

# Alessandro Capalti

Italian painter  
1807-1868

He was born in Rome on September 25th. 1807, eldest son of a wealthy shopkeeper, Lorenzo, originally from Civitavecchia, and Anna Serafini, pupil of Teresa Mengs-Marón. He always lived in Rome. It is regularly registered first with the family, in via del Pozzetto or S. Claudio, n. 96, therefore, in the last years of his life, in via del Corso 54. G. Checchetelli gives us the address of the studio: Ripa di Fiume at Ripetta n. 14. It belonged to a bourgeois environment, linked to the Church, cultured and fond of fine arts. His brother Annibale was created cardinal by Pius IX in 1868 and his sister Maria married the lawyer Filippo Ricci, a great friend of GG Belli and executor of Thorvaldsen.

The funeral eulogy delivered at the Accademia di S. Luca, during the session of May 18, 1868, gives us some clarifications concerning his artistic training. After literary studies at the Roman college, he followed the drawing courses of Andrea Pozzi and especially of Tommaso Minardi. He learned the art of painting from Gaspare Landi. He soon made a name for himself. A good fresco painter, the author of canvases with a religious or historical subject, he owes fame to the qualities of a portrait painter.

Official recognition was not lacking. On Sept. 18 1840 he was admitted to the Accademia di S. Luca and in 1841 he became a virtuoso of the Pantheon. In 1854, when Minardi abandoned the drawing chair he held at the Academy, Capalti succeeded him in this assignment. In 1863 and 1866 he was among the supervisors of the Gallery and on 7 December. 1867 he was appointed secretary of the board. He was also a member of the Chamber chalcography commission. He received the Order of St. Sylvester from Gregory XVI and the title of knight of St. Gregory the Great from Pius IX; he was an honorary member of the academies of Florence (1858), Petersburg and Berlin. From 1851 to 1858 he exhibited at the Royal Academy in London. Among his disciples we mention Onorato Carlandi, Francesco Jacovacci, Aurelio Tiratelli, Enrico Tarenghi and the Viennese Karl Rabl. The funeral eulogy still tells us that he was "of just stature, graceful of face, well formed of the person, he had graceful manners, a mild and sensitive soul". His appearance is known to us thanks to two self-portraits (one preserved by the family) and to some photographs.

Between 1830 and 1840 Rome experienced a period of artistic renewal mainly due to the patronage of the Torlonia princes. A large group of architects, sculptors and painters worked on the decoration of their palaces and villas. The name of CAPALTI was thus associated with that of Camuccini, Coghetti, Paoletti, Consoni, Gagliardi, Podesti, without the sources specifying in particular what is due to each. Moreover, the transformations undergone by Rome and changes in taste have made these works disappear almost completely.

In the villa Torlonia of Castel Gandolfo - and not in the pontifical villa - there are still some frescoes by Capalti: on the ceiling, *Mercury leading the Graces* and, on the over door, the *four parts of the world* (O. Raggi, *Sui Colli Albani e Tuscolani, letters ...*, Rome

1844, p. 256); we know from Moroni that Carlo Torlonia inherited the villa from his father, Giovanni, in 1829, and that he embellished it. The Tor di Nona or Apollo theater, purchased by Giovanni Torlonia in 1820, and made adorned by his son Alessandro between 1832 and 1837 by the same group of artists, was destroyed in 1889 and no traces of the decorations remained. On the basis of period descriptions and photographs kept at the Museum of Rome, it is possible to reconstruct Capalti's participation in the works of the Torlonia palace in Piazza Venezia, carried out before 1842 in honor of Prince Alexander. Along the staircase three frescoes were consecrated to the deeds of Alexander the Great: *The visit to the tomb of Achilles*, *Pursuit of Darius*, *The cut of the Gordian knot*. On the main floor the "gallery of the four ages" contained six large rectangles: *Minerva who animates man*, *The golden age* (or *The blessed idleness of Saturn*), *The silver age*, *The copper age*, *The Iron Age* and *the Flood of Deucalion*.

During these same years, the artist also completed works for Marino Torlonia in the villa of Porta Pia which is sometimes mistakenly confused with the villa in via Nomentana. The detailed description of Filippo Mercuri concerns only the sculptures, but in Thieme -Becker states that Capalti had painted some mythological frescoes in the casino that disappeared in 1948 among the ruins of the villa.

Since 1837 Capalti had ventured into religious compositions in the Villa Aldobrandini of Frascati, when Prince Francesco Borghese had the chapel of St. Sebastian restored in the east wing of the nymphaeum, whose paintings, due to Passignano and remodeled by Domenichino, they had been damaged by humidity; on the walls, on the sides of the nave, there are still two large frescoes representing the *Virgin and Child*, surrounded by musician angels, and the *Savior*.

