IV, who fought at that time against the threat of a decline in the role of the papacy regency in a council as it had been the one in Basel, hindered by sovereign and bishops. Significant was the fact that, in expressing this program in the Sistine, were called some artists considered the cutting edge of the period, including the same Signorelli, artists who were able to translate into modern terms this new political message.

No wonder, moreover, that although Luca Signorelli had been recognized as an important artist, did not hesitate to almost cite the manner and the paintings of Bernardino di Betto, known as Pinturicchio. He had just finished the Borgia's apartments in Vatican and Signorelli under those influences had staged some mythological fables with clear Neoplatonic references such as “The Education of Pan” that was painted for Lorenzo the Magnificent who visited Cortona around 1488_.

In that fresco was clear the accurate study of nude figure, carried on by Signorelli and so recurrent in those detailed bodies often present, as background, in his later works.

In this very period, Luca Botticelli painted a Holy Family located, today, at the Uffizi Gallery. It was commissioned by the Captains of the Guelph; in this painting the artist has adjusted the figures in order to give a circular motion to the entire composition and in order to place the characters so as to dominate the entire picture and not to let even a glimpse of the background landscape. Thanks to two large volumes he has symbolized the New and the Old Testament and emphasized the human figure as the true protagonist of the work.

In the “Ten stories of St. Benedict” painted in the cloister of Monte Oliveto

Maggiore between 1497-98, Luca Signorelli had deployed all the tools of his theatrical vein, and was inspired by the work of Jacopo de Voragine. In this frescoed bezel was narrated a legend about Totila, the king of the Ostrogoths: in 542 he encamped with his army at Montecassino, to test the faculties of St. Benedict he sent the squire Riggo, disguised with his armor, but St. Benedict had immediately discovered the deception. The cycle was being started by Mariano di Matteo from Rome and, after the intervention of Signorelli, the works of decoration were later continued by Sodoma who painted twenty-six scenes from the life of St. Benedict until 1508.

He painted according to a precise iconological program, probably elaborated by local theologian. The themes of the end of the world and the afterlife (Stories of the Antichrist, the Last Judgment, Resurrection of the Flesh, Inferno, Paradise), constituted, together with an illustration of the Comedy of Botticelli, one of the great witnesses of the cult of Dante in the art of the Renaissance.

For one of the two arches, the one to the altar, there already were some sketches made by Fra Angelico. Following these pictures he painted the arch in partnership and with the help of Benozzo Gozzoli (14 June 1447-1449). After unsuccessful negotiations with Perugino, the Opera del Duomo, instructed the completion of the chapel Signorelli. On April the 27th 1500, the Opera approved the sketches for the paintings of the frescoes: the compensation was established in cash and in goods (grain, wine or grape, a place to live). At direct payment of the painter were the colors, except for gold and blue. Those two precious pigments and the bridges, the mortars and the transportation of water were to be borne to the Opera. The work was

probably done at the beginning of winter 1503-1504, since in that date it was assigned the last payment. The frescoes on the walls reveals Signorelli as a good reader of Dante's *Commedia*. Particularly significant from this point of view are the episode depicted on the wall right in front of the entrance with the Dante's Vestibule. The scene shows the Ignavi as a large group of characters while running up against highest mountains and down along the Acheron, following a white sign carried by a demon on the shoulders. Lower down, Charon's boat is approaching another group of damned; on the other side it is represented Minos while he is judging a damned on his knees grabbed by the hair by a devil. On the other side of the same wall, the ranks of the elect is conducted by nine large angels, alluding to the angelic hierarchies, which form a zigzag scale upwards. Especially the decoration of the chapel's socket reveals the clear message of Catholic doctrine: are represented the figures of those who have predicted the end of the world and the hereafter, and that at the same time, thanks to poetry, try to redeem humanity. In the frame interposed between the pillars, on a background that is imitating a 'coram' grotesque, all colored and gilded, Signorelli has pictured, together with Empedocles and the five great poets of antiquity (Homer, Lucan, Horace, Ovid, Virgil), even Dante Alighieri. The monochrome medallions around the figures of Virgil and Alighieri, and the the other frescoes on the opposite wall, to the left of the altar, follow the first eleven chapters of Purgatory. Sticking to Dante's text is very precise. The grouping in the same scene of various episodes is made possible by the exact definition of space and perspective. Scenes of rocks under a sudden light, sharp peaks and sandy moors without any hint of vegetation are the

environment where figures are moving, mostly naked and therefore more congenial to the artistic research of Signorelli, with a powerful volumetric construction.

