

Francesco Gai

Italian painter
1835-1917

He was born in Rome on May 4, 1835 to Paolo, a Roman, and Adelaide Rossini, originally from Subiaco. She had two sisters, Giustina and Teresa, the last of whom went to live with Gai after separating from her husband Camillo Orsini .

He began his training and his activity in Rome where he trusted in the help and often in the hospitality of his paternal uncle Germano (in the century, Giovanni), who became a Vallombrosan Benedictine and at the time resided in the convent attached to the church of S. Prassede. In 1851 Gai took the exams for admission to the Accademia di S. Luca in Rome, and in 1852 he started the pupil.

His teachers were, among others, F. Cavalleri, F. Coghetti, F. Podesti and P. Tenerani. He was a diligent and award-winning pupil; in the first year of the course he devoted himself mainly to drawing. In 1858 he portrayed the Vallombrosan religious father *Stanislao Battistoni* (Abbey of Vallombrosa) and in 1860 the master *Pietro Tenerani*. In June 1860 he signed the contract to paint two paintings with the subject of *Blessed Ugonotto* and *Santa Umiltà*, destined for the sanctuary of the Madonna del Montenero (Livorno), where they are still below the organ.

In 1863 he was entrusted with the task of fresco painting the *Flagellation* in the lunette above the entrance door to the chapel of S. Zenone, in the church of S. Prassede; during the year he painted the portrait of his sister *Giustina* and was awarded, *ex aequo* with Ignazio Carlo Ortiz of Malta, an extraordinary prize of 100 scudi for the painting *S. Luca Evangelista with his symbols*, performed within the Pellegrini competition organized by the Accademia di S. Luca.

In May 1864 he was commissioned to paint the altarpiece with *St. John Gualberto called the spiritual testament to the disciples*, to be placed on the altar of the chapel dedicated to him in S. Prassede; the canvas was completed, signed and dated in 1865 and is currently located in the sacristy; in 1870 he presented the painting at the Roman Exhibition of the works of every art related to Catholic worship together with two *Interiors of the Sacro Speco of Subiaco* and received the "grand prize diploma", recognition that he placed it particularly in the Roman artistic environment.

In 1865 he painted his father *Paolo* in pastel and painted a lunette with the *Madonna, the Child and s. Giovannino* in the palace of Cardinal BA Antonucci in Subiaco, destroyed following the war events of 1944.

In 1867, on the proposal of his uncle Don Germano, he was entrusted with the task of restoring all the frescoes and ornaments of the church of S. Prassede. In 1868 he was engaged in the frescoes of a room in the Villa Moraschi di Subiaco, for which he had designed a decoration inspired by the canvas with *Diana del Domenichino's Hunt* : on

the ceiling, which no longer exists as a result of a collapse, Gai had painted *Diana and Endymion*, on the walls *Diana hunting*, *Diana in the bathroom*, *Diana attends the archery competition*.

In 1869, in July, he rented a room in the convent of S. Prassede as a studio, which he maintained until June 1873; in November, on the recommendation of the master Podesti, he was entrusted with the task of restoring three fresco paintings in the portico of the Roman church of S. Maria in Trastevere. In 1870 he painted the *Portrait of Francesco Podesti*, preserved in the Museum of Rome. February 16 1871 he married the granddaughter of Podesti, Guendalina Baldassarri of Recanati. He also painted the portrait of his wife and that of his mother-in-law *Carolina Podesti*. On March 13, in Rome, the decoration project for the Senate hall in Palazzo Madama was approved; Gai was included in the list of the four "renowned historical painters" who would have painted four allegorical figures in tempera on the muslin veil of the *plafond* : the *Fortress* refers to Gai. On March 24 of the same year he was appointed professor of merit of the Academy of S. Luca, to replace the late T. Minardi and, in accordance with tradition, sent his self- *portrait*; on 14 November the Institute of fine arts of the Marche in Urbino informed Gai that he had appointed him honorary member and asked him to send his self- *portrait*: the work was never sent and only many years later, in 1909, was the portrait of Gai painted by F. Podesti.

Dec. 28 1871 his son Guido was born in Rome, and on 5 August. 1873 the second son Silvio. The two children were portrayed several times by their father in some drawings: Guido in 1873 and 1876; Silvio remembers the drawing of 1876. The Society of Encouragement for Christian Painting in Bologna awarded him, in October 1876, a diploma with a bronze medal for the painting *The Holy Family*.

In 1877 he was commissioned by the sculptor F. Fabi Altini to decorate with a fresco the lunette above the sepulchral monument of the Marquess Teresa Stampa Soncino, in the Verano cemetery in Rome; the chosen subject was *Judas Maccabeus sent the oblations to the Temple for the dead, collected at the camp after the battle*; in the same year he portrayed the religious *Don Placido Pieri* (Abbey of Vallombrosa).