The altarpiece of the chapel, a *martyrdom of s. Sebastiano*, is the first large canvas of Capalti that we have. Successful, however, it is less famous than the *Circumcision* which replaced the canvas by G. Muziano on the main altar of Il Gesu, renewed according to a design by A. Sarti, then preserved in the convent. The altar was inaugurated on February 18. 1843, but from the speech written immediately after by A. Alciati in defense of the realized project it turns out that the picture "that the talented Mr. Capalti is already painting" it was not yet finished. This allows it to be dated as soon as possible to 1843 and not to 1842 (Thieme-Becker). There is no trace of other works of Capalti of which we have news in the texts. In 1839 the *Italian Bee* (V, p. 63) had announced, reproducing it in engraving (plate XXXV), the painting by *Booz and Ruth* painted for F. Gavezzani of Lodi.

The existence of a *Conception of the Virgin* in an American church is attested by the funeral eulogy pronounced at the Accademia di S. Luca, which also indicates, without dating or locating it, a " *Niccolò de Lapi* who gives his son the sword so that he can use it to defend his homeland. "

Another historical composition was exhibited at the Royal Academy in London in 1851: *The Florentines' offer to their homeland during the siege of 1529*. From the catalog of the International Exhibition of 1862 (p. 265), also in London, two other titles of unidentified works are obtained: *La Sunamita* and *Ettore*.

More important and better known, the work of Capalti as a portrait painter. The portrait of *Pius IX*, signed and dated 1846, was donated to the Museum of Rome in 1963. The Accademia di S. Luca has many of his portraits; the *Self-portrait* on canvas, dated 1842

(after admission), the portraits of his colleagues, teachers and friends: *Tommaso Minardi* (1858), *Antonio Sarti* (1859) and *Paolo Mercuri* (1865). In 1966 this collection was enriched with two other portraits: that of the *wife* and the very delicate one of a child, a painter's *grandson*. The Napoleonic Museum preserves the portrait of *Monsignor Fransoni*, the picture gallery of the Monte di Pietà that of an *unknown lady* and the municipal gallery of modern art the sketch of the portrait, standing, of an unidentified *officer*. In Naples, the Capodimonte Museum preserves three: those of *Mrs. Doeff* and her daughters *Giovanna* and *Enrichetta* in the National Gallery of Dublin, the portrait of *Archbishop John Mac Hale* (1855) belongs to the painter's maturity. The Roman private collections still retain numerous family portraits. For more than twenty five years Capalti was the fashion painter between the nobility and the upper middle class. The most beautiful are perhaps those of Palazzo Doria-Pamphilj, including the two large gala portraits, with a slightly pompous elegance, by Prince *Filippo Andrea Pamphilj* and his wife, born *Mary Talbot* graceful also those of their children gathered in an idyllic background of leaves and flowers, in harmony with the blond hair, the pearly brightness of the faces and the vaporiness of the fabrics.

Upon the death of Princess Guendalina Borghese, sister of Princess Pamphilj, in 1840, Capalti was called to make a portrait surrounded by the symbols of her virtues which was praised with an anonymous sonnet in the *Album* of 28 November. 1840 (VII, p. 308). We still mention, because they are exhibited on several occasions, the portraits of the *Duchess Teresa Massimo* (Florence 1910), the actress *Adelaide Ristori* (Florence 1911), the *Marchesa Ulderica Pentini*, *Anna Maria Bossi* and *General Bossi* (Rome 1932). Contemporary sources report the portrait of *Donna Anna Cesarini* from 1842 and the portraits of the *ancestors of Duke Leopoldo Torlonia*, which were lost in the destruction of the Belvedere villa in Frascati (Seghetti). The texts also mention one or two portraits of the Rolland family. Other portraits are cited in the catalogs of the 1851, 1852, and 1858 exhibitions of the Royal Academy. At the London International Exposition of 1862, three portraits of the unknown prove that the English public had remained faithful to custom, which dates back to the eighteenth century, to have their portraits painted in Italy.

Capalti also had a modest engraving activity in his youth. The national chalcography conserves fifty-two slabs of *Raphael's* lodges, plus a frontispiece, which had been etched together with Luigi Perisini between 1829 and 1838.

Capalti does not deserve the oblivion into which he has fallen, which was caused in part by the disappearance of his most important works. In some respects an official, well-educated bourgeois painter who knew French and English - the wealth and variety of his library prove it (inventory, unpublished in *30 Capitoline Notaries*) - despite the numerous treatises on art that he possessed, he does not seem to be neither a theorist nor an innovator. Well equipped, he assimilated the lessons of the teachers and above all of Tommaso Minardi, of which he was the favorite pupil, thus following the trend of the time, which arose from neoclassicism, from which, however, he stands out even without opposing it. The frescoes of Palazzo Torlonia, judging from the photographs (Museum of Rome), are large historical and mythological compositions that highlight the beauty of the bodies. Pathetic effects are added to the precision of the design and attention to detail to combine movement with plasticity. At villa Aldobrandini, however, the linear composition expresses the desire to rediscover the naivety of the primitives, while the purity of the design, the ideal beauty of the faces reminds Raphael to whom the purists referred. However, a more personalized boy's

face is enough to present his unquestionable talent as a portraitist. Tradition cites a succession of influences, starting with Landi, moving on to E. Magnus, then ending with Van Dyck and Lawrence. Two names, the latter, too important to serve as a model for an art made above all of truth, dignity and simplicity.

Capalti died in Rome on March 29, 1868 of an apoplectic attack.

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