Since 1493, with the death of Lorenzo de' Medici, Luca Signorelli has returned to Umbria and abandoned the measured compositional rhythms of previous Florentine works for more crowded compositions, for more rich and dense narrations and characters in rhetorical poses.

The activity of Signorelli culminated, during the first decade of the sixteenth century, with works such as the Crucifix and the Maddalena (Uffizi), and, especially, with those paintings now located in the Diocesan Museum of Cortona. They represent in full the conclusive aspects of his visual poetic: The Lamentation of the Dead Christ (1502), for example, was the oldest work of Signorelli in Cortona, among the group of works painted between 1512 and 1523, date of the artist's death in Cortona.

The binding of Signorelli with his land was always very tight, even when he painted in other cities (Urbino, Florence, Orvieto, Rome, Citta di Castello and many more), Signorelli has paid taxes and participated in civic and politics life of his city.

Starting on 1513, the artist's style has changed again: he went to Rome, to pay homage to the new Pope Leo X Medici and tried in vain to have himself assigned some new works. Here he met Michelangelo, while he was engaged in the construction of the tomb of Julius II in St. Peter in Chains Church. This was a moment of great crisis and difficulty for Signorelli: he has struggled in order to keeping up with the times.

The “ Mourning of the dead Christ” is kept in the Shrine of St. Margaret of

Cortona: it was painted during a break from the work in the Chapel of San Brizio, during a stay in Cortona while the black plague was raging the more. Some news on the work were found, after some archival researches, and published by Nicola Fruscoloni (1984) from which we know that the work for the main altar of Santa Margherita was commissioned by laity who were in charge of the care of the church and by the Minor Friars that were officiating there.

It has been one of the most successful opera of the artist: it was striking for its size, for the vivid colors and for the strong dramatic expression of the figures. The figure of the dead Christ was associated, as recalled by Vasari, with the death of his son Antonio during the plague; the latest art historiography considers, however, that there are no scientific assumptions or documentaries to set that conclusion. The work, nevertheless, is a great representations of pain: it is crystallized in the painted expressions of the subjects and recalls a parallel with contemporary wooden statues of folk tradition. The central group is characterized by a succession of expressions and gestures of pain: all the figures were staged as they were suffering an extreme tragedy. The power of these colors, almost abstract, and the whitened surfaces almost dazzling by the means of light (the skin of the living bodies as white as the one of a dead bodies, the fabric brocade and embroidered cloth from the uniform) tend to enhance the devotional and sacred aspects more than the narrative willingness, as it was in ancient religious dramas. In the background in the middle a beautiful landscape of Nordic inspiration is organized a perspective, at all unrealistic, rather resembling some Humanistic theatrical scene. It is quite a reminiscence of

Rogier van der Weyden (his " Deposition" of the Prado for example) and of contemporary Ferrarese paintings that Signorelli often had cited in other works of his maturity.

One of the last works of Signorelli was " The Assumption of the Virgin" (1519-1520), from the Cathedral of Cortona. During 1508 the episcopal see of Cortona was moved from the San Vincenzo Church, where it was since 1325, to the Cathedral of Santa Maria Assunta. Starting on this date, Signorelli had began painting an Assumption (finished in 1520).

The composition is consisting of 41 figures all well assembled in the foreground to fill all the space without any lack for landscape or architectural background. All these figures were painted as stereotyped and with a quite rigid posture. The division between the group of the apostles and the one of the Virgin with the Angels Musicians appears slightly mechanical: the physical types are also repeated wearily, and even the drapery has mediocre design and the expressions are devoid of naturalness. Only the figures of three apostles, on left, show some stylistic quality. The altar on which the work was placed in the Cathedral of Cortona was dismantled in 1664 and replaced by a work of Mazzuoli.

Luca Signorelli died in Cortona during 1523 after falling from scaffolding while he was working and since he was part of the Society of Laudesi probably was buried inside the church of San Francesco, but to date, despite repeated research, his body was not be found.

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