In 1878 he portrayed *Don Germano Gai*. On 12 October his daughter Laura was born in Marlia, near Lucca, where he had moved.

The portrait of *Ignazio Iacometti* was completed in 1879 as well as three small oval canvases depicting *Mary Elizabeth Bradhurst Field*, her daughter *M. Elizabeth Field Brancaccio* and her son-in-law, Prince *Salvatore Brancaccio*; the date "October 1879" placed on the back of the three portraits, marks the beginning of the client relationship between Gai and the members of the two families Field and Brancaccio.

In 1880 he concluded three works that had been started for some time: the large altarpiece with the *Madonna della Salute* conceived in 1874 for a church of the Vallombrosan Congregation to be built in Signol (or Loriol) in France, never built, for which he had also designed the architectural project (the painting is in the choir to the right of the main altar in S. Prassede); the portrait of the princess *Luisa Corsini* born Scotto, in a polite and sensitive *vanitas key*, for which she also designed the gilded frame; the frescoes in the church of Ss. Sacramento in Ancona, as an assistant and

collaborator of the elderly master Podesti, with the figures of the *Four Evangelists* in the pendentives and the *Savior* in an oval on the vault of the choir.

Free from demanding assignments, he had the opportunity to carry out fantasy, craft and not a little diplomacy to fulfill the wishes of the Brancaccio and Field princes; Thus ended the stay of Gai in Tuscany, between Marlia and Lucca, and moved permanently to Rome.

Having become the "family artist" of the Fields, Gai took care not only of painting portraits, celebratory paintings, mythological subjects and decorations for walls and ceilings in their building, which later became Brancaccio, but also created drawings and projects for furniture and various furnishings, restored ancient paintings, devised architectural solutions for the nymphaeum and the *caffeaus* in the park.

In 1880 he designed the decoration of an environment called "boudoir degli Specchi" with small "old-fashioned" portraits (pastels and canvases) depicting noble ancestors; he was interested in the integrative restoration and the decoration of two sedans and two spinets, for one of which he supplied the cartoons with *Theories of putti* on the sides and *Triumph of Venus* inside the coverage plan; he began working on cartoons for a portrait of children; he supplied the cartoons for a frieze with landscapes within frames supported by putti, to be painted on canvases placed on the walls of the Field dining room; in 1884 he completed the large canvas with the portrait of *Princess Brancaccio with her children in the garden*.

Perhaps around the years 1884-85 he made five over-doors for a living room of the Field apartment with the *harvest of the crops*, the *grape harvest*, the *lighting of the fire*, the *swing*, the *blind fly* (the sketches relating to the first three subjects, in a private collection in Livorno; the last two in Rome in the Eredi Gai collection); the room also refers to Gai the other two monochrome over doors with *La Caccia* and *La Pesca* (1890), and the project of the stucco decorations with female figures, cherubs and flowers inspired by the four seasons; of uncertain dating, but in all probability *before* 1886, the vault painted in tempera with the *Gloria of the Brancaccio family*, conceived by Gai, but performed largely by another hand, should be placed in a room of the princely apartment, as well as the project for a ceiling to be decorated with three canvases of mythological subjects. Before 1886 it was the plan for the *caffeaus* in the park - but it is not certain that the work refers to Gai: there was an Egyptian statue, the so-called "Torello Brancaccio", restored and recomposed with additions by the artist, and today in Palazzo Altemps in Rome - and *after* 1886 the nymphaeum was instead built there, as well as a gate that opens onto the villa.

In 1886 he set up a large commemorative canvas with *Umberto I and Margherita di Savoia on a visit to the Brancaccio princes*, never made, of which a large *body* of drawings and three sketches remain; between 1890 and 1891 the decorative project of the bedroom of Princess Brancaccio, typologically close to the alcove of Palazzo Mansi in Lucca, was probably placed, for which she executed, with the help of decorators, the ceiling with the *dressing table of Venus* and the one with a theory of *Amorini in the act of supporting flowered serti*, also designing a parade bed and a cabinet with mirror. For the Field apartment, also in Palazzo Brancaccio, he designed the decoration of a dressing room with a ceiling hosting an ancient canvas, perhaps by Pietro Liberi, and an exotic taste

fireplace in gilded stucco, as well as the decoration of the so-called "concert hall", and that of the bedroom of Mary Elizabeth Field; for the ceilings of these two last rooms he had also created, respectively, a sketch with the *Triumph of Neptune*, not executed.

