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ANTONELLO *da* **MESSINA**

ROOM 1

Saint Jerome in his Study (National Gallery, London), one of the greatest masterpieces of Renaissance Europe, and one of the most famous of the artist's mature works, is the painting that introduces the work of Antonello da Messina in this Scuderie del Quirinale exhibition. The painting which Marcantonio Michiel – a cultivated art connoisseur – saw in 1529 in the house of a rich merchant Antonio Pasqualigo, clearly shows why the Venetian aristocrats competed to acquire Antonello's portraits and small devotional paintings as soon as the artist from Messina set foot in Venice. The ingenious architectural setting in this picture must immediately have appeared an unprecedented novelty to everyone, with Jerome's study inserted into a powerful, dark church, rather like a set of Chinese boxes, backlit from windows opening onto an airy rural landscape. The **Saint Jerome**, with its silent luminosity, its minute descriptive detail, the highly skilful syntax of perspective obtained through the light that makes everything clear and limpid, must have been

admired as an absolute masterpiece, on a par with the great Flemish painters such as van Eyck or Memling, to whom it has sometimes been attributed.

ROOM 2

If the superbly calibrated **Saint Jerome** marks the artist's maturity, the fundamental components of Antonello's artistic formation can be seen in the works of the Neapolitan painter Colantonio. The young Messina artist trained in his workshop during the period in which Naples was one of the artistic capitals of the Mediterranean, during the reigns of Renato of Anjou and Alfonso of Aragon.

The two small panels depicting scenes from the life of Saint Vincenzo Ferrer, part of an elaborate polyptych now in the Museum of Capodimonte, show Colantonio's ability to combine the beauty of Flemish still lifes and landscape description with a well-established Italian structural tradition. This was a lesson that Antonello was to develop with masterly skill in works such as the Sibiu **Crucifixion**,

enriched with a landscape that has always been recognized as a view with a strong symbolic significance. Indeed, one can distinguish the natural and monumental features of the city and port of Messina: to the right the Basilian Monastery of San Salvatore and further back the Fort of Matagrifone or Rocca Guelfonia. However, the Aeolian islands are visible in the centre of the straits, though they cannot actually be seen from Messina in that position.

The wall devoted to the series of Madonnas may lead to solving some of the problems associated with them that have been debated for years, as they show how, for reasons of style and composition, paintings such as the Como **Virgin Advocate** – a Madonna interceding for special favours to be granted – or the Venice **Virgin Reading**, cannot be by Antonello da Messina, but should probably be considered important examples of the Spanish painting that Antonello became familiar with and admired in Naples. The so-called **Salting Madonna** from London, on the other hand, with its highly detailed garments and rich

accessories, the silky sheen of the white lead touches and the absolute essentiality of the forms – evident in the oval face of the Madonna – reveals his consummate expertise. This expertise and skill, together with a rare ability to capture the subject's inner self, was to make Antonello one of the greatest portraitists of all time. This can already be seen in the **Portrait of a Man** from Pavia in which the sitter, with his head sharply tilted and a slightly ironic expression, almost seems to be spying on the viewer. Antonello's psychological insight enables him to surpass the **Portrait of a Man** by Jan van Eyck, such a masterly interpreter of the outer surface of things.

ROOM 3

The two small private devotional works from Messina and New York, which are painted on both sides and appear worn with use, are characterized by an expert descriptive skill that is almost miniaturist, especially the very intense **Ecce Homo** from New York (recto).

These paintings, though so small in size, reveal Antonello's masterly art in capturing profound emotions through a penetrating study of reality. This kind of study is also evident in the only two drawings attributed to him. The first, purchased by the Louvre in 1983, depicts a **Group of Women in a Piazza** – in which the tall residential buildings in perspective are very reminiscent of those in the background of the **Saint Sebastian** from Dresden (Room 10) – and it is executed using a very unusual, almost pointillist technique that heightens the vibrant luminosity. The second drawing, from America, once considered as a preparatory sketch for the Sibiu **Crucifixion**, depicts a group of women, and its delicate execution would suggest that it is probably a partial copy of the Paris drawing made in Antonello's workshop.

