

Works of Beloved Painter "il Guercino" Come to the U.S. for the First Time

Simona Florio & Francesca Di Folco (February 06, 2009)



The works of Baroque-period artist Giovanni Francesco Barbieri, known as "il Guercino", are being shown outside Italy for the first time, with an exhibit at the Italian Cultural Institute in New York

On the heels of the Metropolitan's success with Giorgio Morandi, comes an exhibit dedicated to another Emilian artist, Giovanni Francesco Barbieri, better known as "il Guercino". The nickname, which in Italian means "squinter", was given to Barbieri because he was cross-eyed.

Present at the Italian Cultural Institute's opening were the Director of the Institute, Renato Miracco; Consul General Francesco Maria Talò; Director of the Associazione Albergatori di Bologna, Guido Morisi; Flavio Tuzet, mayor of Cento, the village between Bologna and Ferrara where il Guercino was born; Bologna Councilor for Tourism, Miriam d'Andrea; and Mons. Celestino Migliore, Nunzio Apostolico Osservatore Permanente alle Nazioni Unite.



In the exhibition hall there was a palpable sense of curiosity from American guests. They lingered in front of the canvasses, rapt in thought, often asking questions of the curators. The Guercino exhibit is a gift to New York from the city of Bologna, which is working to promote the painter, beloved in Italy for centuries but still relatively unknown Stateside or on the international scene. This New York tribute to the artist takes off on the anniversary of his birth, February 2nd, 1591. Renato Miracco remarked, "il Guercino knew how to represent an alternative current to the Baroque movement, displaying a typically Emilian sensibility, characterized by an exaltation of the simplest things". Indeed the protagonists of the painter's works are farmers, the countryside, the seasons, all images that express the artistic distinction of his early period. The exhibit "moved me", enthused the mayor of Cento, "and I extend an invitation to visit our region: seeing the scenery represented here firsthand, one's emotional reaction is stronger."

At the end of the presentation, between one glass of prosecco and another, while attendees continued to take in the surrounding tableaux, we interviewed Tourism Councilor Miriam D'Andrea who shared some insight into the exhibit.

Was it difficult to take il Guercino's works from Bologna to New York?

"Yes. I feel like I've won the Gold Medal at the Olympics. It's the first time these paintings have been shown abroad. I think it's fundamental for us to introduce our artistic patrimony beyond national borders, so as to reach both Italian-Americans and Americans. The Emilia-Romagna region has endorsed the initiative supported by the towns of Bologna and Cento, in collaboration with "Bolognaincoming, Hoteliers of Bologna Reunited", and "APT Servizi srl", a company which promotes tourism in Emilia. And the Italian Cultural Institute also played a fundamental role, as host of the exhibit."

Why New York?

"Sincerely, I think New York is a wonderful place to encourage tourism to Bologna, a city which is as deserving of attention as Rome, Florence and Venice. All too often it risks being classified as a second-tier destination, when it isn't. Those who have come here this evening have shown a lot of interest not just for il Guercino's works, but for the entire Emilian region and its traditions."

So how would an invitation to Bologna read?

"Bologna is a city rich with history. It has the world's oldest university, founded 750 years ago, 65 free museums and it was the first city to institute the "Liber Paradisus", the edict abolishing slavery. This is what interests visitors: our history. American tourism to Bologna is only second to tourism from Germany. I feel a very close connection to the U.S.: in Bologna we're also home to a branch of John Hopkins University, which draws many young Americans and integrates them into our city."

What was the motivation behind Bologna's undertaking of such an intensive marketing operation?

"It was a project that left a bit of a dent in our municipal budget, but it was worth it. It allows for the exhibit to be housed here until March 2nd, and hopefully, for an increase in tourism to Bologna in the near future. In this moment of acute economic crisis, it's difficult for Italian families to set aside weekends and travel to our region. That's why we're focusing on American tourism. I think it's our winning move. Clearly the crisis is being felt here too, but Americans are lovers of everything Italian, perhaps more than we are, as they continue to choose Italy as their preferred travel destination."

(Translated by Eleonora Mazzucchi)



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