

SAINT SOULS
Cathedral Museum, Garofalo Palace, Ragusa 2014

Despite what the Church says, not every man is a saint, but all saints are definitely men with their own specific characteristics that make them exceptional. During the iconoclastic struggles period, the most human side of man's experiences have been overlooked. Based on the belief that if Christ is the only unique model, there is no reason for his teachings to be filtered by middle figures. Everything considered, including Christ's representation as both God and Man, it raises some issues. Everything considered, this raises some issues, including Christ's representation as both God and Man. If one aims at painting Jesus Christ's human side, for instance, where is His divinity? After long and painful discussions, it was finally decided to represent Christ and the Saints modifying their features in an effort to emphasize the correspondence between the image and the reality it represents.

In other rarer cases, it was decided to represent Christ as an animal, which perhaps originates from the traditional iconography used with small animals which accompany Saint Anthony, Saint Rocco or Saint Bernard. This idea follows a negative logic: since Divinity is an abstract concept, then a total difference is more real than a clear similarity, such as the one resulting in the humanization of the features, because it makes crystal clear the absolutely immeasurable gap between the human world and the transcendent one.

But, hold on a moment. Isn't Christ true God and true Man?

This fateful certainty is at the basis of a normalization starting in the late Middle Ages and leading to the Renaissance artists producing images similar both to Christ's supposed features and to the features of Saints, whose prints and even bodies are often preserved miraculously well. And when there was no "original" to look at, artists could always use their own friends or lovers as models. This custom resulted in excesses and misunderstandings, such as the harsh debates on Caravaggio's Madonnas, portrayed as beautiful courtesans.

These controversies lasted until the 18th century, when Church predominance as sponsor of the Arts decreased progressively becoming less and less relevant, and the Saints and the Madonna became an exclusive prerogative of secular art. This is clear in Dante Gabriele Rossetti's works, for instance, where Eros prevails over the Christian side, even in its more obsessive variants.

Today situation is not much different. The most "educated" artists use the Sacred by belittling it, with the only goal of shocking the fools. At the same time Saints in the churches have been reduced to meaningless reproductions of past masterpieces, usually realized by ungifted copyists. There are, however, a few brilliant exceptions: works that are formally correct and irreproachable, but above all, that have style. These works own a language that is so common that it can be easily understood by everyone and, at the same time, so educated that it clearly reveals a certain nature, a personal tendency. Some of Giovanni Robustelli's works fall into this category. I cannot say all of his works because, exactly as not all men are saints, thus not all of Robustelli's works are related to sacred art.

In the current exhibition, the two altarpiece sketches for St. Anthony's Church in Comiso belong to sacred arts. In one of them, Saint Anthony is preaching to fish, while in the other, he orders a mule to kneel in front of the Holy Communion and the mule obeys, with an edifying effect on all bystanders. Included in the exhibition are also the draft versions of Saint Paul's Vocation, currently hosted in the Bishop's Chapel in Ragusa. His other works in this exhibition are not really conceived as cult articles, yet they still seem to be inspired by a religious feeling, where Christianity is the true subject of the representation and not just a mere excuse. This does not mean in any way that Robustelli is defending a religious position. Actually, had

he not specified that his Saint Rosalia painting is actually the Saint portrait, we could easily identify the subject with a secular image, very alike to Millais's Ophelia or Tiziano's Venus. Robustelli aims at surprising us, at reaching the extraordinary through his incredibly sparkling use of lines and colours. These elements are missing in the small Christian holy pictures, while they are typical of Byzantine icons. In the icons, these principles can be attributed to the Divinity thanks to a mental schematic construction. Instead in Robustelli's images, they are linked to man's sensitive power. Thus, it is not surprising that Robustelli portrays Saint Francis focusing on His love for animals, an aspect that raises our interest in this historical moment when nature is considered as a resource to exploit rather than as an old parent to take care of. In the same way, the paintings of Saint John with a furrowed brow and his finger pointing at what is not permitted, and of Saint George fighting His own inner demon seem to refer to the current crisis of the Italian justice that has lost the sense of individual responsibility.

The exhibition goal is to encourage a "second" sight capable of using art as a filter to question the Saints' troubled lives in order to gain a better understanding of our own life. And after all, the liturgical calendar also serves the purpose of encouraging us to undertake a journey along the path of growth and deeper knowledge of ourselves by getting in touch with our fellow men. Perhaps at the end of the journey we will have gained a more definite perception of the relationship between Eros and mind, reason and faith, nature and culture, earthly life and afterlife. Definitely we will treasure Robustelli's Saint souls as a precious memento.

Post scriptum

Rereading what I wrote, I realized much to my dislike I used the word "goal" related to Robustelli's art. Admitting my shame, I don't change it now. But true art has no other goal than itself.

So it occurred to me that the first title Robustelli had in mind for his exhibition was "The Flowers of Good".

Not Baudelaire's Flowers of Evil then, but still flowers, marvels to pick in the coloured fields of his predecessors, from Ernst to Beardsley to Blake till the insuperable level of Botticelli, the greatest illustrator that ever lived, according to Berenson. Myth (or Faith) and drawing are one and the same thing. Joy, sorrow, agony, peace and torment are expressed in such a superb way that it was rarely achieved before. Some of Robustelli's unusual framings seem to suggest even something typical of Japanese art in the way he focuses on space and in his tendency towards arabesque. In his recent works, this is mitigated to some extent by the chiaroscuro technique. He comes from Vittoria, a city extremely rich in Art Nouveau style in every artistic expression. But Robustelli's vision is so wide that even the Art Nouveau legacy appearing in some images only makes them more familiar rather than weighing them down. What more can I say? John Keats wrote: "A thing of beauty is a joy forever". If I stop to think about it, I am not sure whether the encounter with the Saint Souls in this exhibition will leave us more mature or conscious. But I am sure that it will give us a grain of joy, as it always happens with Robustelli's art, regardless of its subject.

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