ROOM 4

The visit to Room 4 begins with the mysterious and very famous Cefalù **Portrait of a Man** by Antonello, known for a long time as the

Portrait of an Unknown Sailor – formerly in Lipari and used as the door of a pharmacy cupboard – who rivets the viewer’s attention with his direct and ironic gaze, and enigmatic, inscrutable smile. There follows a series of works that exemplify the fertile stylistic dialogue between artists active in Naples – a melting pot where there were close contacts with Spanish and Provençal art – and in Sicily. Here, then, are the so-called Noto **Madonna of the Snow** and the Palazzolo Acreide **Madonna of Grace** by the Dalmatian Francesco Laurana, produced by the sculptor in Sicily after the years spent in Naples and Provence. These recall Antonello’s work in the geometric structuring of the figures and the stylized elegance of the oval faces. Here, the sculptures are juxtaposed with Antonello’s polyptyches (finally reassembled for this exhibition) to reveal the different aspects of his formation. **The Virgin and Child Crowned by Angels**, the **Saint John the Evangelist** (Uffizi, Florence) and the **Saint Benedict** (Castello Sforzesco, Milan) are striking in that, despite the division of the scenes into sections,

Antonello chooses a unifying light, according to Italian spatial principles, while drawing inspiration from Provençal painting in the pure definition of the faces and the luministic effects of the glinting metals and shimmering fabrics. Another work that exemplifies the direction the painter was taking is the great Messina **Polyptych of Saint Gregory**, executed in 1473 and restored for this exhibition. Apart from the archaic quality of the gold ground, it reveals Antonello’s extraordinary and original skill in rendering perspective by making the vanishing point visible in the centre of a panel bathed in light. And it is also the light that brings out the thousands of details, such as the small scar on Gregory’s chin, which makes the figure of the saint come alive, and the book that the Madonna is so realistically holding out to us, as though inviting us to read.

ROOM 5

This room opens with the Madrid **Portrait of a Young Man** on a parapet, in the conventional Flemish style, signed by Antonello. Probably executed in 1473, it is one of the most involving of the painter's works because of the way in which the subject is presented to the viewer in extreme close-up. The room also contains two remarkable variations on the same theme, the 1474 Syracuse **Annunciation** and the 1475 Palermo **Virgin Annunciate**. The latter is perhaps the most famous of the Sicilian painter's works and is one of the art icons of all time, dating back to Antonello's stay in Venice. The former enchants and surprises in its masterly orchestration of light sources, generating an interplay of backlight and, at the same time, wholly unifying the composition. But what is truly innovative is the interpretation of the **Virgin Annunciate** from Palermo, in which the painter achieves absolutely modern results, breaking up the traditional composition of the Annunciation scene. Here, indeed, Antonello condenses the sacred event into the single figure of the Virgin

and concentrates on the personal and intimist aspect of the scene, underlining the psychological effects of the event revealed to the pensive and realistic figure of the Virgin and making the viewer feel, due to the absence of the angel, that he is the sole witness to the sacred event.

ROOM 6

Grouped together here are three moving meditations by Antonello and Giovanni Bellini on the theme of the Crucifixion. Emotionally charged because of their small size and the fact that they were for private use, they reflect the highly eloquent dialogue between the two great masters from 1475 to 1476, when Antonello was in Venice. The quality of Bellini's paintings is astounding, almost miraculous, heightening the dramatic sufferings of Christ in the minutely observed, authentic details of the landscape rendered with realism and wonderfully rich colour and light. All the details should be studied in depth: from the blood trickling down the

Saviour's body to the meticulous brushwork that makes the pebbles of the river sparkle, as in the **Crucifixion** from Florence, to the absolute visual precision of the incredible diversity of the flowers and plants, the join of the arms of the cross with the different veining in the wood, and Christ's contracted fingers, as in the **Crucifixion** from Prato. Antonello's **Crucifixion** from Antwerp is marked by sublime nobility and crystalline control. It is signed and dated 1475, and shows all the painter's inventive genius in the sweeping view behind Golgotha, constructed not according to the canons of the time, but with at least two vanishing points. It also reveals a profound knowledge of anatomy in the contorted and foreshortened figures of the two thieves crucified with Christ.