From 1891, and certainly until 1893, he was commissioned to supervise the renovation works in the castle of San Gregorio da Sassola where he probably restored the ancient frescoes present.

In 1896 he portrayed *Eleonora Brancaccio with her recently born son Leone Massimo*; finally, around 1909, he made the clay sketches for the sculptures depicting the busts of *Elisabetta and Salvatore Brancaccio* and painted a small oval canvas with the portrait of Prince Brancaccio; after the princess's death (1909), he left some works of arrangement in rooms pertinent to the castle of Roviano and some drawings for grates, perhaps to be placed to protect heat sources. Relative to his activity as interior and furniture designer, within the Field-Brancaccio client, there is a large *body* of drawings and studies, all in the Eredi Gai collection in Rome.

His commitments as an artist of the Field and Brancaccio families did not prevent Gai from devoting himself to other works and activities, even if Arnaud (1886) remembers him as "not very industrious in Rome", even if endowed with exquisite taste in decorative compositions.

In 1891 he worked on the Ruggeri chapel (now De Amicis) in the Verano cemetery frescoing the *Madonna and Child, S. Chiara and S. Pietro*; of the destroyed decoration remains a detached fragment with the head of *St. Peter* and various studies.

In 1893 he taught at the Industrial Art Museum of Rome and in 1894 he was appointed delegated member of the government in the governing council of the institution for the three-year period 1894-96, a position reconfirmed for the years 1896-98.

In 1899 in the villa Muti-Bussi of Frascati he restored and integrated some frescoes: *Il Mosè receives the tables of the Law, Eternity, Immortality, Tobia which restores the sight to the father*.

In 1903 a mosaic with a *Madonna and Child with angels* was placed in the lunette above the portal of the church of the Madonna del Mare in Pula, for which Gai had provided the cartoons; in the basin of the apse there is the mosaic with *La Madonna del Mare*, always on his cartoons.

In 1904 he painted a fresco *Deposition* in the Fontana chapel in the Verano cemetery in Rome. In May 1905 he was nominated a member of the Congregation of Virtuosi in the Pantheon in the class of painters and in June he received a gold medal, awarded to him by Pius X, for the precious collaboration given in the Consultative Commission for the restoration of the Sistine chapel; during the year, he moved with his wife to Livorno, to the home of his son Silvio, while maintaining his study in Palazzo Brancaccio in Rome and his assignments at the Accademia di S. Luca.

The occasion for his stay in Livorno was the start of work for the decoration of the Orlando chapel (consecrated in 1906) in the cemetery of Mercy commissioned by

Giuseppe Orlando, for which he frescoed the *angel of the announcement of the Resurrection*, in the external lunette above the portal, and in the internal walls *The announcement of the Resurrection, The Crucifixion, The Fortress and the Vigilance, The Faith, The Prudence and Temperance, The Justice*; he conceived the stucco decoration, the statues of *meditation and prayer*, the design of the floor, the furnishings. Also for the Orlando family, he designed the plaque to commemorate the launch of the cruiser "Pisa" (1909) and the paintings for the wooden chapel on board for the cruiser "Georgios Averoff", launched in 1912; for it he conceived two diptychs, one with *S. Peter and the Madonna*, the other with *Christ and s. Giovanni Battista*, and the elevation of the altar with *The Evangelists Luca and Giovanni*.

In July 1913 he joined the Superior Council of Public Works which oversaw the completion and decoration of the monument to Vittorio Emanuele II.

In 1916 he began to paint, without completing it, the canvas *Moses saved from the waters*, while three fake tapestry canvases with playful putti in various attitudes were completed.

He was highly appreciated as a portraitist, in addition to the effigies of his family he portrayed among others *Enrico Gui*, the countess *Giovanna Scarpellini*, the sons of the *Scarpellini counts*, the *Count Legrontec*. His last self- *portrait* is from 1916. Landscape production was very scarce.

In 1883, with the architect E. Gui, he was commissioned by the Accademia di S. Luca to report on the damage that had occurred to the wall structures and frescoes of the Palazzo Farnese di Caprarola; in 1904 he promoted the reorganization of the competitions organized by the Academy itself together with G. Tadolini and M. Piacentini; in 1907 he was awarded the merit medal in recognition of his constant commitment to the institution and in 1910, together with U. Ojetti, he curated a summary reorganization of the collection of architectural drawings, including academic gifts and competition tests prior to the "Clementine competitions"; in 1913 he was elected president, a position abandoned after a year due to poor health. In 1915 he designed, with the help of his last son, Mario, architect, a new site for the Accademia di S. Luca to be built in Valle Giulia; but the proposal was rejected.

Gai died in Rome on May 17, 1917.

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