



# Renaissance master regained

ROME

Long overlooked, Lotto is now subject of major exhibition at Quirinale

BY RODERICK CONWAY MORRIS

Lorenzo Lotto is one of the best documented of the great Renaissance painters but was for a long time one of the least known.

Seventy-five works are signed; many others are undisputed attributions; 40

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autograph letters and many other documents relating to his life survive, not to mention a personal account book for the years 1538-54, with diary-like details of his life and thoughts.

His peripatetic life and industrious habits enabled him to leave his mark in Venice, where he was born in about 1480, the Veneto, Bergamo in Lombardy and the Marche. In Bergamo, over a 13-year period, he painted half a dozen altarpieces, including the Martinego-Coleoni altar, one of the largest ever created. In addition to frescoes, private commissions and designs for 33 miniature panels for the choir of the basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore. So significant was his legacy there that the myth arose that the city had been his birthplace.

Lotto's works featured not only in princely collections in Italy but soon found their way to France, Spain, England and the Low Countries. Yet by the beginning of the 19th century, his name was almost forgotten. The primary reason was that his works came to be attributed to the most bewildering range of other artists from Giorgione, Pordenone, Titian, Tintoretto, Dosso Dossi and Veronese to Perugino, Leonardo, Andrea del Sarto, Holbein and even Van Dyck (not to mention the now little-known 17th-century German Baroque artist Johann Carl Lotz).

The international rediscovery of Lotto began with the American art his-



A hallmark of Lotto's paintings is the way figures interact with one another and involve the viewer. In a 1521 panel from the San Bernardino altar for example, at right, the Madonna is seen to be actually addressing the titular saint.



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torian Bernard Berenson's monograph on the artist of 1885, depicting him as a melancholy genius and proto-Expressionist, much in tune with the fin-de-siècle era. But wider public appreciation of Lotto has come about as a result of a series of exhibitions in Italy, France, England and the United States, the first of them at the Doge's Palace in Venice in 1983.

The present magnificent show, curated by Giovanni Carlo Federico Villa, marks the triumphal culmination of this process of revelation, stimulated and underpinned by decades of research. The simple title "Lorenzo Lotto," dispensing with the almost obligatory subtitle beloved of today's exhibition organizers, is a mark of the Scuderia del Quirinale's well-placed confidence that here is an artist who should no longer need an explanatory tag and can speak for himself.

The 54 works here — consisting of religious, classical and allegorical subjects, and portraits — give a sweeping survey of Lotto's oeuvre, and include 17 paintings conserved and re-

stored especially for the exhibition, among them nearly a dozen altarpieces.

The first room has three of these from the Veneto and the Marche — from near Treviso, Asolo and Recoaro — all painted when Lotto was still in his mid-20s. These stunning pieces demonstrate that, although drawing on the example of the great works being produced during his Venetian youth — notably by Giovanni Bellini, Giorgione and Dürer — he was already a master who had established a style of his own.

Lotto's characteristic sense of drama, the expressive physiognomies of his madonnas and saints, the eloquent use of pose and gesture, the minute but lyrical attention to detail — the draperies, ensembles and brocades, shining armor, coarsening chain mail, gloved hands, rugs and not just the oriental carpets but their feathery tassels finely rendered — all are here already in these early works. Equally striking is his use of repeated colors, especially blues and reds, running through the painting and rhythmically linking the

As a painter of portraits, Lotto was an innovator. Early portraits of the Bishop of Treviso, circa 1501-2, left, and his widowed sister, Giovanna, circa 1503, far left, give a strong sense of his sitters' presence. At right, "Adoration of the Shepherds," circa 1510.



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whole composition.

Also evident in these Sacred Conversations is what would become another hallmark of his paintings: the way figures interact with one another and involve the viewer. By the time of the San Bernardino altar from Bergamo of 1521, for example, the Madonna, with an openhanded gesture, is seen to be actually addressing the titular saint, and the young angel at the foot of her throne turns away from his book and quill pen looking out at us, drawing the spectat-

ors into the picture, into the Conversation.

It is probable that Pope Julius II's architect Bramante spotted Lotto when the latter was on a visit to Loreto, the important place of pilgrimage near Recanati. There followed an invitation to the Vatican and in 1509 an encouraging commission for decorations in the Papal Palace. But the inexorable rise of Raphael was leaving little space for other artists there. None of Lotto's Roman works have come down to us. In 1511 he

returned to the Marche, where he was as much in demand as ever and completed two more altarpieces before moving on to the rich commercial center of Bergamo, where he enjoyed enormous success and was handsomely rewarded.

In 1525 he returned to his native Venice, which gave him the opportunity to paint his first altarpiece in the city itself, of "St. Nicholas in Glory," which includes a captivating landscape, for the Carmine church. He later did another



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Lotto introduced a wide variety of portrait poses and settings, and his "Triple Portrait of a Jeweler," above, showing the same subject from three different angles, was the first of its kind. At top, "Portrait of Amleto Odoni," 1527.

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er altar for the Dominican basilica of SS. Giovanni e Paolo (both these works are in the exhibition).

As a painter of portraits, more than 40 of which survive (nearly half of them on show here), Lotto was the heir of Antonello da Messina and Giovanni Bellini, but he was also an innovator. He definitively dropped the convention of a parapet in the foreground of the picture, bringing his sitters in more direct contact with the viewer. Even the early portraits, painted before and at the time of his first commissions for altar pieces, of the Bishop of Treviso, Bernardo de' Rossi, and his widowed sister, Giovanna, are consummate masterpieces that give an uncanny sense of his sitters' presence even 500 years later.

Lotto introduced a wide variety of portrait poses and settings, and the horizontal format. He made new and subtle uses of objects to suggest aspects of his subjects' personalities. And his "Triple Portrait of a Jeweler," showing the same subject from three different angles, was the first of its kind. During the last 20 or 30 years of his life he moved frequently between Venice, Treviso and the Marche. His powers were undiminished but he seemed to find it increasingly difficult to make a living. For some brilliant portraits executed in Treviso between 1542 and 1546 he received no more than between 10 and 15 ducats apiece. For other works he even accepted payments in kind: oil, wine and hams.

Finding himself virtually penniless in Ancona in 1548, he decided to auction 46 of his works from his personal collection, but only 7 of them were sold raising a fraction of what he had hoped for.

He spent the last two years of his life as the inmate of a religious hostel in Loreto, paying for his board and lodging by undertaking commissions for the institution that included the lowly task of painting numbers on the dormitory beds. Yet not long before his death in 1556, he managed to scrape together four gold scudi to send to a servant girl in Venice, who had nursed him during an illness there and was about to be married.

Lorenzo Lotto, Scuderia del Quirinale, Rome. Through June 12.

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