

Fra Felice da Sambuca

Italian painter, Capuchin priest
(1734-1805)

Fra Felice da Sambuca (born Gioacchino Viscosi) was born in Sambuca di Sicilia, 17 August 1734. At the age of 20 he entered the Capuchin convent of Monte San Giuliano (today Erice), where he wore the habit with the name of Fra Felice da Sambuca.

According to some biographers, he had an initial training in Sciacca, at the school of the painter Francesco Aversa, and later, he spent a short period in Palermo at the workshop of Olivio Sozzi or, perhaps, was a pupil of the Capuchin brother Father Fedele da San Biagio.

In creating his works of a religious nature, Fra Felice tends to communicate directly with the faithful; everything is everyday in his painting and his figures denote their own marked gestures, as if they were reciting a "part". The emotional intensity that transpired from his paintings gave him such a reputation as to force him to create, in a short time, a large number of works that, at times, are lacking in the pictorial technique or in the attention to detail.

In Sambuca di Sicilia he gave life to his first works, including the *Transit of St. Joseph*, *Jesus in the garden* and *The Four Evangelists*, carried out in 1760; he also painted frescoes for the churches of Santa Caterina d'Alessandria, San Calogero, San Giuseppe, the college of Mary and the orphanage.

In 1768 he went to Rome, following the call by Pope Clement XIII, for the realization of some paintings on the occasion of the beatification of the friar Bernardo da Corleone: a large canvas with *Blessed Bernard in glory* and five oil tondi with Facts and virtue of the blessed, now dispersed, while in the church of Santa Maria della Concezione dei Cappuccini are still preserved the *Apparition of the Virgin Mary to blessed Bernardo*, (of an unusual finesse in its realization compared to its artistic production) and two canvases with *The death of the righteous* (the "good death") and *The death of the sinner* (the "bad death"), religious subjects in great demand and repainted several times by the painter. At the Historical Institute of the Capuchins in Rome there are four sketches with Stories of Fra Lorenzo da Brindisi, attributed to Fra Felice da Sambuca. In them, more than and Guido Reni, you can feel the knowledge of the works of Gaspare Traversi.

In 1777 Fra Felice went to Tuscany, thanks to the interest of Father Luigi Sibaldi from Borgo a Buggiano (Pistoia), housed in the Capuchin convent of Torricchio. Within a year, he managed to complete several paintings in the aforementioned localities, in Pistoia and in other convents in Tuscany. These works, valuable for their strong expressive charge, show stylistic and expressive conformity with those of Brother Stefano da Carpi; Fra Felice transfers the themes of religious and devotional painting into a clear and understandable language.

After returning to Sicily, Fra Felice continued to paint (sometimes to repaint) or to restore paintings for churches and convents in western Sicily; the breadth of his production "is to be compared with the speed of execution and with the tendency, stimulated by the clients, to frequently repeat certain subjects". Like many other painters, he kept and reused the cartoons with various figures in creating other paintings: the image of *St. Fedele of Sigmaringa*, for example, is the same one used by the artist for his other works.

The painter spent the last years of his life in the Capuchin convent of Palermo, where there are many of his paintings and where he died on October 14, 1805.

After 12 years, on 29 March 1817, at the request of Father Lorenzo di Palermo, Vicar Provincial, and in the presence of the bishop Msgr. Gabriele Gravina , of Msgr. Giuseppe Amorelli and cardinal Pietro Gravina , the body of Fra Felice was exhumed and placed to the right of the main altar of the Capuchin church of Palermo, where it is currently kept.

Works in the Church of the Madonna della Concezione of the Capuchin fathers in Rome:

- *Apparition of the Virgin Mary to Blessed Bernardo*
- *The death of the just* (the "good death")
- *The death of the sinner* (the "bad death")
- Stories of Fra 'Lorenzo da Brindisi , four sketches preserved at the Historical Institute of the Capuchins in Rome (attributed)

Translated from:

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