ROOM 7

Here, two **Ecce Homo** paintings by Antonello, from New York and Piacenza, are juxtaposed with two meditations on the same subject by the Flemish painter Petrus Christus and the

Vicenza artist Bartolomeo Montagna. Antonello's two works illustrate the turning point in his style that occurred around the middle of the 1470s. While the **New York Ecce Homo**, dated 1470, shows the intense sentimentalism typical of the Flemish interpretation of the subject, the one from Piacenza, executed in 1475, reveals the change that occurred after his contact with the artistic scene in Venice, when he began to acquire a dramatic and expressive force so strong as to influence later painters. The small panel – almost a miniature! – by Petrus Christus is an excellent interpretation of the meditative approach to the theme of Ecce Homo aimed at encouraging inner reflection, thus it combines the signs of Christ's martyrdom with references to the Last Judgment (the angels holding the lilies and the sword). Strongly influenced by Antonello, Bartolomeo Montagna reached great heights in the last work in the room, in which the calibrated realism of the details accentuates the intensity of the image of Christ, his body racked with pain.

ROOM 8

This room opens with seven portraits that bear witness to the genre that Antonello loved most of all and explored so expertly. In his paintings exhibited here (from Rome, Turin, and Berlin) dating to late in his career, he takes the typical Flemish model to the utmost perfection in the sharp but perfectly balanced way in which he picks out details of physiognomy and personality. The painting from Berlin – signed and dated 1478 – is a profound renewal of the fifteenth-century portrait prototype, achieved by replacing the customary neutral background with a broad landscape, executed well before Bellini's experimentations. The works by Alvise Vivarini and Jacobello di Antonello, Antonello's son, evince the importance of Antonello's teaching, while the two works by Bellini are quite different: **Portrait of a Blond-haired Young Man** from Rome and the **Male Portrait** from Nivaagaard, in which Bellini's style of portraiture owes more to Flemish art – particularly Memling – than to that of Antonello. Typical of Bellini, the tendency to

set the subject against a blue sky gives the face an expression of serene detachment that is quite different from Antonello's ironic stance. The second section of the room contains three meditations on the theme of the dead Christ. **The Christ at the Column** from the Louvre constitutes the pinnacle of Antonello's explorations of this theme. The bold and highly original iconographic scheme conveys the sufferings of the martyred Christ in extreme close-up. Compared to this intense yet restrained rendering, Bellini gives a highly dramatic interpretation of the subject, in which the expressive tension of the scene is increased by the unusual angle of the composition, with the Saviour's legs seemingly entering the viewer's pace.

ROOM 9

This room is devoted to the **San Cassiano Altarpiece** (Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna) – which, unfortunately, has not been loaned to the exhibition – and how this breakthrough in the history of religious art

was received in Venice. Commissioned from Antonello by the aristocrat Pietro Bon for the altar of the Venetian church of the same name, it has had a rather troubled history: first it was dismantled and then various fragments of the painting were lost, as can be seen from engravings and works such as **Saint Sebastian** by David Teniers (1651 – 59) from Vienna, which is exhibited here. As soon as it was finished [1475 – 76], the altarpiece became one of the most famous works of art in Venice. The idea of the unified figurative space immediately aroused fascination and admiration – eight saints gathered around the throne of the Virgin and Child under a large arch – since it was unique and completely revolutionary in the figurative panorama in Venice, which was characterized almost exclusively by altarpieces composed of various sections. Its features thus captivated viewers and artists alike. The latter sought to measure themselves against this difficult work which immediately became a model that could not be ignored. One of them was Giovanni Bonconsiglio, called il Marescalco, who

faithfully imitates Antonello's painting in the fragment of the altarpiece (Vicenza) commissioned by the Venetian nobleman Gabriele Morosini della Sbarra, as does Antonello de Saliba in the large **Virgin Enthroned** in Catania.

The room also contains other works by Antonello's closest heirs, namely his son Jacobello, Antonello da Saliba and Jacometto Veneziano.

ROOM 10

The **San Cassiano Altarpiece** and the Saint Sebastian from Dresden are all that remain of Antonello's work for the Venetian churches. The latter was commissioned from Antonello by the School of San Rocco in 1478, the year of its foundation and an extremely difficult period for Venice, which was hit that summer by a devastating plague. The painting, with a view of the city constructed with a very calibrated perspective, is a true tribute to the city. A sunny and lively Venice emerges between the canals and chimney pots, inviting the viewer to

pick out the various details of the urban context. In the foreground towers the monumental figure of the saint, seen from below; the volumes of the body, gently modelled by the light, are reminiscent of Andrea Mantegna's work, but the realistic details, such as the hair and the bark of the tree to which the martyr is bound are typical of Antonello. The immense power and beauty that emanate from Antonello's work, especially from the monumental figure of the saint, are clearly visible in the painting of the same title by Cima da Conegliano and in the later Venice **Christ Resurrected** by Alvise Vivarini.