

Mattia Preti
Bozzetto for the Votive Frescoes for the 1656 Plague
 Naples, Capodimonte Museum, Inv. Q262
 Oil on canvas
 127 x 75 cm
 Second half of the 1650s
 Provenance: Naples, Colonel Casella collection (?) (before mid-1850s);
 Real Museo Borbonico, then Museo Nazionale (until 1957).

In 1656 Naples was hit by a terrible plague that decimated the population claiming almost 250,000 victims. Based on a decision made previously, it was only on 27 November of that year, though the disease had been brought under control by then, that the *Eletti* of the city commissioned Mattia Preti, who had come over from Rome three years earlier, to paint the votive frescoes on seven gates of the city (Spike 1987, p. 14). The story therefore told by Bernardo De Dominicis that Preti had painted these frescoes free of charge to expiate the murder of a sentry committed upon his arrival in the city is totally unsubstantiated. The contract established the painter's fee in "1500 ducats, and a pound of ultramarine". It also specified that "before painting he has to draw sketches on cartons, so that they may be seen beforehand and made to satisfaction". Moreover, in honour of the "Queen of Heaven", the adopted iconography would be "the image of Her Purification and Immaculate Conception, with other Patron Saints" (Nappi 1980, p. 63). All frescoes are lost today, except the fresco at Porta San Gennaro, which was recovered in 1997 thanks to a difficult restoration intervention. But the two existing canvases of the Capodimonte Museum can still be seen today, and are an indication of the approval phase by the *Eletti* before being transposed onto the walls. A third sketch has been reported on the art market (Montalto 1920, p. 100n) but has been lost without a trace.

The indications of the contract are interpreted by the artist in a powerful dramatic vision. On high is the celestial sphere, where to the sides of the Immaculate Virgin, who is identified by the crescent moon under her feet, are saints Gennaro, Francis Xavier, a Jesuit missionary proclaimed co-Patron saint of Naples in 1654, and Rosalia, who had protected Palermo during the 1625 plague, imploring the Virgin to intercede with her Son held in her arms. Down below, the earthly world is a theatre of desolation and death, with the coffin bearers carrying away the dead. Among the dead is a woman with a child on her lap, a reworked quotation from the *Plague of Azoth* by Nicolas Poussin today at the Louvre. The fulcrum of the composition is the angel sheathing his sword, a symbol of God's justice.

Thanks to the detailed description by De Dominicis, Raffaello Causa (1972, p. 993, 147n) identified the painting as the *bozzetto* for the fresco painted by the 1st of September 1657 (Clifton-Spike 1989) on Porta Reale, named later Porta dello Spirito Santo, at that time located in Via Toledo.

His training in Emilia and the influence of the culture of Rome of the 1630s are remediated by Preti, also as a result of the influence of Lanfranco's Neapolitan frescoes (1634-1646), into a linguistic context by now openly Baroque, heightened by the cold pale tones vivified by zones of warmer colour, in particular in the victims' clothes. The same stylistic syntax is expressed in the *Madonna and Saints*, signed and dated July 1656, for the church of Sant'Agostino degli Scalzi, in Naples, at present in the Capodimonte Museum. Some motifs return in other works by Preti, such as the woman turned over in the foreground, in the *Immaculate Conception* for the church of the Blessed Virgin of Sarria in Floriana (Malta), and the tangle of dead bodies in the background of the *Allegory of the Order* in the lunette at the entrance of Saint John's Co-Cathedral in Valletta.

A study in preparation of the head of San Gennaro is preserved at the Ashmolean Museum of Oxford (Strinati-Marini-Ippoliti, cat. 19-19a).

Alessandra Rullo



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Exhibitions

Florence 1922; Paris 1935; Naples 1947; Paris 1965; Valletta 1970; London-Washington 1982; Paris 1983; Turin 1983; Naples 1984; Madrid 1985; Rome 1988; Torgiano 1988; Sao Paulo-Rio de Janeiro 1989; Naples 1994; Strasbourg-Bordeaux 1994; Bonn 1996; Rimini 1996; Naples 1999; Rome 2004; Phoenix 2006.

Bibliography

De Dominici 1742, III, pp. 333-336; Capasso 1878, pp. 597-605; Montalto 1920, pp. 97-113; Causa 1947, pp. 37-38; Causa 1972, pp. 992-993; Nappi 1980, pp. 63-65; Utili in Napoli 1984, cat. 2.172; Pérez Sánchez 1985, cat. 93-94; Clifton 1986, pp. 103-108; Spike 1987, pp. 11-14; Utili in Di Giampaolo-Bon Valsassina 1988, cat. 18; Clifton-Spike 1989, pp. 55-56; Ferrari 1990, pp. 208-210; Strinati-Marini-Ippoliti 1991, pp. 62-64; Clifton 1994, pp. 479-501; Leone de Castris in Abbate 1995, pp. 230-232; Pagano in Daprà 1996, p. 156; Utili in Spinosa-Utili 1999, p. 146; Spike 1999, cat. 111; Ruggiero in Spinosa 2003, cat. 36; Daprà in Maninchedda 2004, cat. II.II.35; De Rosa in Loughman 2006, p. 112; Utili in Spinosa 2008, pp. 157-159 (with previous bibl.).