



# Unnerving eye for inner lives

## VISUAL ARTS

### Lorenzo Lotto

Scuderie del Quirinale, Rome

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Lorenzo Lotto was the first Italian painter "to be sensitive to the changing states of the human soul", according to the Renaissance art historian Bernard Berenson. Certainly, no other Cinquecento master imagined the interior life of his subjects as vividly as the Venetian. His canvases are peopled by weeping angels, Madonnas who flinch from their destiny and patricians haunted by mortality.

Not everyone was enamoured. "His art pleases very much those who don't understand painting," observed a certain Tassi in 1793. Compared with the harmonious visions of Raphael and Titian, Lotto's draughtsmanship was sketchy, his colours discordant and his compositions flustered. Little wonder that for three centuries after his death in 1556, when academic orthodoxy ruled, he was neglected.

Yet in the post-Freudian era, Lotto's psychological dramas are riveting, immediate and real. Today, Raphael inspires awe but Lotto prompts recognition. It should be no surprise that this is the second show dedicated to him since 1998.

With nearly 60 of his paintings sensitively lit and eloquently explained in the lofty halls of the Quirinale Stables, this show can only sustain Lotto's reputation. And thanks to generous corporate sponsors, - Enel, the banking group BNL, the Bergamo Credit Foundation - the show occasions a substantial restoration programme. Half of the 34 Italian paintings on show have been restored and further interventions are planned.

Born in 1480, little is known about Lotto's early life save that he was probably apprenticed in Venice. Blessed with an inquiring intellect and poetic imagination, it is likely he balked at the rational classicism made fashionable by Giovanni Bellini and developed by Giorgione and Titian.

By 1503 Lotto was in Treviso, where a less orthodox humanism suited his quirky temperament. His first important patron was the local bishop Bernardo de' Rossi; his portrait, with its steely, blue gaze and flashing signet ring, announces him as the unyielding prelate who was ultimately expelled for his refusal to bend to the will of the Venetian Senate. Even more engaging is the allegory of vice and virtue that Lotto painted on the cover. Set in a rocky, seaside glade whose pebbles, shrubs and saplings boast Dürer-inspired precision, it shows a cherub attending to his mathematical instruments while an inebriated satyr sprawls in the grass.

In 1504-05, Lotto painted his first



'Ritratto di Lucina Brembati', 1518

major altarpiece for a Treviso church, showing the Madonna enthroned beneath a glittering mosaic cupola flanked by a symmetrical quartet of saints. But even then Lotto desired a dissonant, dynamic vision. The zigzag weave of a Turkish carpet jostles with the acid-bright, saintly draperies; the right flank of the chapel opens on to a wedge of blue sky while the left dissolves into a slab of darkness.

Lotto's curiosity drew him towards medicine. Several doctors became his patrons and their expertise informed his meticulous anatomical accuracy. "The Mystic Marriage of St Catherine with the donor Niccolò Bonghi", 1523, shows Bonghi detailed down to the scarlet capillaries that thread his nose. Meanwhile, a 1506 altarpiece of the ascending Madonna reveals her as a dough-cheeked matron rather than the fresh-faced maid of popular belief.

His refusal to sacrifice the real for the ideal did Lotto no favours when he arrived in Rome. Called there by Julius II to fresco the Vatican alongside Raphael in 1509, his sojourn lasted barely a year. No work survives but it is unlikely that his earthy countenances pleased a pontiff accustomed to divine High



'The Mystic Marriage of St Catherine'

Renaissance thoroughbreds. By 1513, Lotto was in Bergamo, where he built up a clientele among professional men, merchants and minor nobles. A tension between sacred and secular animates Lotto's midlife oeuvre. The artist in him thrilled at material opulence, never missing a chance to throw a Turkish rug over an altar or highlight the sheen of a lush velvet sleeve. Yet his pious streak judged such luxuries ungodly. When Bergamo noblewoman Lucina Brembati donned her finest gems for her 1518 portrait, Lotto concentrated on the ring-encrusted fingers at her bejewelled breast, leaving her face an expressionless cipher.

In 1525, Lotto left for Venice. There, however, a populace accustomed to the sensual, heroic symphonies of Titian was left perplexed by altarpieces such as "San Nicolò in Glory", 1527-29. The upper half is a neo-Baroque eruption of cloud-born saints and angels in clashing, sulphuric hues, while the storm-lit coastline below prefigures a Romantic landscape. As Mannerist painters took classicism to new heights of affectation, Lotto's disquieting, enigmatic visions fell further out of favour. In the latter half of his career, he was unable to establish himself securely, yet his imagination thrived. The crowd-pleaser here is "Annunciation", 1534. Rather than greeting the angel Gabriel with conventional awe, Lotto's Madonna turns her back on him and looks directly out of the canvas, holding up her hands up as if appealing to the spectator for help. Yet the scene-stealer is the cat. Right in the centre of the canvas, it springs violently away from Gabriel, its tail rigid with terror. Some scholars interpret it as the embodiment of Satan; more immediately, it is a viscerally expressive trope for virginal trauma.

Lotto's late portraits vibrate with a sombre, existential timbre. Abandoning colour, he concentrates on conjuring exquisite tonal nuances from the black costumes worn by his subjects. Of his tribe of troubled, vulnerable patriarchs, most moving is the barber, Gian Giacomo Stuer. Painted in 1544, he hands his scissors on to his son Gian Antonio as if painfully aware of the inadequate nature of his legacy.

Given that a portrait by one of Titian's followers would highlight a subject's wealth and substance, it is little wonder that Lotto's commissions dwindled to a stop. He died penniless, having spent his last years in a charitable sanctuary in The Marches, where one of his last tasks was to paint the numbers on the hospital beds. Five hundred years later, he shines out as the precursor to Caravaggio and Rembrandt. His star is unlikely to wane soon.

Until June 12, [www.scuderiequirinale.it](http://www.scuderiequirinale.it)