

PRESS RELEASE***St. Francis Contemplating a Skull* by Spanish painter Francisco de Zurbarán, for the first time in Rome**

On loan from the Saint Louis Art Museum, the work will be exhibited starting 16 March in the Hall of St. Petronilla at the Capitoline Museums, alongside canvases by Caravaggio e Velázquez

Rome, 16 March 2022 – **For the first time**, Rome will be placing the spotlight on the Spanish master **Francisco de Zurbarán** (1598-1664) who, alongside Diego Velázquez and Bartolomé Esteban Murillo, was one of the greatest representatives of Spanish painting during the so-called *Siglo de Oro*, the golden age of Spanish art.

Among the most impressive instances of the Spanish master's mystical formalism, ***St. Francis Contemplating a Skull*** is on loan from the *Saint Louis Art Museum*, and its arrival at the *Capitoline Museums*, from 16 March to 15 May 2022, presents an exceptional opportunity to gain close-up understanding of his highly original pictorial language, the lessons of which were first understood by nineteenth-century French painters and recognized by Italian and international critics only beginning in the 1920s.

Moreover, the choice of staging the work in the museum's *St. Petronilla Hall* places it in a **dialogue with the two Caravaggio canvases** present there – ***The Fortune Teller*** and ***John the Baptist*** – and with **Diego Velázquez's *Portrait of Juan de Córdoba***: four masterpieces, then, done over a fifty-year time frame, whose juxtaposition offers a reflection on the art of three key figures in seventeenth-century painting.

The exhibition project **Zurbarán a Roma. Il San Francesco del Saint Louis Art Museum tra Caravaggio e Velázquez** ("Zurbarán in Rome. The Saint Louis Art Museum's St. Francis between Caravaggio and Velázquez") is promoted by *Roma Culture, Sovrintendenza Capitolina ai Beni Culturali* (the cultural heritage office of the city of Rome) and is curated by *Federica Papi* and *Claudio Parisi Presicce*. Organized by *Zètema Progetto Cultura*.

The Saint Louis Art Museum's *St. Francis Contemplating a Skull* originally belonged to an altarpiece (*retablo*) conserved in the Carmelite church of the Monastery of San Alberto in Seville. In spite of its small size, it is one of the most fascinating depictions of the friar from Assisi.

The saint, a genuine pictorial obsession for the artist (who repeats the subject in other works over the course of his activity), is depicted standing, wearing his characteristic Capuchin frock while contemplating a skull he is holding in his hands. The composition's severe and monumental appearance is accentuated by the strong geometric rigour, by the verticality of the hood, and by the folds in the garment that falls to the floor, leaving only the tips of the toes on his bare feet exposed. The silent dialogue between the saint and the skull symbolizes the passage from life to death, an allusion to the fragility of human existence, a recurring theme in Spanish Baroque art and in general the art of the Counter-Reformation.

The creative and visual process is therefore slow and not immediate as takes place in Caravaggio, and **the lights and shadows do not take on a natural value, but a symbolic and spiritual one**. In his ascetic contemplation of the skull, the saint proves detached and elusive, immersed in a mystical dimension that transcends the viewer's perception.

The **use of light is the focus of the juxtaposition** between the Saint Louis Art Museum's St. Francis and the Capitoline Picture Gallery's Caravaggio and Velázquez paintings, highlighting the affinities but also the differences. In fact, although the relationship between form, space, time, and light is certainly their common denominator, the pictorial choices and the symbolic interpretation each artist gave of them differ a great deal.

The austere, severe, and rigorously geometric style with which Zurbarán builds his images; his ability to grasp, even in the simplest and humblest subjects, the poetic charm of existence; and his ability, through the contrast between his dark backgrounds and light foregrounds, to give his compositions monumentality and naturalism at the same time, saw him defined as a **mystical, metaphysical, oneiric, and magical painter, and earned him the nickname "Spanish Caravaggio,"** first ascribed to him by the Spanish biographer Antonio Palomino in his 1724 volume *An account of the lives and works of the most eminent Spanish painters, sculptors and architects*.

Although, of all Iberian painters, Zurbarán was the only one to earn this sobriquet, he never visited Italy. He became acquainted with Caravaggio's revolutionary painting only via copies of the artist's works that had already come to Spain in the first decade of the seventeenth century, and through observation of the works of Caravaggio's followers, and Jusepe de Ribera above all. Moreover, Zurbarán's works conserved in Italian territory are quite rare (only in Florence and Genoa), and only one show dedicated to the painter—organized in Ferrara in 2013 and without the Saint Louis painting – has been staged in Italy.

Starting from Caravaggio's style, Zurbarán developed a wholly personal version of tenebrism, applying it to the figures of saints and to his extraordinary and hyperrealistic still lifes. For the Spanish painter, through light, "grace" is projected into the physical as well as into the spiritual world, as was affirmed in the mystical literature at that time, particularly in the Carmelite literature widespread in Catholic Spain.

INFO

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Capitoline Museums – Picture Gallery – St. Petronilla Hall

Piazza del Campidoglio, 1

Open daily 9:30 AM – 7:30 PM (ticket office closes one hour earlier).

Tel.: 060608 (daily, 9:30 AM – 7:00 PM)

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